

SQUARE- SHOOTER

WILLIAM MACLEOD RAINE

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.**

Title: Square-Shooter

Date of first publication: 1934

Author: William MacLeod Raine (1871-1954)

Date first posted: June 23, 2021

Date last updated: June 23, 2021

Faded Page eBook #20210649

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

This file was produced from images generously made available by Internet Archive/Lending Library.

SQUARE-SHOOTER

BY

WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE

GROSSET & DUNLAP

Publishers New York

By arrangement with Houghton Mifflin Company

COPYRIGHT, 1934 AND 1935, BY WILLIAM MACLEOD RAINE

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED INCLUDING THE RIGHT TO REPRODUCE
THIS BOOK OR PARTS THEREOF IN ANY FORM

This story has been published by
the Chicago Tribune Syndicate
under the title 'Blazing Guns.'

PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

CONTENTS

I. A PEACEABLE CITIZEN	3
II. AN OFFER IS MADE AND ACCEPTED	14
III. MARY MARRIES A DANGEROUS MAN	26
IV. ‘CAN’T A HUSBAND BE A FRIEND TOO?’	31
V. MORE FRIENDS	40
VI. COLE SAYS ‘ADIOS’	45
VII. PARTNERS IN A DEAL	54
VIII. FOUR HANDS ON THE DESK	61
IX. HARMONY AT THE CIRCLE 3 T	69
X. HOTTER THAN HELL WITH THE LID ON	73
XI. ‘I’LL RIDE YOU WITH SPURS’	79
XII. A RESPECTABLE MARRIED MAN GOES TO TOWN	86
XIII. JUDGE FAIRLEY GIVES AN ORDER	91
XIV. NOT LOOKING FOR TROUBLE	100
XV. SELF-DEFENSE	110
XVI. ‘I’M NOT PAID TO LIKE THEM’	119
XVII. ‘I’VE HAD AN ELEGANT SUFFICIENCY’	126
XVIII. SLIM GOES DOWN THE ROAD	132
XIX. MARY WRITES A LETTER	143
XX. A RECRUIT	148
XXI. ON THE WAY TO THE WAR	155
XXII. UP SUICIDE TROUGH	161
XXIII. TRESPASSERS WARNED	167
XXIV. ‘IF COLE WASN’T SO DAMNED LEGAL’	173
XXV. ‘SEVENTEEN OF THEM—COUNT THEM’	180
XXVI. IN THE DUSK	187
XXVII. COLE ADVERTISES	193
XXVIII. LAURET MAKES HIS CHOICE	200

XXIX. MARY PICKS UP A HAT	<u>206</u>
XXX. AT THE END OF A WAGON TONGUE	<u>211</u>
XXXI. COLE GUESSES	<u>221</u>
XXXII. RADBOURNE WAVES A WHITE FLAG	<u>228</u>
XXXIII. SMOKED OUT	<u>237</u>
XXXIV. MARY URGES HASTE	<u>251</u>
XXXV. A CHALLENGE	<u>257</u>
XXXVI. HASKELL GETS THE ACID TEST	<u>261</u>
XXXVII. 'TWO IS COMPANY, MY DEAR'	<u>268</u>
XXXVIII. 'THE WAR IS OFF'	<u>272</u>
XXXIX. AN IMPORTANT FOOL BUTTS IN	<u>279</u>
XL. COLE BLUFFS	<u>285</u>
XLI. 'PORT AFTER STORMIE SEAS'	<u>293</u>

SQUARE-SHOOTER

SQUARE-SHOOTER

CHAPTER I

A PEACEABLE CITIZEN

COLE SANBORN sat in a tiptilted chair on the porch of the Jonesboro House, the worn heel of one boot hooked in a rung. His long, lean body was slack, apparently relaxed, but its ease was like that of a coiled spring which might be released at the touch of a trigger. Chill gray eyes set deep in a hard, reckless face swept the dusty road with indolent vigilance. In them lay a cynical audacity, no apprehension. Yet he knew he was a temptation to itching fingers. His presence was a challenge—to perplexed and dubious law which knew much and guessed more, to the anger of many whose vanity and rights he had flouted, to the vengeance of enemies powerful and entrenched.

He was as nearly motionless as one could be who rolled, lit, and smoked cigarettes at spaced intervals. For an hour he had not left the porch, and every instant of that time he had been watched. That there was menace in the air Cole knew. He had seen a lifted head in the window-casing of the new store being built farther down the street. Eyes had glittered at him from Pete Casey's Haven of Rest. The man knew the chance he was taking. Someone in a flush of anger might take a shot at him. To sit there in the center of the little town's stage, so contemptuously unconcerned, was a jeer at good, law-abiding citizens—and others not so good. For Cole Sanborn was wanted on many counts, the latest of which was the murderous robbery of a K. & J. express car less than a week ago.

Tacked to the wall back of Cole's head, so close that his thick black hair brushed the edge of the paper, was a poster advertising a reward for the capture of the robbers. Attention was given to a short, heavy-set man dressed in the leathers of a cowpuncher, to a lank fellow in jeans; but the authorities showed more concern about the leader. He was a big, rangy, black-haired man wearing corduroy trousers stuffed into the tops of boots, a

gray cotton shirt with a blue polka-dot bandanna round the neck, and a broad Stetson decorated with a band of rattlesnake skin. For information leading to his arrest and conviction the railroad would pay one thousand dollars, the state five hundred.

And on the porch of the Jonesboro House sat a man who fitted the description even to the polka-dot bandanna and the bedecked Stetson. What Cole banked on was that faint line which lay between moral certainty and absolute evidence. The train-robbers had been masked. A hundred men might feel sure Cole Sanborn led them, but none of them could swear it.

A small man, sun-tanned and wrinkled, came down the plankwalk toward the Jonesboro House. He wore the high-heeled boots of a cowboy and walked gingerly, the weight of his body on the toes. In front of the hotel porch he stopped.

‘So you’re back,’ he said harshly.

Sanborn’s eyes danced. ‘I’m back, sheriff. Can’t stay away, I reckon. Got so many good friends here.’

‘What’s your business here?’ the officer demanded abruptly.

The brows of the other man lifted, but the grin did not leave his face. ‘You asking me or telling me, Magruder?’

‘I don’t aim to have any unnecessary killings in this town. Jonesboro don’t want you here, unless——’

‘——unless I put up at your hotel.’

‘My advice is for you to light a shuck outa here.’

‘After I’ve finished my business,’ Sanborn concluded for him with drawling correction.

‘Which is?’

‘Thought I’d have a look at that gather of beeves on the mesa. If I could buy at a whack-up, I’d take a bunch of them.’

‘You paying cash?’

‘Right interested in my business, aren’t you, sheriff?’ Sanborn suggested, gentle sarcasm in his voice. ‘You’ll want to know next whether I’d settle with gold or greenbacks.’

The black, beady eyes of Magruder rested on the indolent figure in the chair. The little man had no clear course of action mapped in his mind. He had been elected because he was known to be game, but this was not a question of nerve but of judgment. His fingers rubbed the criss-crossed lines

that scored deeply the back of his neck. His opinion was that Cole Sanborn was guilty as hell, but a man could not take opinions to court.

‘Come into money, have you, Cole?’ he asked guardedly.

The big man ignored this and trod with cheerful effrontery on dangerous ground. ‘I’ll tell you, Magruder, man to man. I came back to help you hunt the robbers of the K. & J. express.’

The sheriff did not share the other’s levity. His black eyes were hard as jade.

‘You’ll go too far one of these days, Cole—soon,’ he predicted.

‘I wouldn’t go far to find the scalawags that did this job,’ Sanborn replied hardily. The clatter of horses’ hoofs crossing a wooden bridge had drifted to them and his eyes were on the advancing cavalcade. ‘I’d look right near here.’

‘So would I,’ Magruder agreed darkly. ‘What’s eatin’ you, Cole? Haven’t you got any sense a-tall? Don’t you know there are men in this town who wouldn’t ask better than to shoot you down on sight?’

‘Only they don’t do it,’ Sanborn murmured, his eyes still on the dust-cloud of riders.

‘You can drive ’em too far.’

Five riders swept past to the Haven of Rest, the other two drew aside and reined in at the hotel.

Cole answered with light derision, his mind no longer on the conversation. He watched the two who were dismounting. One was a big rawboned cattleman, his companion a girl in her teens.

‘Friends like you are far and seldom, sheriff,’ the soft drawl of the man in the chair went on. ‘You’d hate to see me bumped off, wouldn’t you?’

‘I don’t give a dawg-gone when they get you if it ain’t on my range,’ Magruder flung back with swift emphasis. ‘I’m sheriff of Boone County.’

He, too, had his eyes on those who had just arrived. A pulse of excitement beat in his leathery throat. For the man who had swung down from the sorrel was Jerry Haskell, foreman of the Circle 3 T outfit, and between that brand and Sanborn there was bitter warfare.

Haskell straddled forward, then stopped abruptly. His glance had fallen on the man in the chair.

‘Of all the damned fools,’ he commented aloud.

The gazes of the two big men locked unwinkingly. Haskell was the first to speak.

‘So you decided to give yoreself up,’ he said.

‘Guess again,’ Sanborn advised quietly.

Haskell swung on the sheriff. ‘You arrestin’ this outlaw, Magruder?’

The officer shifted a cud of tobacco from one cheek to another. ‘No-o. Can’t say I am, Jerry. Not yet.’

‘What you mean—not yet?’ Haskell wanted to know angrily. ‘You waiting till he’s hid in the brush again before you make a move?’

‘I want more evidence.’

‘Evidence! What the blue blazes!’ exploded the foreman. ‘Do you expect a photograph of him took on the spot? Read that poster back of his ugly head. Then take a look at him. He’s the spit’n’ image of that description, ain’t he?’

‘In a way.’

‘Goddlemighty! Can’t you read and see for yourself, Magruder? Big black-haired guy in corduroy trousers—blue polka-dot bandanna—hatband of rattler’s skin. Why, he hasn’t even took the trouble to change his clothes.’

‘Which ain’t reasonable, Jerry. Looks like before he held up the express he’d have made himself less conspicuous. Looks like——’

‘Thought he’d get away with it in the dark. You scared of him because he claims to be a killer and has a rep as a bad man? If so, say the word, and I’ll do the job for you.’

Magruder flushed angrily. ‘I don’t need any help from outsiders unless I call for it, Jerry. If you’ll prove to me he held up the train——’

‘Prove! Doesn’t every man in town know it? Are you a plumb fool?’

Sanborn broke in with a lazy question. He still lounged in the chair. Only the glint in his steady, narrowed eyes showed that every nerve and muscle of him was keyed for instant action.

‘When you arrest me, Haskell, who do you aim to get help you—that bunch of warriors that’s just trailed into Casey’s?’

‘Gimme a deputy’s star, Magruder,’ blurted out Haskell. ‘I’ll show him.’

‘I’ll do what showing is necessary,’ the sheriff said bluntly. ‘I’m not askin’ help of the Circle 3 T to run my business.’

‘Which seems to be to protect train-robbers.’ Haskell looked at the officer poisonously. ‘Look out, Magruder. Don’t get swelled up on yoreself.’

You're not the big boss here.'

'Who is?' cut in Sanborn.

The question was surplusage. Everybody in Boone County knew who ran it.

Samson Magruder was an honest man. His election had been a surprise, to nobody more than to Chet Radbourne, the man who pulled wires and gave orders to subordinates. The little cowman had upset the cut-and-dried ticket of the machine by defeating the politician selected for the job. But he had no desire to measure strength against the Circle 3 T because of a campaign accident. He would be swept away like a chip in a flood.

Haskell remembered the young woman with him. 'Go into the house and get a room for yourself, Miss Mary.'

The girl looked at the foreman with sullen resentment. 'That's an order, is it?' she asked.

'This is no place for a girl,' he said, still watching Sanborn. 'There's going to be trouble—soon.'

'I'm used to it,' she answered bitterly. 'I've seen nothing else since I came here.'

'Did you hear me?' warned Haskell curtly. 'Get into the house. I'm responsible for you.'

Sanborn looked at her for the first time. She was slender, trim, and young.

'Better go, Miss,' he advised. 'Big Chief Heap Much Talk has got notions.'

The girl was aware of an electric tenseness in the air. She looked at Haskell, at Sanborn, then turned sharply on her heel and went into the house.

Magruder spoke hastily. 'Get this right—both of you. If there's any killing here, I'm in on it. I'll jump the first man draws a gun.'

The foreman did not look at him. Not for an instant did his gaze lift from the enemy sitting there at careless and alert ease. As he looked, the white heat of his anger burned out. His native caution reasserted itself. No use taking a chance, not with all the cards stacked against Sanborn. All he had to do was to wait—take his time. The fellow had ridden into a trap. Perhaps he had not expected to meet any Circle 3 T men, though he must have known he had enemies in town. Willfully he had run the risk. Now he was caught unless he moved very swiftly, and apparently he had no intention of leaving. For Cole Sanborn's audacity was colossal. Danger was the breath of life in

his nostrils. He seemed to ignore rather than defy the enemies who ringed him about. Haskell could count four or five of these, not including Circle 3 T riders. There was Lauret, professional gambler, dealer at the Arcadia, who had been forced to take water during a difficulty with Sanborn. He was dangerous and vindictive. The proprietor of the place, Jim Maxon, had been drawn into the trouble, and he too had given way rather than press the matter to an issue, which had involved more than five hundred dollars as well as the prestige of the house as a square-shooting concern. Also, there was Lutz, who had tried to skin Sanborn on a cattle deal. And Harley—and Preston, bully-puss gunmen from the Nation. On Main Street Cole had killed a horsethief in a duel. It was known the fellow had brothers quick on the trigger.

Haskell hated Sanborn, always had from the first hour of meeting. They had been in a poker game at Summit. The foreman was strong and masterful. Most men stepped around him rather than oppose his temper. But Cole had completely disregarded it. Later Haskell cursed himself for not having seen that this quiet, cool stranger was dangerous. As usual, Haskell had begun to bull the big pots. Smoothly and efficiently Sanborn had relieved him of three hundred dollars, cashed in, and sauntered out of the saloon. Haskell knew that a dozen men were snickering in their sleeves at him. He hated it. Rage boiled in him. But there had been something in Sanborn's cold, steady eyes that had quelled his impulse to shoot it out.

Since then Haskell had met the man occasionally, and never without anger surging in him. There was something about the fellow's look and manner, something careless and contemptuous, that stirred the bile in him. He had taken the trouble to learn what he could of Sanborn. The young man had once been a Circle 3 T rider, but even then was a rebel. An hour had come when he had publicly slapped Chet Radbourne's face and left the ranch.

That had not hurt him any with the public, but his subsequent wildness had affronted Jonesboro. The town had been a rendezvous of bad men, and he had faced down the worst of them. He had broken into the jail to release a friend of his charged with rustling by the Circle 3 T. Radbourne's warriors had dry-gulched him, and he had got away after being wounded. A wiser man would have capitalized his courage, but Sanborn let his name become anathema to God-fearing men and women. Though his strong, sardonic face was far from handsome, the eyes of many women had followed his light-stepping trail with reluctant fascination. No mother ever introduced her daughter to him. His friends were devoted, but his foes outnumbered them.

With scornful derision he moved among them, knowing that he was marked for death.

Now he sat on the porch of the Jonesboro House, in the heart of the enemy country, with a devil-may-care negligence amazing in its effrontery. Haskell was not afraid of him. He would not admit that. But why take a fifty-fifty chance when it was not necessary? Sanborn could draw like a streak of lightning and fling accurate bullets with a speed incredible. He had shot Buck Travis, a notorious gunman, through the heart, though Buck had been pumping lead before Sanborn's fingers had closed on the butt of his forty-five.

'I'll give you an hour to get out of town,' Haskell said hoarsely. 'An hour. If you're here then——'

'If I'm here, maybe you'll give me another hour,' Sanborn scoffed.

'If you're here, you'll go to hell on a shutter, fellow,' the foreman warned.

'Why an hour, Jerry? Why not now?' Cole asked, smiling hatefully. 'You got to go and get those nice Circle 3 T boys ready for to entertain me? That the play?'

'One hour, Sanborn,' his enemy warned furiously. 'You hear me.'

Haskell turned and went straddling down the walk to the Haven of Rest.

Magruder was the first to speak. 'Better burn the wind outa this burg, Cole,' he said. 'Soon as you can fork your bronc.'

'I'm so dad-gummed forgetful,' Cole drawled. 'I'd meant to mention to you I had business here.'

The little man snorted. 'Business! You heard Haskell. He's done served notice on you. Right now it may be too late. An' you sit here chinnin'.'

'Don't you reckon he was joshing, maybe? With the sheriff here to protect me——'

'You know dawg-gone well I can't protect you,' Magruder broke in impatiently. 'Unless I take you to jail. Not then likely, with the Circle 3 T riders here egging on the boys to a necktie party they figure is considerable overdue. They'd bust through the jail like it was a doll house. You know it.'

'Ain't there any law in this town, Magruder?' Sanborn asked plaintively. 'Here I am, a peaceable citizen, attending to my own affairs, not interfering with anybody——'

'Peaceable hell!' the exasperated officer yelled. 'Dog my cats, you raise more cain than any other son-of-a-gun I ever saw. You're so ornery you get

even yourself in trouble to see the fur fly. This minute you've got yore tail in a crack, and all you do is sit there whittling away yore slim chance. Fellow, Haskell is on the prod. He'll cut loose his dog in no time a-tall. If I was your friend, I'd tell you to slap a saddle on the nearest broomtail and make dust.'

Cole pointed to the reward poster. 'You throwin' in with a train-robber like Haskell said, sheriff?' he asked with a grin.

'If I knew you'd robbed that train, Cole, hell an' high water wouldn't prevent me from arresting you. I've a good mind to do it, anyway,' Magruder said quietly.

Sanborn rose and stretched himself with a yawn. He looked at his watch. 'I reckon your advice is good medicine, sheriff,' he said. 'Gave me an hour, eh? A whole hour. Think of that. I'll be saying "Adios"!'

The big man walked into the house with the springy tread divorced a thousand miles from fear.

Magruder's gaze followed him. The sheriff frowned in puzzled uncertainty. He had not the least idea whether the man meant to play safe and hit the trail or stay and fight. To stay would be suicide, but to leave at Haskell's order, like a cur with its tail between its legs, would be the last course one would expect of Cole Sanborn. He was no hell-roaring braggart. When he started a play, he made it stick. Yet it stood out like a sore thumb that if he did not get out, hell-for-leather, he was a gone coon.

The officer shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

CHAPTER II

AN OFFER IS MADE AND ACCEPTED

THE high-heeled boots of Cole Sanborn clumped up the stairs to the upper hall. On both sides of the dark passage were the doors of bedrooms. One of these was partly open.

He caught sight of a figure and pulled up abruptly. A slim form moved forward.

‘You’re Cole Sanborn,’ a young vibrant voice said.

‘Right, first guess,’ the owner of the name admitted.

‘I’m Mary Landis.’

She gave the information shyly. He guessed an imperative urge behind this unexpected introduction.

‘Pleased to meet you, Miss,’ he said formally.

‘You know who I am?’

‘Jed Burrows was your uncle.’

‘And I suppose you know I inherited the Lazy B Ranch from him?’

‘Yes.’

‘And that Mr. Radbourne is my guardian?’

‘Everybody knows that.’

‘Yes, they know he got himself appointed by the court because he wants to run my affairs,’ the girl cried passionately. ‘Because my range lies next to his and he needs the water my cows drink and the grass they eat if he is to be God Almighty in this country.’

‘Correct,’ Cole agreed.

‘Everybody kowtows to him. He stands in with the court. When I spoke to the judge, he told me not to worry because Chet Radbourne would be a good friend to me if I didn’t make trouble.’ She stopped, anger flashing in her eyes.

‘He doesn’t stand in with the court,’ demurred Sanborn. ‘The court stands in with him. He’s got the law buttoned up in his pocket.’

‘Isn’t there any justice in this country?’ she demanded.

‘I haven’t bumped into any lately, Miss Landis.’ A sardonic humor danced in the gray eyes. ‘But I’m supposed to be biased on what justice is.’

‘You know what kind of a friend he’ll be to me, the same kind a wolf would be to a lamb,’ she went on urgently. ‘I don’t want his friendship. I want him to let me alone. I don’t want his riders drifting Circle 3 T stock over my range as if they owned it.’

‘Better make a deal with him,’ Cole suggested. ‘Sell out for what he’ll give. Of course he’ll skin you something terrible, but it will be better to take anything he says rather than try to oppose him. His say-so goes in this country.’

‘Does it go with you?’ she asked, eyes fixed in his. ‘I heard his man Haskell give you an hour to leave. Are you going? What will he do if you stay?’

‘I wonder,’ he murmured.

‘I’ve heard about you ever since I came into this country three months ago. They say——’

‘They say——’ he prompted.

‘That you’re a bad man and a killer,’ she blurted out. ‘But that you’re afraid of nothing and that if you give your word you’ll keep it.’

‘Maybeso.’

He waited. Her troubled eyes searched his weather-beaten face.

‘Could I make it worth your while to fight for me? I’d pay you well to be my foreman.’ She hurried on, impetuously: ‘There’s nobody else I can go to for help. Everybody is afraid of him. Perhaps you are too.’

If he was surprised at her offer, his impassive face did not show it.

‘How can I be your foreman? Read that poster on the wall downstairs. I’m not only a killer. I’m an outlaw. I robbed the K. & J. express. Anyone can tell you that. It’s common gossip. I’ll be lucky if I can crawl into the brush alive. Say I made my getaway and you took me on as foreman. You’d be buying trouble. And it wouldn’t do any good, because Chet Radbourne is sitting up there at the Circle 3 T like a fat spider with the law sewed up in his jeans.’

‘So I’ve got to let him rob me! If I stay, I’ve even got to marry the man he picks out for me,’ the girl lamented, torn between anger and self-pity.

‘Looks like,’ Sanborn agreed. His hard eyes narrowed in thought. ‘Yes, I reckon Chet would play it that way, pick as a husband for you a putty man,

one under his thumb, who would jump when he gave the high sign. Safer than to let you get away and try to make trouble for him.'

'He doesn't intend to let me go,' she said, fear shaking her low voice. 'I'm as much a prisoner as if I were locked up.'

He saw terror in the deep violet eyes uplifted to his. 'It's come to that, has it?'

'Yes. *Only he's not going to pick a putty man.*'

Cole read in her cry the despair that flowed like a river of woe through her bosom. He was oddly moved by her young desperation, and from a detached distance was cynically amused at his sympathy. What did it matter to him if Chet Radbourne had picked this girl to be his wife? As Magruder had said, his own tail was in a crack. The chances were he would not get out of town alive. If so, he would have to fight his way through enemies. For he knew Haskell was not giving him any hour, but was busy already setting the trap.

Yet she was such a child, so young and slim and vivid, that he could not ignore her plight. To his mind there jumped a picture of Chet Radbourne, gross and shapeless and middle-aged, humped up like a big toad, using this clean sweet girl as a pawn in his foul schemes. Even the touch of his fat hand would soil her, and she was entangled beyond escape in the net he weaved so patiently. To marry him would be the end of life for her. That was what he saw in her stricken face. She would go on living, in a physical sense, but her soul would be violated, all the zest of her ardent youth forever quenched.

Swiftly his mind reviewed the possibilities. No, he could not take her with him. To try to reach the brush country, with her by his side, would be to attempt the impossible. Moreover, the success of such a forlorn hope would defeat the purpose of it. She could not spend a week with him alone in the chaparral, while trying to reach a railroad, without losing every shred of reputation; not with Cole Sanborn, a man notorious for his wildness with women.

'There's nobody to help me,' she went on. 'The men who ride for him—you know what they are like. Even if one wanted to help me he would not dare lift a finger. Something terrible would happen to him.'

'Yes,' Sanborn agreed.

'Why do I come to you, who have your own troubles?' she asked, and at her own question wakened up to the immediate danger pressing on him.

‘What are you going to do? Don’t let them kill you. Get away now, before your hour is up. Hurry . . . hurry!’

He smiled sardonically. ‘I haven’t any hour. That was talk, a stall to duck a showdown right there. Haskell has his men posted for me.’

‘Then you must send for the sheriff and surrender to him. He will protect you.’

Sanborn shook his head. ‘Magruder would if he could. But he can’t. The calaboose is a shack. Tonight it would be torn to pieces.’

‘But——’

She paused, horror-stricken, her fear-filled eyes in his cold, steady gaze. Did he mean that he was lost, already as good as dead? If it was as bad as that, how could he stand there with not a hint of panic in his bearing?

‘I’m a mighty live dead man, if that’s what you mean,’ he told her cheerfully. ‘I’ve been in worse jams than this.’

‘You must do something—soon,’ she urged.

‘What’s the hurry? Haskell is figuring that I’ll try to make a break and then he’ll get me. Why play his game for him? Let his lads do some worrying while they nurse their guns. It won’t help their nerve any. I’ll make the raffle. Don’t you worry about that. I never have thrown down on myself yet. Let’s get back to your worries. I’ll ask your own question, Miss Landis. Why did you come to me? I’m a bad man, a killer, an outlaw. What makes you figure I’m any better than Radbourne?’

‘He’s a horrible man. And you—you look clean.’ She went on swiftly, to justify herself: ‘I heard one man say you’d never killed anybody who didn’t need killing. And anyhow you are his enemy.’ She flung out her hands in a little despairing gesture. ‘I had nobody else to go to.’

Cole was moved by her helplessness, more than he wanted to admit to himself. He was one hard, tough *hombre*, with as harsh an exterior as the stinging desert plants. For him the price of life was a wary and suspicious alertness. He could survive only if he was as instant in attack as a rattler, as swift to melt into the chaparral as a coyote. Yet his thoughts clung to her problem. If there was any way to rescue her . . .

He could find none. The half-formed ideas that jumped through his mind he rejected. They were one-way pockets, like a rabbit’s burrow. To get her into more trouble would be easy, to get her out quite another thing. Why start something he couldn’t finish?

‘That foreman idea is no good,’ he told her. ‘You’ve got to have color of law with you in any fight you make. Chet will claim he’s appointing any foreman you need. How long until you’ll be of age?’

‘Fifteen months. It might as well be that many years. I can’t stand out against him that long. He’s giving me a little time to get used to the idea of—of marrying him. Just as a concession to public opinion. Not that he gives it much weight.’

‘There’s one way . . . maybe,’ he reflected, aloud. ‘If you could marry some decent young fellow——’

‘How shall I find him—put an ad in the paper?’ she asked.

‘The hills are full of nice lads.’

‘Good enough for me, at least,’ she flashed, with a flare of resentment at his casual manner.

‘Don’t know about that,’ he answered, unstirred by her protest. ‘I’m not acquainted with you. But by your own say-so you’re not fixed to be too particular. It’s neck meat or nothing. Chet’s sitting up at the Circle 3 T, hunched up in his chair, waiting till you quit struggling. You’re roped and ready to brand. It’s Chet for you—unless someone else beats him to it.’

‘Do you think anyone else would dare marry me, knowing he had to fight my guardian, even if I were willing to take him?’

His hard gaze swept her slim figure, her immature bosom, the dainty head poised gallantly above a slender throat. A heat wave stirred in him. She was, he thought, the loveliest thing in human flesh he had seen in many a day.

‘I reckon you could find a man—if Chet didn’t have you roped,’ he drawled. ‘But with you rounded up and in his corral, that’s another story again. He’s poison, sure enough. It’s a fool notion, maybe. But a husband—if he was man enough—could throw a monkey wrench in Chet’s steam roller and knock his guardianship higher than a kite. He’d have a right to run your business for you if you wished. Of course, that would just be the start of it. Chet would be in his wool right off and he wouldn’t likely last long.’

‘No,’ she agreed. ‘He’d have to be strong enough to hold his own against the Circle 3 T killers. And who is?’

In the man’s eyes a light kindled. In imagination he was looking at some picture which pleased him. ‘He’d have to be some curly wolf himself to make the grade.’

‘Yes. Someone as savage and ruthless as Radbourne himself—and with brains enough not to let himself get trapped,’ she said.

‘And with luck enough to bull through when he got in a jam. Send out a call for a Wild Bill Hickok or a Jesse James, ma’am.’

A flood of color swept the cheeks of Mary. ‘Someone—like you,’ she murmured.

He stared at her with fixed surprise. That he had thought of and rejected himself because of his bad record was one thing. That she had thought of and accepted him was much more amazing.

The long dark lashes of the girl fluttered to the hot cheeks, then lifted bravely. Her eyes held to his.

‘You’re crazy,’ he cried roughly. ‘Hell’s bells, girl, have you forgot who I am—Cole Sanborn, outlaw, killer, professional gambler? I’m the bogey man of this country here. Chet is a fine respectable citizen beside me. Mothers use my name to scare their kids when they are troublesome. I’m put up as a text by preachers to warn wild young fellows back into the fold. Me, I’m out, for a girl like you.’

‘Are you as—bad—as all that?’ she faltered.

‘Ask the first man or woman you meet.’ He bowed with ironic mockery. ‘Much obliged for the compliment, but I won’t do. ‘Soon as you married me you’d be damaged goods. Anybody but me.’

‘Even Chet Radbourne?’ she asked.

‘No, by Heaven, I’m better than he is, no matter how bad I am. But I’m the dog with the bad name. Like I just said, I won’t do.’

‘You’re human, at least,’ she replied unsteadily. ‘And he’s not. I’d be paying only for—the use of your name. I’d have to take my chance that you’d play fair, that you’d be . . . just my foreman. Any money you ask, in reason, I would give.’

‘I see,’ he said slowly. ‘The only privilege I’d have would be that of getting dry-gulched—at so much a month.’

‘The Circle 3 T men are hired to fight. This would be the same, wouldn’t it?’

‘Not quite,’ he said dryly. ‘They’re hired to kill. Your husband-in-name-only would be hired to get killed. It’s some different.’

‘Would they kill you for sure?’ she asked.

‘Would they eat cherry pie like mother used to make?’

‘And the law—it wouldn’t help you?’

‘No, I’d have to rely on Judge Colt.’

‘Why ask, since I know the answer already?’ she said, her voice gone dead. ‘You’re right. It’s a crazy idea. I don’t know you, and you don’t know me. I thought—since you are his enemy too—perhaps—— But there’s nothing to it. You’d get killed, as you say. And nothing would be changed. I take back what I said.’

She turned to walk into her room. Cole followed her.

‘Here we can see each other,’ he said, mockery in his sardonic face. ‘You can look for my cloven hoof, and I’ll take a long look-see my own self.’

‘What for?’ she asked. ‘I told you I’d taken it back. For just a moment I was mad, I guess.’

‘Don’t take it back yet, Miss Landis. We’re both up against a situation that calls for desperate remedies. There are points to this thing. It would be a pleasure to me to get a foothold from which I could annoy Mr. Chet Radbourne. And I know a few willing lads who would throw in with me if they thought we had a chance.’

‘Which you have just finished telling me you wouldn’t have,’ she reminded him.

‘Maybe—and maybe not. I’ve been known to use a gun myself. Would I have full power to do what I decide is best? Or would you wilt as soon as the band began to play?’

‘You mean—war?’

‘That’s just what I mean.’

‘I’ll not be responsible for starting anything. I wouldn’t stand back of you while you shoot down riders from ambush, if that’s what you’re thinking of doing.’

‘I’m not thinking of that,’ he said, his eyes filled with a moving light that surprised her. ‘We’re in a position where we want public opinion to support us. We’d have to let him make the attack, then we’d yelp loud as we could about it. The trouble wouldn’t be of our making, but there would be plenty of it. Don’t get any other notion.’

It was what she had wanted, a valiant defender of her rights. But woman-like she drew back.

‘No, I can’t start anything like that.’

‘It’s coming, anyhow. Do you think this country is going to lie down to Chet Radbourne while he runs over everybody like he’s a czar? Not on your

life. Someone has to lead. I'll take a chance if you will. It's not so much of a chance for me. I'm first on Chet's dead list anyhow. He means to get me. This way I'll get a run for my white alley.'

'Would you stick to our bargain?' she flung at him, her cheeks drenched by new waves of hot color. 'Or would you think . . . afterward . . . that since I . . . had taken your name and you were fighting for me . . . ?'

'You told me that one of the things you heard about me is that if I give my word I keep it,' he said, looking steadily at her. 'That happens to be true. I'll loan you my name, because I want a good crack at Chet. It's a good name. I come of a good family, though I'm a black sheep myself. I've got the rep of a hell-roaring devil. But in my own way I'm a square-shooter. I don't rue back from any bargain I make. You'd be Mrs. Cole Sanborn to the world. To me you'd be Miss Mary Landis.'

Mary looked into the sardonic face of this outcast from society, and it did not seem to her a bad one. It was hard and reckless, but in the steel-gray, youthful eyes was the light of an audacious candor. Somehow he had contrived, in spite of the wreckage he had left in his wake, to keep his own self-respect. At the worst he was neither a sneak nor a coward, but a man ready to walk unafraid into desperate peril.

Yet she drew back for a moment, appalled at the necessity of having to make so momentous a decision. It would be a terrible risk, but if she rejected it, Chet Radbourne would be no risk but a horrible certainty. She had tried to escape from the Circle 3 T and had been taken back to the house by a cowpuncher who had evidently been detailed to watch her. Chet was taking no chances.

'Three months ago I was finishing school—in America, where people are free,' she cried, a sob in her throat. 'Now I'm in some horrible country ruled by a devil-man who doesn't recognize any of my rights.'

'I've heard of revolutions,' he said, with a swift smile. 'If we win, I'll be a patriot. If we lose, I'll be a dead dog of a rebel. I'm a poker player, Miss Landis. Chet holds all the aces in a stacked deck, but at that he might not win. I'm ready to sit in.'

The heart of the girl beat furiously. Bad man though this Cole Sanborn was, he stirred in her an excitement she could not escape. The situation made for drama. In different ways both of them were doomed. Why not take a fighting chance with the outlaw in an attempt to escape?

'All right,' she said quietly. 'When do we get married?'

‘Soon as we can get the county clerk here with a license and a preacher to do the job. And that’ll be right now, inside of an hour.’

Inside of an hour. The words gave her a shock. They reminded her that Jerry Haskell had given Sanborn an hour to live. Was she to be maid, wife, and widow all in the same day?

This was a mad adventure on which she was embarking, with the most notorious bad man of the district as a partner. It was probably a sin for her to marry someone whom she did not love, whom she intended to know only as her foreman. But she had to save herself if she could from the biting jaws of the trap which had gripped her.

‘Send for the minister,’ she said. ‘I’m ready.’

He wrote a note to the county clerk and another to a minister. While they waited, the man she was about to marry discussed business with Mary Landis. She was confirmed in her opinion that he was no scatter-brained fool. The suggestions he made seemed to her pertinent and wise. They drew up papers and she signed them.

‘We’re crossing the Rubicon,’ she said, fear in her eyes. ‘I hope——’

‘Keep on hoping, partner,’ he replied cheerfully. ‘Most of our worries scare us half to death and never happen. We’re going to give Chet a run for your money.’

CHAPTER III

MARY MARRIES A DANGEROUS MAN

THE REVEREND CALVIN BROWN was a plump, rubicund little man who always gave an impression of being out of place on the lawless frontier. He was soft and genial and emotional, but at bottom he did not lack stamina. The proposed marriage shocked him. He looked at Sanborn, hard-bitten, bronzed, with well-packed muscles rippling beneath the skin like those of a panther. The man was strong as steel and apparently as emotionless. What Brown saw was the brand of Cain written on his forehead. The troubled gaze of the minister passed to the girl, so young and dainty and harassed. In her soft dark eyes he read stark fear. It made her loveliness more poignant without quenching it.

It seemed to Calvin Brown that this marriage had been hatched in hell. His soul recoiled from it.

‘I can’t marry you without having a private talk with this young lady,’ he told Sanborn quietly.

‘Suits me,’ agreed Cole promptly, a satiric smile on his lean face. ‘Let’s not have any bully-ragging, Reverend. Stomp on it if you find any snake sticking up its head. It’s up to Miss Landis. If she doesn’t want to get married, of her own free will, there will be nothing doing. And while you’re at it, you better warn her I’m a hellion, and that if she marries me decent folks won’t have anything to do with her.’

The minister gulped. It took courage for him to answer this notorious killer as he did, but he looked straight at the big man as he spoke.

‘I shall. I’ll advise her not to go on with this.’

‘Do,’ Sanborn replied, with his sardonic smile. ‘But be quick about it. It’s got to be yes or no. We’ve got no time to shilly-shally.’

Cole strode out of the room and closed the door behind him.

‘My dear young lady, you can’t know what you are doing,’ the rosy-cheeked little man began. ‘This Sanborn is a ruffian of the worst type. He’s supposed to have held up the K. & J. Flyer only last week. He’s a desperate fellow, dangerous——’

‘That’s why I’m marrying him,’ Mary interrupted.

‘I beg your pardon,’ the preacher exclaimed.

‘It’s his chief merit, that he’s dangerous. I want someone to fight for my rights. You needn’t waste time warning me about him. I know what a ruffian he is.’

The Reverend Calvin was startled. ‘But, God bless my soul, if you know that——’

‘I know it, and still I’m going to marry him,’ she said doggedly.

‘But marriage is a holy institution ordained of God. My dear, you must not——’

‘What kind of a husband would Chet Radbourne make me?’ she broke in. ‘If I married him, would our marriage be ordained of God?’

Her mind, it seemed to him, hopped about like a restless bird pecking at grain. ‘We’re not talking about Chet Radbourne, but about this man Sanborn.’

‘I’ve got to marry one of them, and I’ve made up my mind which one,’ she explained. ‘Chet is my guardian. I’m his prisoner. He means to make me do what he says. You haven’t answered my question.’

Brown was appalled. He had no illusions about Radbourne. The owner of the Circle 3 T was evil, a menace to the county and the town. His deeds were conceived in darkness and woe followed their execution.

‘I’d rather see you in your grave than married to him,’ he said bluntly. Yet he spoke in a low voice, for in Boone County the walls had ears when Radbourne was mentioned.

‘And I’d rather be there,’ the girl answered. She was white to the lips, but she did not falter. ‘I’ve made up my mind. You don’t know all the facts, Mr. Brown. I want to marry Cole Sanborn. It’s the only way out for me. Please don’t refuse to help me.’

‘Of course I’ll help you, but don’t be precipitate. You said yourself he is a ruffian. Let me talk with Mr. Radbourne. I’ll explain to him how you feel.’

‘He doesn’t care how I feel,’ she said. ‘He knows I’d as soon touch a snake as his clammy hand. It will please him to break my pride and my spirit. When you talk with him he’ll “Te-he,” with that cackle he uses for a laugh, and soft-soap you with a lot of lies. Then he’ll grin at me and gloat over me and make me do what he says. Is this Cole Sanborn so very bad? I know he has killed men and is wild, but I’ve heard he keeps his word. Don’t you think, if he makes a promise——?’

Mary left her question suspended in air, but voice, manner, eyes, all pleaded for a favorable verdict from him.

‘I don’t know how bad he is,’ the minister answered. ‘He’s aboveboard, at any rate. They say he’s faithful to his friends, but don’t let that——’

‘I’m going to marry him—now!’ she cried.

Mary walked quickly to the door and flung it open. Sanborn was just coming up the stairs followed by the hotel waitress and the cook.

‘Witnesses,’ he mentioned. ‘Unless you’ve changed your mind.’

‘I haven’t,’ the girl replied. ‘I’m ready to go on—at once.’ Her clear complexion was without a stain of color, but her bearing was undaunted.

They were married in the little bedroom, the two witnesses staring at the principals with wide-open eyes of startled wonder. They thought they had never seen a bride so lovely and with such tragedy in her eyes.

Sanborn did not kiss the girl who had just become his wife. Not a flicker of feeling touched his cold, hard face.

Calvin Brown shook hands with the girl. ‘I hope I’ve not done wrong,’ he said, still troubled.

‘You haven’t done wrong,’ Mary answered him tremulously. ‘No matter how it turns out.’

‘It’s an even steven bet, Rev., as to how it turns out,’ the new husband said, imps of devilry dancing in his eyes. ‘If Mrs. Sanborn is lucky she won’t be a widow until I’ve finished a job I’ve got to do.’

This was Greek to Calvin Brown. What that job was he had no idea, though he guessed it was connected with Chet Radbourne.

‘I’ll pray you may be happy,’ he said to the bride.

A twisted, ironic smile touched Mary’s pale lips. ‘I’m sure I shall be,’ she returned. ‘As happy as I deserve.’

To the minister Cole spoke, with a disarming smile: ‘I hate to hand you your hat right off, Reverend, but there are reasons why we’re in some hurry. You’ll hear later what they are. Both Mrs. Sanborn and I are very much obliged to you for what you’ve done.’

Cole followed Brown into the corridor and pressed a gold piece into the hand of the preacher. The latter rejected it, abruptly.

‘No. I don’t want money for what I did. I wouldn’t feel right about taking it, under the circumstances. I’ll ask you to treat her well. I’m disturbed about this marriage. Remember she’s a young girl, sweet and good and unused to men like you. Be kind to her, no matter how harshly you treat the rest of the world. Protect her—guard her—from your own evil ways as

well as from others who would harm her. Do that, and God may forgive you your sins.'

'I aim to do just that,' Cole said simply.

Something in the way he made his simple promise lifted a load from the heart of the minister. After all, while the light holds out to burn, the vilest sinner may return, he reflected.

CHAPTER IV

‘CAN’T A HUSBAND BE A FRIEND TOO?’

SANBORN walked back into the room and shut the door. Mary’s gaze followed his light-footed movements. As he came forward, his muscles seemed to ripple with the easy, sinuous grace those of a panther have.

Panicky fear was in her shining eyes. Through them he read her skittery emotions. She had rushed to impulsive action. Now that it was too late, she realized the madness of it. This killer and train-robber was her husband. What folly to have thought that such a man would keep the promise he had made her.

He did not try to reassure her with pledges, but came to business in a matter-of-fact voice.

‘We’ve got to make plans,’ he said. ‘Chet will be on the prod ‘soon as he learns this, and I’ve got to light out. Can’t take you with me. That’s sure. There’s going to be heap much war in the hills. Can’t hide you anywhere in this country where he won’t find you. Question is, what are we going to do with you?’

Cole thought he knew the answer, but he felt it more courteous to let her join in the decision.

‘If you can’t take me with you and if you can’t hide me——’

‘Nothing left for you to do but run away until Chet and I have finished our rumpus. I’ll get you to Red Circle and you can take a train back home.’

Mary had forgotten her fear of him. It was swallowed up in disappointment. Had it come to this already, that the only result of her mad marriage was to leave two wolves to fight over her property? If she left the country, it would be as good as forfeiting her rights.

‘I’m not going,’ she said bluntly. ‘The Lazy B Ranch is mine. I thought you meant to try to save it for me.’

‘Sure enough,’ he assented. ‘You ought to be here on the ground. It would look a lot better. That’s a fact. If it were safe. But I can’t protect you from Chet. Not yet. I’ve got to gather what men I can. It will take time. We’ll be on the dodge till I get ready to make my play.’

‘I can see that,’ she agreed. ‘But I can see another thing too. If I run away, everyone will think I’ve abandoned my claim to the ranch. I have to

stay here and let people know you represent me. Don't you see that's necessary to make your cause a good one?'

He saw it, plainly enough. If she ran away, the public would regard the quarrel merely as a dog-and-cat fight between him and Radbourne. To build up opinion on her side and his she had to stay. But could she do this without being gathered in again by the long arm of her guardian? If he put her in the care of good people in Jonesboro, if she gave it out that she wanted to stay there and not at the Circle 3 T, would Chet Radbourne dare take her away by force? The man controlled the county politically. He dominated the range. Fear of him reached the most distant nester. But after all this was a country which respected good women. That was branded into the unwritten code of the outdoor West. How far could even the owner of the Circle 3 T outrage this sentiment?

'I'm not going back home,' Mary went on, sharp decision in her voice. 'That would be to give up the fight. Maybe you're sorry you went into this. Maybe you want to back out. If you do, say so. You can have the marriage annulled and tell Mr. Radbourne you're sorry.'

He smiled at the challenge flung at him so flatly. She was so young and slim, so full of spirit. And she had cut through to the essential fact that they could not win unless she stayed on the ground. There was a risk for her if she remained within reach, but Cole thought he knew a way to minimize it. Moreover, there was no use ignoring the fact that she could not fling down a defiance to Radbourne without running some risk. That was in the cards.

'You're sure you want to stick it,' he said. 'You know Chet and his hellions. I'll protect you all I can, but it won't be possible for me to be staying around town all the time.'

'With whom can you leave me?' she asked, brushing aside his protest.

He gave that consideration. The office-holders at Jonesboro were Radbourne men. His mind eliminated them. The Reverend Calvin Brown had not enough force in his personality, and anyhow he was a bachelor. There was Hal Peters, a lawyer, an honest man with courage enough openly to disapprove of Radbourne's venal clique. His wife was a lady much respected in the best circles of the town. Cole had never met her. He was barred from meeting women of her kind because he was a semi-professional gambler and a bad man. But she was known to be generous and might respond to an appeal from a helpless girl. It would be worth trying.

He told Mary what was in his mind. At his suggestion she wrote a note. The small son of the landlord carried it.

‘I’m not so sure we won’t have Chet checkmated ‘far as you are concerned,’ Cole said cheerfully. ‘I wouldn’t trust him any more than I would a rattler. He’s poison. In the hills there are graves of several men he has dry-gulched. But a young lady, under the care of Mrs. Peters, if she will take you, would be different. Very likely he would lay off until he had got me.’

‘What are your plans for yourself?’ Mary asked. It came to her with an odd sense of strangeness that the movements of Boone County’s leading desperado now intimately concerned her—and an hour ago she had never seen him.

‘I’ll gather what wild devils are footloose in this country,’ he said easily. ‘Chet has made enemies. Plenty of ’em. I’m expecting two lads here tonight. They’ll do to ride the river with, both of ’em. Before we leave town I’ll make a play before Haskell. I want word to travel through this country that I’m on the warpath against Chet. I want it known I’ve called his bluff that he’s the big boss.’

‘Is it a bluff?’ the girl asked. ‘Isn’t what you are doing really the bluff?’

‘Maybeso. We’ll see if I can make it stick. No use fooling ourselves. I don’t claim I can. It’s heavy odds I can’t. But I aim to take a whirl at it. ‘Soon as I can, if things break my way, I’ll call for the showdown.’ He stopped, frowning at her. ‘There’s another thing. If we play a game, we’ve got to play it so as to fool our enemies. You’ll have to call me Cole and I’ll call you Mary. Before I leave town I’ll fix it so as to kiss you before folks.’

‘Will that be necessary?’ she asked, in a small voice.

‘Yes. We’re aiming to pull public opinion our way. Love at first sight, and all that sort of thing.’ He added dryly, ‘I won’t like it any better than you do.’

His curt manner, so entirely divorced from sentiment, relieved her apprehensions and at the same time stirred feminine resentment. She had been kissed before, but never by one who told her it was an unwelcome duty. The two or three lads who had won the privilege had not seemed to so regard it.

‘All right,’ Mary said, as indifferently as she could. ‘If it has to be. A stage kiss.’

‘That’s right. If I act like I meant it, you’ll understand. It will have to be done right.’

‘From what I have heard I’m sure you know how,’ the girl replied, a sting in her voice.

‘When I hit the grit on my way out of town I’ll likely be in a hurry,’ he said, ignoring her sarcastic thrust. ‘If I give a yell, come out onto the porch a-running. I won’t call for you unless it looks safe. We won’t fool with the love and kisses if guns are popping.’

‘Shall I hear from you, about how you are getting along? I’ll want to know, now that we are business partners in a way.’

‘You’ll hear,’ he told her grimly. ‘Plenty. Especially if Chet bumps me off. Don’t forget that no news is good news. And don’t worry. Keep yore head high, like you wasn’t a bit scared of this sidewinder.’

‘Yes,’ she murmured, with mock humility. He was giving her orders already, and she was taking them as though he were really the head of the family. But she could not keep back an ironic fling. ‘Every day will be a year till I see you again, my lord.’

A sudden boyish grin warmed his harsh face. ‘I reckon you’re sore as a toad on a skillet now you’ve got yore way. You want me hard enough to whop Chet and his Circle 3 T outfit of gunmen and soft enough to say, “Thank you kindly, ma’am,” for the chance. Now ain’t that a woman for you?’

‘You wouldn’t expect a woman to know enough to think straight, would you?’ Mary asked, eyes flashing.

The laughter died out of his face. ‘Girl, we’re in a tight. Till we get out of it I’m boss. It’s a job that has been wished on me, but I aim to handle it. You’ll do like I tell you. Understand?’

She met the cold, hard light in his eyes and read there the rigor of a spirit virile and inflexible. Whatever else he might be, he was a dynamic personality. A pulse of excitement beat in her throat, stirred less by fear than expectancy. A queer exultant dread fluttered in her bosom. Her gaze shifted. She looked out of the window at the mountain peaks, crags of fire in the sunset.

‘I understand,’ she said in a low voice.

He swung from her toward the door, wary, motionless, brown hands resting on hips close to the butts of the revolvers in his belt. Feet were moving in the passage outside the room.

Mary’s heart died under her ribs. A weight pressed on her chest so that she could not breathe. Was this Haskell, backed by his men, ready to strike?

There came a knock on the door, a cheerful voice raised in profane greeting. The door swung open, to admit two men.

‘Fellow, we’re here,’ the first broke out. ‘With half the dust of Boone County in our throats. A li’l’ drink——’

His words ceased, abruptly. He stared at Mary, his eyes amazed question marks. For he recognized her. He had seen her in town once with her guardian. What she was doing here he did not dare to guess.

‘Mary, this slabsided guy who looks like a rail upended is Dave Pope. He’s long as a snake, and he drags the ground when he walks. The hammered-down runt is Pete Daggett. Boys, meet Mrs. Cole Sanborn.’ The voice and manner of Cole were casual.

Dave Pope’s lank, unshaven jaw dropped. If he had heard aright—— But of course Cole was joshing. Dave looked at his friend reproachfully.

‘You hadn’t ought to drape around jokes with dynamite in ’em, fellow,’ he remonstrated.

‘No joke,’ Sanborn corrected, eyes dancing. ‘Gospel truth, boys. Ask the lady.’

‘But you said only yesterday you hadn’t ever met up with this young lady,’ Dave reminded him, still suspicious.

‘That was yesterday,’ Cole said. ‘This is another day. Right off, we knew what we wanted, this young lady and I.’

The squat cowpuncher who had been introduced as Pete Daggett stammered out what was in his mind. ‘B-but C-chet Radbourne—where’s he at?’

Cole looked at Pete with mild interest. ‘I don’t know. You looking for him?’

‘I—t-thought——’

‘I don’t reckon he’s in town, Pete, but Jerry Haskell is here. I expect he can tell you where Chet is. What say we mosey over to the Haven of Rest and ask Jerry?’

Pope scratched his red head and looked at Mary for information. ‘This fellow Sanborn is such a dad-gummed josh, Miss, you got to check up on everything he says. I reckon the old horned toad is just trying to put something over on us, but——’

‘We were married not fifteen minutes ago,’ the girl interrupted.

‘I’ll be teetotally flabbergasted,’ Dave ejaculated.

‘That all you got to say?’ Sanborn asked, lights dancing in his eyes. ‘No good wishes for the young lady? No congratulations at getting so good a man?’

The lank man ducked his head in a kind of bow, scraping his right foot back along the floor as he did so. 'I hope you'll be plumb happy, Miss. It's a surprise, you might say. We didn't know Cole was a marrying man, but _____',

'Didn't know it myself till an hour ago, boys,' Sanborn cut in. 'You want to look out, boys.'

He found himself intrepidly light-hearted, for no reason he could have precisely defined. Of late he had been low in his mind, dissatisfied with himself and his part in life. A monotonous vista of meaningless years had stretched ahead. That was why he had come to town and sat on the porch of the Jonesboro House inviting battle. He had wanted to drug his discontent with an adventure. Now one had come to seek him, the greatest one of his life, a hazard from which he would probably not emerge alive. He could not remember when he had been so keenly exhilarated before. Why? Was it because this crazy venture had some meaning to it, because he had gone into it for reasons not wholly selfish. He did not know, and just now he did not care.

The long, lean cowpuncher found a warm little hand in his. 'I'm very glad to meet any friend of my husband,' Mary said. 'We're going to need friends, I think.'

Dave looked into the deep, soft eyes and was lost. He was from that moment sealed to the service of this girl whose beauty, tempered like a blade, held a fire imperishably live. In spite of her delicacy there was a swift eagerness in her. He liked the tiny freckles powdered over the impudent little nose. They made him think she might be good fun if a fellow knew enough to keep his place.

'You've got one, ma'am,' Dave said promptly.

'M-make it two, Mrs. S-sanborn,' Pete Daggett stuttered when it came his turn.

'Thank you both—very much,' Mary answered, and her white teeth, strong and even, gleamed in a swift smile. 'A little while ago I had no friends. Now I have two. That's fine.'

'Two—or three?' drawled Cole. 'Can't a husband be a friend too?'

Mary answered without looking at him, an overlying pink flushing the smooth brown skin of her cheeks. 'Sometimes they are,' she said lightly.

Her nonchalance was fraudulent. What had occurred had established a relationship with this grim stranger. She might come to hate or despise or fear him. Time alone could answer that. But their lives had become

interlaced and indifference was not possible. Already he stimulated excitement in her.

‘Put me down as one on trial,’ he suggested. ‘Maybe I’ll do to take along.’

‘He s-sure will, ma’am,’ Pete promised.

‘If he don’t treat you right, Mrs. Sanborn, you tell us,’ Dave said, grinning. ‘We’ll work him over for you.’

Mary nodded, cheerfully. Already this wild adventure began to seem less crazy than it had at first.

CHAPTER V

MORE FRIENDS

AGAIN came the sound of footsteps in the passage, followed by a knock on the door.

‘Mr. and Mrs. Peters to meet you, ma’am,’ a boyish voice sang out.

Cole moved noiselessly to the door and swiftly flung it open. He was taking no chances.

A man and a woman stood there. The boy had vanished. The man was a long-legged, awkward man in a shiny coat known then as a Prince Albert. The woman beside him was in her late thirties, well-dressed and graceful but not pretty. In her thin face character was stamped.

The rough-hewn countenance of Hal Peters registered surprise and resentment. He knew Sanborn by sight and by reputation.

‘What does this mean, sir?’ he asked stiffly.

Mary came forward timidly. She felt shy and embarrassed at being found alone in a bedroom with these men.

‘Please come in,’ she invited. ‘I’m Mary Landis, and I’m in trouble. Mr. Sanborn thought you might be willing to help me.’

‘What has Mr. Sanborn to do with this?’ His swift glance swept over the three hillmen and came back to her. ‘In your note you didn’t mention——’

‘I know,’ she interrupted. ‘We were afraid you wouldn’t come if you knew he had anything to do with it. Maybe it wasn’t candid, but I need help so badly. You will come in and hear my story, won’t you?’

Peters hesitated. There was something strange and sinister about this. He had heard about this girl and been sorry for her, but no good woman had anything to do with Cole Sanborn.

Mrs. Peters took the decision out of his hands. She walked past him into the room and shook hands with the girl. ‘Of course we’ll listen to it,’ she said warmly. This young woman needed friends, especially one of her own sex. That was all Jessie Peters needed to know.

Tears misted the eyes of Mary. It had been so long since she had met kindness from such a woman.

‘You are good to me,’ she said simply. ‘Will you and Mr. Peters sit down, please?’

Mary told her story, as briefly as she could, beginning with the time when she had come to Boone County to take over the property left her. She made clear the hopelessness of her condition and then mentioned the desperate remedy at which she had jumped.

Peters cried out, amazed. ‘Good God, you don’t mean that—you have married this man Sanborn?’

‘That’s what she is telling you, sir,’ Cole answered. ‘Out of the frying-pan into the fire.’

‘But—but—if you knew——’

‘I know,’ Mary said quietly. A tide of color was flushing her cheeks, but she held her head up and her eyes were steady. ‘I’ve heard all the stories. Mr. Sanborn himself warned me. He said it wouldn’t do. He tried to dissuade me. But—there was nothing else ahead of me except something worse than death. I made my choice, of my own free will. I married the only man I know who will fight to save me. Whatever he has done—I believe in him.’

She continued to look at Peters, but her hand went out to meet that of the man she had just married. The gesture was wholly impulsive, and it set a wild song singing in the veins of Cole Sanborn. She trusted him to keep faith. He would do it until the crashing guns sounded faint in his ears as he sank into death.

Cole spoke, in a voice tutored to dryness. ‘This is the point, Mr. Peters. I can’t take Mrs. Sanborn with me, for I’m up against the guns of forty killers. She won’t leave and go back to her old home, even if I could get her through to the railroad. Where will she be safe from Chet Radbourne?’

‘In our house,’ Mrs. Peters said swiftly. ‘He wouldn’t dare take her back to his ranch against her will if the whole town knows she wants to stay here. Even Mr. Radbourne couldn’t do that.’

‘I’m not so sure,’ Peters demurred cautiously. ‘He’s a wily fox. Probably he would appeal to the law. In any case, this is a serious matter, not one to be jumped at hurriedly. There are several angles to it.’

Sanborn looked straight at the lawyer. ‘One of them is that he will consider it an unfriendly act for anyone to shelter her against his wishes. It may not be a safe thing to do.’

The attorney flushed. ‘I have never claimed to be a friend of Chet Radbourne. In this town that is well known. If Mrs. Peters and I decide it is

right to ask this young lady to our house, you may be sure we shall do so.'

'And of course it is right,' his wife said quickly. 'You agree with me about that, Hal, do you not?'

Peters hesitated a fraction of a second. 'Yes, we shall be glad to have Miss Landis as our guest.'

'Mrs. Sanborn,' the girl corrected quietly.

'It was a slip. I meant to say Mrs. Sanborn.'

None the less, Cole knew Peters was against him just as he was against Radbourne. The lawyer would welcome Mary in her own right, not as the wife of an outlaw.

Mary thanked Mrs. Peters and her husband. 'It is a great deal for you to do. It may bring you trouble, and you do not know me at all. I am very, very grateful.'

'Nonsense,' answered Mrs. Peters briskly. 'It will do us good to have a young person in the house.'

'I shall never forget your kindness,' Mary insisted. 'Never as long as I live. I wish I didn't have to impose on you, for it isn't a light thing to make an enemy of Mr. Radbourne.'

'Better wait here until you hear from me,' Cole told Peters. 'I'm going over to Casey's to have a talk with Haskell. Likely the house is watched now. I'll arrange with him to call off his boys.'

'How will you arrange that?' the attorney asked bluntly.

Cole smiled, but there was no softness in the smile. 'We'll have a little talk.' He turned to the cowboys. 'Let's drift and find out for Pete where Chet is.'

'I d-don't care a billy-be-damn where C-chet is,' Pete said. 'I ain't looking for him none.'

'All right,' Cole said gaily, 'we'll go over and ask Jerry what time it is.'

'If you want to know the time, I can tell you,' Dave put in. 'No need to ask Jerry.'

'He gave me an hour quite a spell back,' Cole replied cheerfully. 'I've got to find out if it's up yet, haven't I?'

'What do you mean to do?' Mary asked, in a low voice.

'Surprise Mr. Haskell.'

'You'll be very careful, won't you?'

‘Careful is my middle name,’ he told her.

With which he led the way out of the room followed by his two men.

CHAPTER VI

COLE SAYS 'ADIOS'

THE fire had died in the hill crotch and left a lake of deep purple with edges of glittering crimson. Soon night would flow over the valley.

Dave Pope stood on the porch of the Jonesboro House and looked up and down the street. A man was standing among the horses at the hitch-rack in front of Blossom's Emporium. Another was in the doorway of the Haven of Rest. A third sat in a window-frame of the new store that was going up. None of them moved. No casual loafers were on the street. Tensity gripped the atmosphere. It was as though time stood still, waiting for the ticking of a clock that would signal death's entry.

A squat figure lounged out of the hotel and joined Dave. They stood on the porch a minute, unhurried, apparently undisturbed. Pete rolled and lit a cigarette.

The two separated. Pete sauntered across the road and joined the motionless figure at the door of the Haven of Rest. Dave moved toward the hitch-rack at Blossom's. Neither of them hurried. As he passed the unfinished store, Dave cocked an eye up to the window-frame.

'Just watching the stars come out, aren't you, Hank?' he taunted.

Cole Sanborn walked into the picture. He strode lightly across the road, looking neither to right nor left, straight for the Haven of Rest. He did not linger. Nor did he hasten. Though his friends protected flank and rear, a bullet might come flying out of the night at him. That was a chance he had to take. Dave and Pete, by their silent presence, said 'Check!' to the men posted for the attack. This might be enough, since the victim was walking to the place where Jerry Haskell waited and was not trying to escape. Cole was betting high stakes that it would, but he could not be sure.

He reached Casey's place and passed through the swing door. Pete did not at once follow. He did not want the guard stationed there to shoot Sanborn in the back. Cole would have to play a lone hand, for the moment at least.

Those in the Haven of Rest saw Cole the instant he came into the room. There was a faint murmur, as though the wind had swept through the place. The dealer at a poker game stopped, cards suspended in air. Roulette players

forgot to place their bets. The bartenders stared, their eyes fixed on the newcomer.

Haskell was at the bar, his back to the door. Aware of the sensation, he slowly turned his broad shoulders and stared at the man moving toward him. Not until his enemy had reached the bar and was facing him did he speak.

‘So it’s you,’ he said slowly, rage in his throat.

‘Nobody else, Jerry,’ Sanborn answered cheerfully. ‘You gave me an hour to leave town, you remember. Haven’t forgotten my time’s up, have you?’

‘I haven’t forgotten,’ Haskell replied heavily.

‘Afraid you had, so I came to remind you. I’ve been so busy I didn’t think to go. Otherwise, of course, I’d have lit out like the heel flies were after me.’

Haskell glared at him. The thick neck of the foreman was suffused with angry color. This fellow’s insolence always had that effect on him.

‘You’re a damn fool, Sanborn,’ he said.

‘Not news, Jerry,’ the other responded lightly.

Cole’s roving glance had swept the room as he came forward. Most of those present were innocuous citizens. Three or four perhaps bore him ill-will, but would not be likely to carry this to the point of hostilities. Lutz, playing poker, would not fight unless pushed. Lauret might, given enough backing. Except Haskell himself there did not appear to be any Circle 3 T men present. The other riders were on guard outside. Probably one of them was galloping into the hills to report to Chet Radbourne a piece of news he would not like.

‘This country won’t stand for a minute to have a nice young lady marry a man like you,’ the foreman announced loudly.

‘You mean Chet won’t like it, Jerry,’ Sanborn corrected.

‘Don’t twist my words, fellow,’ growled Haskell.

Cole’s white teeth flashed in a broad smile. ‘You scare me when you talk savage thataway. ‘Makes me all jumpy. By and by, like enough, you’ll land on me all spraddled out. Why didn’t I cut dirt for the brush country instead of foolin’ away my hour getting married?’

‘You’re talking yourself into a coffin,’ the Circle 3 T man said blackly. ‘One of these days——’

‘Now ain’t that generous of you,’ Sanborn drawled. ‘You’ve done extended my time free gratis. Here I was all whipped out because my hour

was up and so plumb terrified I drapped in to ask for an extension, and right off you let me know you've postponed the fireworks.'

'I told you to shove,' Haskell flung out, slamming a fist on the bar.

'That's right,' agreed Cole. 'And you're the venomous kypoote, a walawahoo from the mal pais. Fact is, I'm so blamed frightened, my legs won't track. If I didn't have nigger luck, I reckon you'd be eating me up right now. Well, I'll shove, Jerry. But first you call in those willing warriors of yours you've got stationed up and down the street to bushwhack me.'

'That's a lie,' the foreman roared.

'*Call 'em in, Jerry.*' Sanborn's voice was almost a whisper, but a bell of warning rang in it loud as a cathedral chime.

Haskell's swift glance slid around the room. A score of fascinated eyes were watching the drama. This was a frontier town. All present knew that a challenge had been given. If it was accepted, the roar of guns would fill the room. A body—perhaps two—would crumple up and slowly slide to the floor. In that deadly silence Haskell found no help. He had to make his own choice.

Again the foreman's instinct warned him to evade the issue. What was the sense in letting the outlaw fling bullets into his stomach, even though in turn he killed the fellow? At the right time he would get him without risk.

'If you're afraid of my boys, I'll tell 'em to let you alone,' he jeered.

'Good of you, Jerry. I'm scared of them almost as much as I am of you. Call 'em in and say your little piece to them.'

Haskell turned and hooked his elbows on the bar. Sullenly he spoke to a man at the poker table.

'Jim, run along and bring the boys in. They're hellin' around somewheres outside.'

'You'll find them where Jerry posted them to bump me off,' Cole added.

The man named Jim left the room hurriedly. Tension relaxed. The croupier spun the wheel. The dealer at the poker table resumed distribution of the cards. Someone ordered a drink. For there was to be no trouble, at least not immediately. Haskell had made his choice, and that choice had been to decline his enemy's challenge to a fighting finish.

Lauret moved forward from the faro table and joined Haskell at the bar. He was a neatly built man, well-dressed, with the cold, impassive face of the professional gambler. That he was serving notice he stood with the Circle 3 T against Sanborn was apparent to all.

With characteristic insolence Cole took occasion to insult him at once. From experience he had learned that the best way to meet danger was to challenge it rather than to run away from it.

‘Thought you were a capper for the Arcadia, Lauret,’ he said scornfully. ‘Does the tenderfoot money drift to this joint now?’

‘Any objections to my being here, Mr. Sanborn?’ the gambler asked crisply. ‘Do I have to ask you where I may hang out?’

‘Nary an objection, if you don’t run on me just because Jerry has got me scared.’

A man walked into the place through the side door. He was Butch Preston, a bad man from the Nation with whom Cole had had a difficulty.

Sanborn accosted him instantly. ‘Well—well, if Butch isn’t among us, too. A meeting of all my friends, looks like. Come up to the bar and have a drink, Butch, along with Haskell and Lauret. My treat.’

The man from the Indian Territory declined the invitation. ‘I don’t like a hair of yore head, Sanborn, and I’m not drinking with you.’ His wall-eyed stare took in the situation accurately. ‘Looks to me like you might be right busy soon, with one thing and another. I’ll tell you something, fellow. I’m not sitting in on this play. If I ever get on the prod, I won’t need any help. I’ll play a lone hand.’

Cole looked at him, a long, lean man with a clean brown jaw, and he knew at once that Preston’s declaration was on the level. He was not going to join Haskell and Lauret if guns were drawn.

Into the Haven of Rest men trickled. First, four riders of the Circle 3 T; close on their heels Dave Pope and Pete Daggett. At sight of Sanborn’s friends, Haskell knew why his men had not obeyed the order to kill Cole when he left the hotel.

The foreman spoke to his men sourly. ‘This fellow here, Sanborn, is scared some of you boys might jump him, so he crawled in here and asked protection. He gets it, for tonight only. I’m giving him time to hightail it outa town.’

‘Jerry being so fond of me he’d hate to see any harm come to me,’ Cole drawlingly explained.

One of the men, a black-haired, graceful fellow, looked at Cole, at the foreman, and laughed aloud. ‘So that’s the way of it,’ he said.

Haskell turned on him, eyes blazing. ‘What you mean by that, Slim?’

The black-haired man grinned at his boss with cool hardihood. 'I'm wondering, Jerry. Just a private little thought of my own.'

'Don't get funny with me,' Haskell warned.

'It's yore say, Jerry. You can change yore mind if you like. Only——'

'Got any kick coming?' Haskell demanded angrily.

'Nary a kick,' Slim answered evenly. 'But that wasn't the way you talked awhile ago. Maybe he hasn't got you buffaloed. Maybe you're just long-lost brothers. It's all right with me—if it is with Chet.'

'Keep your trap shut,' the foreman ordered, with a poisonous look.

The narrowed eyes of Sanborn rested on Slim. 'Too bad you don't get a crack at me,' he said.

Slim returned his gaze, steadily. 'If I don't,' he added.

'I reckon you was born high up on the Guadalupe, raised on prickly pear, quarreled with alligators, and played with grizzlies,' Cole said pleasantly. 'Too bad you couldn't get along with the sheriffs in that country. But of course its loss is our gain.'

'If you'd like to read my pedigree, begin soon as you're ready,' Slim suggested, very gently, black eyes fixed on Sanborn.

Cole shook his head. 'Not now, Slim, if that's your present name,' he said. 'I'm taking things in the order of their importance tonight. Likely I won't get down to you.' He let his glance range over the other Circle 3 T punchers. 'Funny what gets swept up into this neck of the woods. About what you'd expect that double-back action four-flusher Chet Radbourne would find to do his dirty work. Ugly as galvanized sin, every last one of you. I don't know how you rank as gunmen, but you'd ought to be good if Chet's to get his money's worth, for there ain't one of you could chouse a longhorn on the prod.'

The Circle 3 T warriors stirred uneasily. They waited for Haskell to give the word, and he did not give it.

'Big business you're in, all of you,' Sanborn went on, his voice not raised, but biting clear. 'Helping that thief Radbourne steal the ranch and cattle from a girl who can't protect herself. A nice bunch of flop-eared curs you are. Keep your hand away from that gun, Mex, or I'll drill you through. I'm talking, and you'll listen. Tell Chet from me he can't cut it. He's up against a man now, not a kid girl. From now on, as the husband of the owner, I'm running the Lazy B. I'll come up right soon and relieve him of his guardianship of my wife's property.'

‘If you don’t go to the state penitentiary first,’ Haskell cut in.

The cold, hard gaze of Sanborn swept to the foreman. ‘Tell your slimy boss, Haskell, that my wife is the guest of Mrs. Peters by her own wish. That’s where she is going to live. He’s to lay off and not hound her. My orders. Tell him I’ve got hell in the neck, and that if he just looks at her cross-eyed I’ll hunt him to his hole and pour lead in him. I’ll do it, if it’s the last thing I ever do in this world, so help me God. He’ll get it when he’s least expecting it. Tell him that.’

‘You talk like you was the angel Gabriel,’ jeered Slim. ‘If I was running this shebang I’d call yore bluff right now. Maybe I came from the Guadaloupe like you say. Wherever it was, we’d never have let a sandy like yours ride without a showdown.’

‘The showdown’s coming,’ Haskell said, hoarse with anger. ‘Things have changed since we came to town. It’s up to the old man to decide what he wants done. I don’t aim to take the play outa his hands. He’ll call the turn on this scalawag. Don’t worry.’

‘I’ll not worry,’ Cole said cheerfully. ‘Come on, Pete—Dave, we’ll be drifting.’ He looked round with cool effrontery. ‘Unless anyone feels hostile and can’t wait. Glad to accommodate any urgent gent.’ His cold, sardonic gaze ranged from one to another of the Circle 3 T men. ‘No takers? In that case I’ll say “Adios.”’

He turned his back and walked out of the room. It was a risk, but not too big a one. For his companions still faced the enemy. Another moment, and the three friends stood together outside.

As they moved toward a hitch-rack down the street, Cole let out a yell. The three men found their horses and swung to their saddles.

‘Wait here a minute,’ Cole said.

He rode back to the Jonesboro House. A slight figure ran down from the porch to meet him. He leaned down, caught Mary by the arms, and swung her to the saddle in front of him. From the door of the Haven of Rest he saw men pouring as seeds are squirted from a squeezed lemon. The stars were out, and he knew that what he did could be seen by anyone watching.

‘I’m on my way, girl,’ he said.

A tumult of excitement beat in her. ‘Don’t let them kill you,’ she begged.

‘Bet your life I won’t.’

He held her warm, slight body in his arms and drew her close. When his lips met hers, Mary felt herself sinking in waves of emotion. She did not

know how long that clamor of the blood lasted. She felt herself being lowered gently to the ground.

Sanborn swung his horse as on a dime. The animal jumped to a gallop and pounded down the street.

A shot rang out—another—and another.

The man she had married vanished in a cloud of dust.

CHAPTER VII
PARTNERS IN A DEAL

THE stars were over the flat tops when Bud Calloway reached the Circle 3 T with a message.

‘Where’s the boss at?’ he asked of a puncher who lounged out of the stable to meet him.

‘Up to the house. Where the other boys?’

‘Still in town.’

Bud did not volunteer any further information. He swung from the saddle, hitched up his chaps, and bowlegged toward the house.

The ranch-owner was in the bare little room which served him for an office. Radbourne sat in front of a desk, his heavy rounded shoulders hunched, his huge body slumped in the chair. As usual he appeared to be doing nothing. When Bud came into the room he looked up, a question in his small black eyes. He knew there must be news. Otherwise Haskell would not have sent a messenger. But he said nothing. Only his jaws moved. He was chewing tobacco.

Bud did not waste words. ‘Cole Sanborn was in town when we got there—on the porch at the Jonesboro House. Jerry had words with him. He gave Sanborn an hour to leave town, but he posted the boys to prevent a getaway.’

Still Radbourne waited, silently. He knew the gist of what Calloway had to tell was still to come.

‘Jerry left Miss Landis at the hotel,’ the cowpuncher went on. ‘I dunno how it happened, but she an’ Sanborn got together.’

‘He broke through and took her with him? That what you’re trying to tell me?’ Radbourne asked, a danger signal in the beady eyes.

‘No, sir. Jerry has got him penned up. The point is that Miss Landis and Sanborn got married.’

‘They—what?’

Menace rumbled in Radbourne’s deep voice.

‘Sent for Reverend Calvin Brown and he up and married them.’

The black eyes of the Circle 3 T boss were pinpoints of fury.

‘What was Jerry doing—and the rest of you?’

‘We didn’t know a thing about it till afterward, then right off Jerry sent me here to tell you. He aims to bump Sanborn off soon as he shows his nose.’

A dull color rose in Radbourne’s pallid cheeks. ‘Numbskulls and dolts! All of you. Not an ounce of brains anywhere in the lot. Why do I pay wages to such blundering fools?’ He finished with venom-dripping oaths.

Calloway shifted uneasily on his feet. He found it difficult to sustain that malevolent look.

‘Jerry thinks——’

‘He never thought in his life. Or he would have known better than to leave the girl and Sanborn alone together. The fool will probably slip up now and let the ruffian get away.’

‘He’s got every door covered,’ Bud said. ‘Cole ain’t got a chance.’

‘They’re only five to one against him,’ jeered the fat man. ‘He can fight his way out, since you’re not with the boys.’

‘I can hold my end up, Mr. Radbourne,’ the puncher protested mildly. ‘I don’t aim to let Sanborn or anyone else run on me.’

‘Meaning me?’ asked the ranchman silkily.

‘No, sir, not meaning you a-tall. You’re my boss. I expect to take orders from you. That’s what I’m paid for.’ Calloway spoke hastily. The last man in the world he wanted to get a down on him was the owner of the Circle 3 T. He had heard stories whispered that sent a scunner through him. Men had disappeared when Chet had given the word, and echoes of their fearful exits had drifted back as a warning to others.

Radbourne showed his teeth in an evil grin. ‘Don’t forget that,’ he advised gently.

At his gesture of dismissal, Calloway departed. Little beads of perspiration stood on the puncher’s forehead. It was not what Chet said but the way he said it that left a fellow’s throat dry, Calloway thought. He had not done a thing to be blamed for. Not a thing. Yet it gave him a sick feeling to have those snake eyes fixed on him, always with a veiled threat in their glittering depths.

As Bud was leaving, Radbourne flung an order after him. ‘Send Jordan to me.’

Chet’s shapeless body slumped down in the chair. He sat there motionless, absorbed in thought, even the restless jaws clamped.

A man came into the room. ‘Calloway said you sent for me,’ he remarked in a voice peculiarly flat.

‘Yep.’ Radbourne barked out the monosyllable and said no more. He stared at the inkstand, but that was not what he saw.

The newcomer slid into a chair and waited. He was in no hurry. Eyes cold and dead as those of a mackerel on a fish stall fastened on the great mass of huddled flesh in the seat at the desk. Jordan was a man slightly below middle height, hard as nails, tight-lipped, with a face leathery and seamed. He had the rippling muscles of an athlete. His movements were rhythmic and easy. A manner of perpetual wariness rested on him.

‘What d’you think that lunkhead Haskell has gone and done?’ Radbourne asked angrily.

‘I wouldn’t have a guess,’ Jordan murmured.

‘The Landis girl had to sign a paper before a notary. I sent her down to Jonesboro with Jerry—and five of his warriors. Six husky fatheads to look after one little girl, all of ’em garnished with guns. Was that enough?’

‘I’d say plenty, Chet.’

‘You’re wrong,’ the owner of the Circle 3 T barked. ‘That devil Cole Sanborn was in town. He met up with the girl—and married her—all inside of an hour.’

For just an instant the dead eyes came to life. ‘Someone must have been right busy,’ Jordan drawled.

‘Not Haskell or any of his loafers,’ Radbourne snarled. ‘Jerry sent Calloway up to break the glad news and to say he’d got Sanborn trapped.’

‘Which makes everything nice,’ Jordan mentioned in his ironic, colorless monotone.

‘If Sanborn doesn’t break through,’ Radbourne corrected.

‘Out of a trap the great Haskell fixed for him?’ jeered Jordan.

The ranchman’s stubby fat fingers drummed on the desk. ‘We’ll know about that soon, Curt. Sanborn’s slippery as a fox. Jerry ought to get him, but——’

‘Betcha a golden eagle to a dollar Mex he don’t,’ Jordan interrupted, with a thin-lip smile.

Radbourne beckoned the other man to come closer. Chet leaned forward, so that a heavy fold of his great stomach rested on the edge of the desk.

‘That’s where you come in, Curt,’ he wheezed.

‘Oh, that’s where I come in, is it?’

Just as there was something catlike in the lithe, gliding movements of Jordan, so there was in the patience with which he could bide his time. He would not have been a killer with so formidable a record if he had not known when to strike and when to lie in wait. Now his dead-fish eyes rested on those of his employer. Any talking that was necessary he could do after Chet had stated his proposition.

Radbourne whispered, lips close to the ear of the other man. Curt Jordan listened, his mouth a straight, cruel line. Once or twice he spoke, a terse, crisp sentence, but for the most part he held to a wary silence.

When at last he carried the talk, it was to object to the terms proposed by the man with the rounded, hunched-up shoulders.

‘You’ve always wanted something for nothing, Chet,’ he sneered. ‘Most usually you get it, because the other galoot is scared of you. This time you pay full value, or I don’t deliver the goods. This bird Sanborn is poison. Look what he did to Buck Travis and to that Texas man Sanderson. He’s one fighting fool. Anyone who goes up against him takes a big chance. I’m right fond of my hide. If I risk it, there will be real mazuma in it for me. Quit talking as if a hundred bucks was big money. It will cost you just one thousand.’

Radbourne gave a yelp of pain. It always hurt him to spend money except when he could see a financial return for it. He began to explain how easy the job was.

‘If it’s so easy, why don’t you do it yourself?’ derided the killer.

‘Haskell may have done it already.’

‘If he has you’ve saved just a thousand bucks.’

‘Five hundred,’ pleaded Chet.

‘You hard of hearing?’ asked Jordan. ‘I said a thousand. What’s eating you, Radbourne? With this fellow outa the way you get the Lazy B, the girl, her money, and her cattle. Yet you try to beat me outa my measly pay. You’re a lousy son-of-a-gun, Chet.’

‘Don’t you suppose it costs any money to run this shebang, Curt?’ snapped Radbourne. ‘I’m paying wages to thirty good-for-nothings who don’t do anything but sit around and eat up the ranch. I have to scabble to get my monthly payroll together. Be reasonable. Five hundred spot cash ‘soon as I know the job’s done, and on top of that I’ll try fix it so as you get the reward offered for the fellow who pulled off the K. & J. express robbery. I can’t say fairer than that, can I? There won’t be any comeback from the

law afterward. You'll be a public benefactor for getting rid of this scoundrel.'

'That wouldn't interest me,' Jordan said callously. 'I'm out for the dough. But I'll be fair. Get me the reward and I'll do the job for nothing. But don't try to slip anything over on me. I wouldn't stand it for a holy minute.'

'What's the sense of talking thataway, Curt?' the ranchman demanded irritably. 'My word's good as the wheat. You know that. I never in my life threw down on anyone who was square with me.'

'Don't begin with me then,' the killer advised.

The fat man slammed a fist on the desk. 'You act like you were locoed, Curt,' he cried, with an oath. 'Here we are partners in a deal, and you start off loaded with suspicions I'm trying to rim you.'

Jordan laughed hardily, without mirth. 'I know damn well you would if you could, Chet. You sit there like a fat toad figuring out ways to sweat dollars out of everyone you meet. Yeah, I've heard your smooth talk, heap much of it, but it don't fool me one little bit. I'd trust you just as far as I could throw a bull by the tail. You're a sink of iniquity, and I've helled around considerable myself. I'll just mention that I'll be watching you every minute.'

'And I thought you were my friend.'

The killer looked at the fat man, a curious contempt in his shallow, cold eyes. 'Ain't you ever honest even with yourself, Chet?' he asked. 'Don't you play the good respectable church deacon with me. I know you.'

If Jordan had been a timid soul, the look that his employer slid at him would have daunted. There was murder in it—for a fraction of a second. Then the threat was veiled, curtained by a film of wariness.

'We're talking the way crazy kids do, Curt,' the rancher said. 'No sense to it. Let's get to brass tacks.'

'Suits me. Sanborn held up the express. So you say.' There was a flare of ironic humor in the flat voice. 'And I reckon you ought to know. Can you prove it and get the reward for me when I bring him in—dead?'

'What do I run the politics of the county for? I'll see the commissioners vote you the money.'

'Good enough. I'll sleep on the trail till I get this bird.'

'How do you aim to set about it?'

'I'll go to Jonesboro, stick around there, and keep my eyes and ears open. Presently I'll find out where Sanborn is holing up. Then I'll go get

him. If Jerry hasn't done it already.'

'Jerry hasn't.'

The voice came from the door.

Both men at the desk slewed around hurriedly.

CHAPTER VIII

FOUR HANDS ON THE DESK

THE fat face of Radbourne took on an expression of ludicrous dismay. Cole Sanborn leaned indolently against the door jamb, thumbs hitched in his belt close to the butts of the revolvers. He was smiling, but Chet found no reassurance in that smile.

‘Hands on the desk, gentlemen,’ the visitor ordered quietly.

Neither of the Circle 3 T men made the mistake of discounting his vigilance. No liberties could be taken with that manner of negligent ease. The deep-set eyes in the strong brown face were like half-scabbarded steel.

Radbourne’s soft plump hands moved to the top of the desk.

‘Talking to you too, Jordan,’ Sanborn said crisply.

The dead eyes of the gunman did not lift from the uninvited guest. ‘If I had an even break,’ he said slowly.

‘But you haven’t. Not this time. Better luck some day . . . maybe. Put ’em up.’

Jordan looked longingly at this man whom he had just been commissioned to kill. It was in his mind to go through with it now. The fellow’s insolence got under his skin. By rights Haskell’s warriors ought to have filled him full of lead. But here he was, in the stronghold of the enemy, a dozen men within call, standing before them as though he were monarch of all he surveyed. There was something superb about his arrogance. He was a grim, strong fighting man. The cool, sardonic eyes were those of one who did not know fear and would not admit defeat. They suggested the wisdom of surrender. The guns so close to the competent hands would roar instantly if Jordan made a false move. No, it would not do to force an issue yet.

‘You can’t do a thing to us,’ the Circle 3 T killer made answer. ‘The boys are in the bunkhouse. If a shot was fired——’

‘They would come on the jump,’ Cole interrupted. ‘And what would they find? Two dead men on the floor. The live man loping into the darkness they might hear, but they wouldn’t see. No, Jordan, that bet is coppered. You’d never make it as easy for me as that. Put ’em up, like I said. I’ll not mention it again.’

‘Do as Cole tells you, Curt,’ Radbourne snarled. ‘Don’t you see it’s his say-so? No use getting het up and talking fight. We’ll talk this over the way neighbors should.’

Reluctantly Jordan’s hands slid along the desk and came to rest.

Sanborn shut the door with his foot. He did not lift his gaze from the two at the desk. One instant of carelessness would be fatal.

‘We can talk more comfortably with the door shut,’ he said. ‘You wouldn’t want for us to be interrupted, Chet.’

‘Just before you came in, we were mentioning you, Cole,’ the ranchman said, from a dry throat.

‘Saying nice things about me,’ Sanborn drawled derisively. ‘Don’t quit just because I drapped in. But I don’t need to hear you talk to know how fond of me you are.’

‘You figure me wrong, Cole,’ replied Radbourne, with unctuous heartiness. ‘I never did have a thing against you. Trouble is, you’re one of these impatient lads who get notions and stick to them through hell and high water.’ The Circle 3 T man tittered, on a note of simulated friendliness, palpably false.

‘Good old Chet, I’ve been doing you a wrong,’ Sanborn murmured. He saw the rancher only out of the corner of his eyes. His attention was on the other man. He read the thought behind the shallow, stony eyes. ‘You did right, Jordan, in putting up your hands. No chance of beating me to the draw—*then or now*. You’ll have to wait till you can get me from the brush.’

The vanity of the bad man was aroused. ‘I don’t need to get you from the brush. I’ll take a chance with any man alive,’ he boasted.

‘If you have to,’ Sanborn answered contemptuously. ‘I know your kind.’

Again Radbourne cut in. ‘Don’t be a fool, Curt. He came here on business, Cole did. We’ll listen to his proposition.’

‘Good of you,’ Sanborn said, with his thin, sardonic smile.

‘You and I don’t always see alike, Cole, but I aim to be reasonable. I reckon a talk will clear things up. It’s been quite some time since we met up, and we’ve both listened to a lot of lies whispered by busy-bodies. I’m right glad you came.’ Chet managed a reciprocal smile, but it was not a very convincing one.

‘It’s been a year since we met—in person,’ the visitor said. ‘But I’ve had messages from you since then. A few months ago I stopped a Circle 3 T bullet. By the way, Chet, you’d ought to make your warriors demonstrate

before you hire them. No use dry-gulching a man unless you're thorough about it.'

Radbourne shook his head sadly. 'That's no way to talk, Cole. If any of my boys fired at you, it was without instructions from me. I did hear about one of my riders, when he was crazy with drink, pulling a gun and firing at you. I gave him his time right off.'

'Then his name wasn't Jordan?'

The bleak gaze of the owner of that name met that of Sanborn.

'I'm thorough,' he said hardily. 'When I shoot a man he stays dead.'

'So I've heard. No hospital for those you drop. Better get Jordan next time, Chet.'

The gross body of the ranch-owner shifted uneasily. 'You're barking up the wrong tree, Cole. I done told you there's nothing but a misunderstanding between you and me. Anyhow, I'm a law-abiding citizen.'

'And Mr. Jordan is here for ornament?'

The boss of the Circle 3 T brushed this aside impatiently. 'What's the use of jawing? I'm not a kid with a chip on my shoulder. And you're no fool, Cole. You came here to tell me something. Spit it out.'

'I came here to get your blessing, Chet,' Sanborn said, with a satiric lift of the upper lip. 'I've just married your ward, though I don't reckon that is news to you. Of course you'll be glad not to be worried with her affairs any more. I'm taking them over.'

Radbourne did not say what he would have liked to say. It would not do to try too far the patience back of that bitter, insolent smile. Had Sanborn come to devil him into making a false move as an excuse for killing him? That was likely. This strong, virile devil of a fellow was thorough. He had given his proofs.

'We'll have to talk that over, Cole,' he said smoothly. 'I had other plans. But no use going into that now. Spilt milk, you might call it. You and missy have certainly put the kibosh on them. Well, we got to make the best of things as they are. Can't any of us stand out against love's young dream.' He stopped, to give a cackle of splenetic laughter. 'You're certainly a young man in a hurry, Cole. I don't recollect ever having seen faster work. Some of these other lads oughta take lessons from you. You always were a knockout with the ladies. Boy, you'll have to quit hellin' around now.'

'Yes,' agreed Sanborn. 'I'm going to settle down now, Chet—on the Lazy B.'

‘That’s fine,’ Radbourne said promptly. ‘I’m too busy with my own affairs to have much time left to look after those of other folks. I felt it was my duty to see Miss Landis got a square deal, but now she’s married I can step out with a clear conscience. I’ll admit I was some riled when I heard she had taken so important a step without letting me know. But the more I think of it, the better I like it. You’re no Montgomery-Ward cowboy, Cole. You know cows.’

There was a hint of ironic derision in the weather-beaten face that looked down at the Circle 3 T owner. All this talk was a lie, designed to put Cole off his guard. Sanborn knew that, and it got exactly nowhere.

‘Much obliged for your endorsement, Chet,’ he drawled. ‘I was worried for fear I was a four-flusher. I reckon then you’ll push your stock back off our range right away?’

Radbourne chewed his quid. ‘Sure. If any of my stuff have drifted over. We won’t quarrel none about that.’

‘If you’ve got private business with Chet, I reckon I’ll be going,’ Jordan announced. He did not lift his hands from the desk, but a ripple passed through his lithe body, as though he were about to move.

‘Don’t you!’ warned Sanborn, with deadly evenness.

The ripple died down. ‘I’m to stay here, am I?’ Jordan inquired sullenly.

‘Couldn’t get along without you.’

‘I’ll get along without you, one of these days.’

Sanborn spoke to Radbourne. Over his eyes a film had come, a shutter which left them opaque and without warmth. The muscles of the brown face were rigid, the voice cold as wind blowing across an ice-covered lake. ‘Listen, Chet. I sent a message by your man Haskell, then decided to deliver it myself. I’m here to lay the law down. My wife will stay with Mrs. Peters, as a guest, until I’m ready to take over the Lazy B and run it. That will be right soon. From now on, it will be hands off. You’ll not bully her. You’ll not crowd her. It was up to her to make a choice, and she’s done that. I’ve come here to tell you just one thing. If you annoy or mistreat Mrs. Sanborn, or if you harm Mr. or Mrs. Peters, I’ll put you where you’ll never trouble another woman. I could do that tonight, but I’m giving you one chance. Don’t make a mistake. You can’t hide in your hole deep enough so that I won’t drag you out. Understand?’

Chet understood, but at the moment the question was put his mind was not wholly centered upon what his visitor was saying. His face had the

absent look of one who is listening intently. Through the open window had come the sound of horses' hoofs.

A man called, 'That you, Jerry?'

For answer came a raucous curse.

Voices, the stamping of horses, the creak of saddle leather, drifted to those in the room. Someone was striding toward the house.

Swiftly Cole drew a revolver. 'You don't want to be interrupted just now, Chet,' he warned.

The lean muscles of his jaw had tightened and his deep-set eyes had narrowed to shining slits, but there was not the faintest hint of panic in the cool voice.

Neither of the men at the desk spoke. Neither of them moved. But both knew the equation had changed. Sanborn had stayed too long and was now on the defensive. In another moment, with any luck . . .

The footsteps came close.

Sanborn leaned against the door. He was trapped, and as always when danger came close, he felt the lift of the spirit only dare-devils know.

'Say your piece now, Chet,' he murmured.

The beady eyes of Radbourne gloated, but he did not intend to make a mistake. He did not want to pass out with his enemy when the guns roared.

'I'm busy,' he called hoarsely to the approaching man.

'It's me,' the answer came harshly. 'Got to see you, Chet.'

Fingers turned the doorknob, but Sanborn's weight prevented the man from entering.

'Get him, Jerry,' shouted Jordan. 'It's Sanborn.'

He reached for a weapon and flung his body to the floor, and at the same time Radbourne's great bulk slid under the desk. The man outside put his shoulder to the door and pushed it open.

The noise of the guns filled the room. The kerosene lamp went out. Flashes stabbed the darkness. There was a crash of glass.

Haskell yelled an order. 'Get him, boys! It's Sanborn! He went out the window.'

The foreman ran around the house, in time to see a man flinging himself into a saddle. He fired wildly. The answering shot plowed into his shoulder.

Sanborn lifted his mount to a gallop. Men were running across the open to cut off his retreat. Others were climbing back into the saddles they had just left.

A Mexican vaquero clutched at the bridle of Sanborn's claybank and was bowled over like a tenpin. Two others were closing in on him. One of them, on horseback, was the man Slim.

'Here's where I get that crack at you, fellow,' the black-haired cowpuncher called, and simultaneously the roar of his revolver sounded.

Voices, shots, confusion, filled the night. Half a dozen men were between Sanborn and the road. He could not run with any chance of escape such a gauntlet. Abruptly he pulled his mount round, gave it a touch of the spur, and sent it straight at a closed gate opening into a pasture.

The claybank gathered itself for the jump, rose beautifully, and sailed across without touching the top plank. Horse and rider disappeared in the darkness, untouched by the random bullets flung after them.

CHAPTER IX

HARMONY AT THE CIRCLE 3 T

WHEN SLIM walked into the office the victims of Sanborn's visit were examining their casualties, the foreman with raucous profanity, Jordan in a grim silence. The latter had a shattered ankle, Haskell a punctured shoulder. Radbourne sat slumped at the desk. The black-haired puncher guessed that rage was boiling in him.

'Mex has got a busted collar bone,' Slim mentioned. He added, a devil of mischief dancing in his eye: 'Looks like we'll have to turn the Circle 3 T into a hospital. That hell-a-miler Sanborn 'most ruined our outfit.'

'I hired a fine bunch of buzzard heads,' Radbourne burst out, an ugly rasp to his voice. 'How many chances at the fellow you want? First, down at Jonesboro, where you were only six to one; then here, with about twenty of you sitting in.'

'Including the boss, under the desk,' Jordan said viperishly.

'Six to one, Jerry, and you figured it too dangerous,' Chet went on, disregarding Jordan's thrust. 'What kind of odds you looking for?'

The bull-necked foreman glared at his employer angrily. 'I told you he had two guys with him, and I told you, too, why I didn't bump him off. After he'd married the girl, I thought you might want to figure out some other play. If you want him so bad, Chet, you had a chance to get him your own self. Why didn't you plug the scalawag?'

'Buzzard head is right for me,' Slim said cheerfully. 'I took a crack at him in town and another here. No damage. His bronc was moving right lively both times. I'll say that for myself.'

'Chet didn't plug him because he never did have a thing against Sanborn,' explained Jordan ironically, his cool, flinty eyes on Radbourne. 'They're good neighbors, only busy-bodies have been telling them lies about each other. I was expecting Chet to kiss him.'

'He had the drop on us from the moment he stepped into the room,' Radbourne said, a dull flush suffusing his heavy face. 'If you'd had your way he would have finished us both right here. I use my head, Curt.'

'You sure do,' agreed Jordan. 'You'll never hear me say again a fat man is slow-moving. The way you slid for cover! You didn't aim for to stop any

bullets, did you, Chet?’

‘Take me for a fool?’ the ranch-owner demanded. ‘Think I wanted to sit there and be killed?’

Jordan looked at his ankle with disgusted resentment. ‘Well, I’m climbing a horse to go see a doc at Jonesboro,’ he announced. ‘Any other buzzard head going with me?’

‘You’ve got my company,’ the foreman said sourly.

‘I reckon Mex will trail along with you,’ Slim said, decorously suppressing a grin. ‘But you boys want to be careful about meeting this hell-a-miler. If he jumps you with only three of you present, no tellin’ what all he’ll do.’

Jordan looked at the graceful, black-haired puncher out of opaque, stony eyes. ‘I wouldn’t make any more funny cracks like that, Slim,’ he suggested, almost in a murmur. ‘My ankle hurts like hell, and I’m sorta irritable right now.’

Slim was reckless, but he was no fool bent on suicide. ‘Take it back, Curt,’ he apologized promptly. ‘Course I know Sanborn got a lucky break. I was only joshin’. No offense meant.’

Snarling, Haskell turned on the Texan. ‘Where I come from a thirty-dollar waddy don’t horn in with advice like he was boss of the outfit. Myself, I’ve had about enough of you. Maybe you’re one bad *hombre* down in the brush country where you was raised, but that line don’t go up here. You’re just a dog-goned cowpoke here.’

‘Did I claim I was a bad *hombre*, Mr. Haskell?’ asked Slim silkily. ‘If I did, I reckon I’ll have to demonstrate any time you call my bluff.’ The man from the Lone Star State did not raise his voice, but the last six words were spaced, evenly and deliberately.

With an oath Radbourne brought a fist down heavily on the desk. ‘What do I pay you scalawags for?’ he snarled. ‘If you’re on the peck so big, quit fussin’ with one another and go get Sanborn. I ain’t interested in listening to your quarrels. Far as I can see I haven’t got a rider worth a barrel of shucks. Gimme results. I’m the big auger here ’long as I pay the bills. Understand? Swelling up and claiming you are big chiefs don’t explain away the fact that Sanborn makes you all look like plugged nickels. You rock along to the bunkhouse where you belong, Slim. I’ll have a private word with you, Jordan, before you go.’

‘Looks like I’m being handed my hat,’ Slim said coolly, and forthwith departed.

The foreman followed him sulkily. He did not know why there should be close conference between the boss and Jordan which excluded him.

‘I’m in a hurry, Chet,’ Jordan told his chief shortly. ‘Get it off yore chest, whatever it is.’

‘Stick around Jonesboro till your ankle heals up, Curt,’ said Radbourne meaningly.

‘What I aim to do,’ Jordan answered, looking straight at the fat man.

‘Sanborn will come slipping in to meet his new wife. They’re all alike when it comes to a woman. She’s a good-looking little wildcat, and he’ll buzz around her the way a bee does around clover blossoms. The poor fool has framed himself for you. Just keep an eye on the Peters place.’

Jordan meant to kill Sanborn before he returned to the ranch. The lust for revenge burned savagely in him. But he was in no humor to give Radbourne the satisfaction of knowing it.

‘I’ll please myself about that,’ he said dourly.

‘A sure thing,’ the owner of the ranch said persuasively. ‘Candy from a baby.’

‘That’s what you were telling me just before you dived under the desk.’

‘Don’t you see how easy he has made it, Curt? He’ll be crazy about this wench. He doesn’t know the little devil married him just to take a slap at me. I’d like to give her a good quirting, and one of these days I will.’

‘That all you’ve got to tell me?’ Jordan asked sourly.

‘That’s all.’ Chet leaned forward and whispered. ‘Fifteen hundred *dolares* waiting for one little crook of your finger.’

‘Have someone bring my bald-faced roan round here,’ the gunman ordered. ‘I don’t aim to do any unnecessary stepping on this ankle.’

‘That’s right,’ Chet agreed. ‘I’ll go tell one of the boys to rope and saddle for you.’

Radbourne waddled out of the room. Anger surged in him, but he did not dare to show it. After all, no matter what Jordan said, the man would never let Sanborn get away alive after what he had done.

CHAPTER X

HOTTER THAN HELL WITH THE LID ON

THE blast of the last gun died away as Cole rode rapidly across the pasture. His heart was high in him, lifted by the elation that often came after passing through danger. His enemies might follow him a little way, but not for far. No profit for hired warriors was to be found in pressing a dangerous foe too closely. A Circle 3 T man could save his face with Radbourne by the plausible excuse that night had swallowed the fugitive.

At the pasture boundary Cole swung from the saddle, cut the wire with his nippers, and rode into the rough country beyond. It was a night of pale suffused moonlight. To his left he could make out dimly the barranca running almost parallel to his line of travel. In the shadowy gloom the desert had taken on the magic charm of mystery. Details were blurred. One did not notice that the vegetation was gray with alkali dust, that the sahuaro had the desiccated look of extreme old age and were not glorious candelabra. The sunbaked plain, scene of a million fights for survival against drought and other extinguishers of life, did not show its teeth as it did in the untempered atmosphere of day.

Expertly the claybank wound a path among the mesquite and the cholla. It dropped down a steep bank into a wide dry wash. Here Sanborn guided to the left, following the bed of the old river in its devious way to the mountains.

Before him rose a castle formation, left standing stark against the sky by ages of erosion. As he came closer, its architecture became more visible. Ramparts and bastions stood out above the sheer cliff of the lower wall.

He drew up his horse and gave a hail. From the foot of the precipice a voice shouted answer. Two horsemen loped out to meet him.

‘You durned old alkali, I’m sure plumb glad to see you,’ Dave Pope cried joyfully. ‘I was scared you never would come back from that crazy trip. We been restless as a pair of toads on a hot skillet.’

‘D-did you s-see Radbourne?’ Pete Daggett stuttered.

‘Yes, I saw him,’ Sanborn replied. ‘Had a nice little chat with him.’

‘Well, fellow, hop to it,’ demanded Dave. ‘Yore story moves like a snail climbing a slick log. What happened?’

Sanborn showed his white teeth in a gay grin. ‘Nothing much. I told him where to get off, took a crack at him, and said “Adios, amigo.”’

‘What you mean—took a crack at him? Did you have trouble?’

‘Me? No, I didn’t have any trouble. I left some at the Circle 3 T, I reckon, because some of the boys got on the prod.’

‘You kill someone?’

‘No. They got to kinda crowding me and my old Tried and True stopped a couple with a pair of pills. Haskell and Jordan. Only winged ’em.’

‘Haskell and Jordan!’ Excitement blazed in Dave’s pale blue eyes. ‘You’re not just a-loading us, Cole? You did get those sudden-death artists?’

‘Nothing permanent about it,’ Sanborn apologized. ‘Didn’t stop their clocks for keeps. Fact is, I was in quite some hurry at the time. The Circle 3 T boys were buzzing around me like angry bees. I hadn’t time to be thorough.’

‘S-sounds like it might have been h-hotter than hell with the lid on,’ Pete suggested. ‘T-tell us more.’

‘You’re so dad-gummed tight you never give another guy a chance to get in on the fun,’ the lank puncher complained querulously. ‘It would have cost you nothing Mex to have taken me an’ Pete along. But no, you gotta play a lone hand. Serve you right if those buzzing bees had stung you proper.’

‘You know why I didn’t take you, Dave,’ his chief said amiably. ‘My only chance was to drop in on Chet unexpected. If I took an army with me, I couldn’t do that. Besides, I wanted him to know his bunch of warriors didn’t scare me any. As it turned out, my luck stood up fine. I saw Chet and we had our talk. ‘Seems I’ve done him wrong. He’s quite a friend of mine, by his way of it.’

‘You don’t say.’

‘Yes. He’s plumb glad I married his ward, because now he won’t have to spend his time looking after her affairs.’

‘Fine. Now tell us all about it. Begin at the start.’

Cole told his story as the three rode side by side into the cañon which cut like a sword cleft through the hills. They moved up a dry arroyo until it pinched out, after which they clambered up a steep rock chimney, loose rubble sliding down under the hoofs of the horses. This brought them among the hilltops. They turned south, struck a ledge trail, and dropped down into a pocket wooded with live oaks.

Here they found a camp, and in it a man just aroused from sleep. He jumped for the shelter of a tree before asking any questions.

Cole hailed him a second time. 'Don't get busy with that scatter-gun, Dunc,' he added. 'We ain't after your scalp. Friends. Dave and Pete and Cole.'

Duncan McCoy emerged from cover. 'Might as well kill a fellow as scare him to death. I was sleeping awful sound when you woke me. Thought maybe it was old Magruder with a posse. You never can tell.'

'If you'd live a good life the way I do, you wouldn't have to roost 'way up here where a fellow had orta have hooked horns to reach,' Dave reproved the camper.

McCoy was a blue-eyed man, with red hair and sandy complexion, somewhere between thirty-five and forty. He was bull-necked and heavy-set, but he had moved with extraordinary rapidity when he had jumped for the tree. There was not an ounce of fat on his thick body.

He spoke with the faintest brogue. 'I've admired your good life, David man,' he said. From his pocket he drew a poster which could not be read in the dim light. 'Now this tall man in jeans, wanted for robbing the K. & J. express. It wouldn't be David Pope by any chance, would it?'

The Scotchman's pawky smile robbed the question of offense.

'No, Dunc,' Dave answered cheerfully. 'And the rangy black-haired bird in corduroy trousers and polka-dot bandanna wasn't Cole. I'm wondering if the heavy-set one in leathers was that well-known hoot man, Dunc McCoy. 'Course you don't have to confess, old oat-meal-and-scones, if you've been holding up trains as seems likely.'

Cole was no longer in corduroy trousers, so far as could be seen by the naked eye. If he wore them, a pair of well-worn shiny chaps hid the incriminating fact. But the polka-dot bandanna and the decorated Stetson were in evidence.

'You looking for the K. & J. holdups, Dunc?' he asked. 'If you are, there's no reason why you can't go back to Jonesboro and join Magruder's posse. I've brought you good news. That fellow Gildea that you plugged is going to make the grade. You didn't shoot straight enough. Also, those present when the fracas took place say Gildea was reaching for his gun when you cut loose. So all's well along the Potomac. Except, of course, that some of the other Circle 3 T warriors may not like what you did.'

Relief showed plainly on the rugged face of McCoy. This was better news than he had dared to expect. But he chose to comment on the sentence

of Sanborn that was of the least importance to him.

‘You’re damned whistling they won’t like it,’ he admitted. ‘I’ll have to roost a long way from their range.’

‘Unless you throw in with us, Dunc,’ Cole said. ‘We’ve declared war against the Circle 3 T. One of these days hell’s going to pop.’

‘It started popping tonight,’ Dave put in. ‘Cole went up to old Chet’s bailiwick and read him the riot act. Haskell and Jordan crowded him and he gave ’em hail Columbia.’

‘M-made ’em step high as a blind dog in a field of stubble,’ Pete grinned.

The cold blue eyes of McCoy glittered. ‘Tell me about this war, Cole. I might be interested.’

Sanborn told him what had taken place in the past eight hours. Before he had finished the tale, McCoy had made up his mind.

‘Count me in,’ he said quietly. ‘There’ll be no peace in Boone County until the claws of this wolf are cut.’

Cole told him of his plans, as far as he had made any. He was going to gather a bunch of riders he could trust, after which he meant to try to force Radbourne into a position where he would be forced to attack.

The four men rolled up in their blankets and slept till the first gray gleams of dawn began to sift into the sky. One of them brought in the horses while the others made coffee and cooked steaks from a *ladino* beef McCoy had killed the day before. Breakfast finished, the camper packed the sawbuck saddle cinched to his spare mount and threw a diamond hitch expertly so as to take up all the slack.

The world was still mysterious in the dim morning light when they set out. From the summit of the ridge, after a long climb, they looked down on a caldron of opaline mist which filled the valley into which they were about to descend. The crystal light of dawn began to lose its magical radiance as the sun rose and the desert stars vanished.

An hour later they were crossing a mesa quivering with heat. Lizards clung to the rocks. Dust eddies whirled in spirals. The soapweed and the cacti were stunted and parched. Even the mesquite leaves were shriveled.

‘Dry as a cork leg,’ Dave commented. ‘Not a sign of filaree. Betcha there hasn’t been a rain in a year.’

All of them were glad to escape from the burning heat into the shadows of the box cañon beyond.

CHAPTER XI

'I'LL RIDE YOU WITH SPURS'

As a killer, Curt Jordan had only one defect. He was a swift and deadly shot. He was as ruthless and as patient as an Apache. His assassinations were staged with a minimum risk to himself. But he was subject to sullen depressions, during which he bolstered his spirit by heavy, steady drinking. Until he had wiped out Sanborn this moodiness would be riding him hard. He spent a great deal of time at Casey's Saloon staring in front of him, a bottle and glass on the table.

Gildea was in town. The bullet from Dunc McCoy's gun had put him in bed for weeks, and only during the past few days had he been up and around. Since the man was still on the Circle 3 T payroll, Jordan used him to scout the neighborhood around the Peters house. Ten days had passed, and as yet there had been nothing seen of Cole Sanborn. If he had been in town, he had slipped in and out very quietly. Neither Gildea nor Jordan had learned of anybody who had seen him.

Twice Jordan had seen Mary Sanborn on the streets with Mrs. Peters. The sight of her, so light-footed and so carefree, so unaware of him when they came face to face, stirred the rage in him. She was a reminder of the fact that the man he was waiting to get still rode the hills unhurt. The more he drank, the stronger became his desire to send her back to the Circle 3 T. Radbourne had not given orders to that effect, but the wishes of the boss did not weigh heavily with Jordan. By capturing and removing the girl, Curt would score against Sanborn. Very likely, as soon as Cole heard of it, he would head for town bent on a rescue.

Jordan came to an abrupt decision to play this game his own way. His brain muddled by drink, he let his grudge outweigh discretion. To Mexico with Chet's caution! He would send this girl back where she belonged.

Gildea was reluctant, but he had not the nerve to stand out against the implacable gunman. Protesting that this was no responsibility of his, the man at last consented to do as he was told.

They knew that every morning Mary took a long walk, usually up the hill trail back of the Peters place that led to the summit of old Bald Knob. Gildea watched her start, then rode to Casey's Haven of Rest and notified his companion.

The bald-faced roan was tied to the hitch-rack in front of the saloon. Jordan swung to the saddle and the two men rode away.

Half an hour later, Mary came face to face with them at a bend in the trail. At sight of them the stomach muscles of the girl collapsed and she went cold inside.

‘Morning, Missy,’ Jordan said, with a cold, evil grin. ‘You’re going for a little ride.’

‘No,’ she protested faintly. ‘You can’t—you’ve got no right——’

The dead mackerel eyes of Jordan held to hers steadily as he moved forward. They held her motionless.

‘Don’t touch me!’ she cried.

He caught her by a wrist and dragged her to one of the horses, then lifted her to the saddle.

Fear swept her in waves. ‘Where are you taking me?’ she asked.

‘You’ll find out,’ Jordan told her. ‘Get going, Gildea!’

The cowboy led the way, holding the bridle of her horse. Jordan watched them go until the two riders had disappeared around the side of the hill. He limped back toward town.

The riders struck the hill road that ran parallel to the main one in the valley below.

‘We’re going to the Circle 3 T,’ Mary said.

‘You’ve done guessed right,’ Gildea said, chewing tobacco stolidly.

‘If you don’t let me go at once, my husband will settle with you for this.’

‘Yore husband who is on the dodge?’ he asked impudently.

‘I have friends in Jonesboro. They won’t let you do this to a woman.’

‘Let ’em talk to Curt Jordan—or Chet Radbourne. I’m only an escort to see you get home safe. You ain’t any of my responsibility.’

‘Then if I’m not you can let me go,’ she urged. ‘I’ll pay you well.’

He shook his bullet head stubbornly. ‘No use talking, Miss. I’ve got my orders. I aim to carry them out.’

Mary tried to talk him out of this, but the fear of Jordan and of Radbourne was too heavy on him. Defeated, she fell back into silence.

The windmills of the Circle 3 T heliographed to them the rays of the sun. After a time they rode up to the office of Radbourne.

By this time Mary had recovered her courage. She walked straight into the little room where the owner of the ranch sat hunched in a chair behind the desk. Gildea followed.

Chet looked up. His little pig eyes stared at her in astonishment. ‘What you doing here?’ he demanded.

‘That’s what I’ve come to ask you. This man, and that other ruffian of yours—the one they call Jordan—caught me while I was taking a walk and forced me to come.’

‘Is Curt here?’ Radbourne asked of Gildea.

‘No, sir. He had me bring her on his horse.’

‘Why?’

‘I dunno why. He sent you this-here note.’

Radbourne read the note and grunted. ‘All right, Gildea. *Vamos!*’ To Mary he said, snarling: ‘You did a fine day’s work, Missy, when you married this scoundrel Sanborn. The killer came up here and tried to murder me. He wounded three of my boys.’

Mary had heard the story. It was common talk around Jonesboro.

‘That’s not true, that he tried to kill you,’ she said.

‘Don’t talk to me thataway. I’ve a mind to wear you to a frazzle with a blacksnake,’ he growled.

The pulse in her throat beat fast, but she looked at him level-eyed. ‘My husband told me if you ever hurt me he would settle with you. Didn’t he say the same to you when he called a little while ago?’

‘He’s not your husband. I won’t stand for it. Not for a minute. You’re under age and can’t marry without my consent.’

‘But I did.’

‘I’ll have it annulled. He’s a notorious character—a gambler, a dissolute ruffian, a killer, and an outlaw.’

‘You can’t have it annulled without my consent, and I’m not going to give him up.’

He slammed his fat fist on the desk. ‘What’s the matter with you? Looks like you gone crazy, to marry a fellow you’d never seen before, and then to pick the worst bad man in this country.’

‘I picked a man, anyhow,’ she said, and for a moment fires gleamed in her eyes. ‘He’s not afraid of you and all your men. *I’m* not afraid of you now. I know if you do me any harm, he’ll make you pay for it.’

‘Don’t you think it,’ he told her venomously. ‘He’s skedaddling into the brush country fast as he can go, not daring to stay put more than a few hours, scared to death for fear I’ll get him.’

Mary laughed, mocking him, looking down at him with a touch of contemptuous defiance. ‘He must have been terribly frightened, or he wouldn’t have come here and stood your whole ranch on its head.’

‘Listen, girl.’ The jet eyes in the fat, pallid face fastened to hers. ‘Men have got in my way before, and they’re buried in the desert without a slab over ’em to mark the spots. Nobody can interfere with my plans and not rue it. This fellow Sanborn is not one-two with me. If he’d ‘a’ had a lick of sense he would have killed me an’ Jordan when he had a chance. Instead of which he sloshed around bragging what he was going to do until his chance was gone. He’ll never get another break like that. I’ll hunt him down like I would a wolf. Your friend the killer ain’t thorough enough to stand up against me.’

He looked more like a swollen toad than ever. His clammy, unwholesome face and hands sent a shudder through her. They seemed to her an expression of almost reptilian personality. Everything about him was repellent to her. His thoughts, she felt sure, were slimy. Even the way he shuffled across the room was gross and earthy.

To her mind there jumped in contrast the picture of another man. If the stories told about him were true, he too was beyond the pale. But out of him was born something vital and clean that challenged the facts. The light ease of his tread, the sinuous strength of the arrogant shoulders, the indomitable courage back of the recklessness, even the sardonic insolence of the eyes, somehow carried reassurance to her troubled soul. That he was tough as hickory and hard as steel she knew. His lawlessness had become a proverb. In his turbulent life he had done evil. Men and women looked at him askance. Yet she was convinced, regardless of his bad reputation, that there was in him a residuum of clean decency. That was what differentiated him from this fat slug whose gloating gaze sent shivers up and down her spine. He had a code of his own by which he lived, and because of it he would do to ride the river with, to use his own phrase.

‘Perhaps your men will kill him.’ A faint tremor passed through her slight body, but her voice did not quaver and her steady eyes did not fall. ‘If so, it will be because there are many of them and only one of him. None of you would face him on even terms.’

He shrugged his shoulders. ‘You mean that he’s a fighting fool. That kind is the easiest to trap.’

In spite of her fear there was a momentary burst of song in her. She saw him, strong and confident, breaking through the nets spread for him. ‘Jerry Haskell didn’t find it easy at Jonesboro. You and your twenty men didn’t find it easy here.’

Chet looked at her in black anger. ‘You talk like a besotted idiot. It sounds like you’ve gone off your head about this ruffian. Don’t you know what he’s like, that you’d have to share him with every paid woman in the cowtowns?’

At his brutality she flushed scarlet. ‘You wouldn’t say that if he were here!’ she cried.

‘Everybody will say it and snicker at you. The fellow’s a no-’count scalawag.’

‘He’s my husband,’ she answered.

‘You poor fool, d’you think you can make me the laughing-stock of the country?’ he broke out, in a sudden fury. ‘Why, I’ll break you like I would an obstinate colt. I s’pose you thought you were doing something big, getting Sanborn to go cahoots with you in interfering with my plans. I’ve been too easy with you. That’s the trouble. You’ll walk a straight line from now on, girl. ‘Soon as I’ve collected his scalp I’ll put my brand on you. Don’t think anything else. And, by Gad, I’ll ride you with spurs, you li’l wildcat. I’m through humoring your airs. When I snap my fingers you’ll come running, or you’ll get a taste of the whip. Now get outa here and go to your room. If I see any more of you, I’ll start the quirting tonight.’

‘You’re not going to send me back to Jonesboro,’ Mary said.

‘No. I’m going to keep you here, where you belong, on your guardian’s ranch.’

‘If you do, you will be sorry. I promise you that.’

It was strange, but she was no longer afraid of him. She had met a man, and some of his iron nerve had flowed into her. She looked at Radbourne out of eyes hot and hard. The nails of her fingers bit into the palms of her clenched hands.

‘I’ll never, never do as you say,’ she said, with a flare of feminine ferocity. ‘I’d rather die.’

She turned and walked swiftly out of the room, the hot color of defiance still in her cheeks.

Chet followed her, to make sure she was securely locked in.

CHAPTER XII

A RESPECTABLE MARRIED MAN GOES TO TOWN

FIVE men were camped in the wooded pocket between two hills far up on the range. The night was chill and they were taking it easy before the fire. Wind soughed through the tops of the pines.

One of the men was a wrinkled little oldtimer. He picked up a live coal in his leathery fingers, dropped it in the bowl of his pipe, and leaned back against a saddle, his star-topped boots stretched toward the flames. That some of the younger men were 'running on' him good-naturedly because of the tall tales he was telling did not disturb him in the least. A large part of his life had been spent before campfires swapping lies.

'That's the worst of meeting up with a lot of one-gallus young squirts like you-all,' Rusty Hunter said placidly. 'Tell 'em the truth, and they know so dog-goned much they won't believe it. This bronc Sage I'm tellin' you about was ten years old. That's the best age for a cutting horse. Gentlemen, hush. I could read a list of brands to him and he'd go into a herd and cut out the beef steers I wanted. It got so when the critters saw him coming, they would go out of their own accord.'

'Y'betcha!' corroborated Dave Pope. 'They got a gold statue of that bronc on the state capital grounds. The brass plate below it says, "Talked to death by Rusty Hunter." They claim that bronc druv a trail herd to Roswell all by its lone. The boss said to take 'em to old man Chisum, and, by jolly, this-here Sage up and done it.'

Hunter turned reproachfully to Cole Sanborn. 'Didn't I tell you? Just a bunch of pilgrims that don't know rattleweed from grama grass. All they can do is sit on their spurs and cackle at what a fellow who knows says is so. Not a lick of sense. Me, I was taking a trail herd to Dodge when these pore plugged nickels were in diapers. I recollect onct on the trail we had a tenderfoot along looked just like this fence rail who calls himself Dave Pope. We had just crossed the Brazos in flood. We swum the herd, and you could just see the tops of their horns and the ends of their noses. Well, the boss didn't know what in time to do with this no-'count young rooster that had been wished on him, so finally he sent him out to grease the chuck-wagon. By and by this bird comes back plumb full of smiles at himself. That hairpin had greased the whole wagon—sides, back, spokes of wheels, the

whole darn thing, except the axles, which he claimed he couldn't get at. Like I said, he was the spit'n' image of Dave here.'

Dave grinned. 'I ain't claiming you're not old, Rusty. Folks say you came out here skinning a mule team when these hills were holes in the ground. An oldtimer done told me once you must be two years older than God because you looked like Methuselah when he was a kid. Naturally I got a lot of respect for age and——'

Hunter snorted. 'Old! Who said I was old? I could ride out a blizzard today long after you had turned up yore toes to the daisies. I can throw and hogtie a three-year-old quicker'n you any day in the week. There's twenty dollars in my jeans says so.'

Cole stretched his long body in a yawn. 'I'm not so young as I once was myself. Anyhow, I'm going to roll up and get some sleep. Don't forget we hit the trail by daybreak.'

Amiably Dave jeered at him. 'Yeah, Cole, you're so wore down you don't hardly throw a shadow. The old gray mare ain't what it used to be. When a man or a dog or a horse gits stove-up onct it's fare-you-well to the frolicsome days of youth. You're not fit for much any more except to wrangle Mary's little lamb on the sage flats. I reckon if we got into a rookus you couldn't hardly handle more'n three or four of us lads now simultaneous. You an' Rusty get yore blankets and we'll tuck you in nice.'

'Hmp!' snapped Hunter. 'I'll do you, fellow, like I done a tenderfoot at Wamsutter, Wyoming, onct. We was at the hotel, him an' me and a fellow called Jimmy Bounce. We was side-kicks, Jimmy and me. There was only one bed, so I says to the tenderfoot, real generous, "You take it." He looked kinda surprised, but he took it. After he got sound asleep, Jimmy and me lifted him, nice and tender, to the floor, and we had a comfortable night in the bed.'

The pack-horses were loaded and lashed while a pale moon was still riding high in the gray morning sky. The cavalcade dropped swiftly down through deep gorges filled with mist to the flats leading to the mesquite desert.

From the top of a high mesa they looked down into a deep well of space, the bottom of which was shrouded in the obscurity of fog.

'Looks like some giant a million years ago plugged the earth's rind and druv the plug in a ways,' Rusty remarked.

They wound down the desert through a manzanita cañon. Before they reached it the sun had swept away the last of the mist. The riders fell into a

road gait and jogged across the shimmering plain. The desert showed its teeth. White bones of cows met the eye. Every bit of scant vegetation carried spines for defense. In the sting of reptiles lurked death. The struggle for existence here was a continual fight. Even the plants strove incessantly, sending roots far down for the scanty supply of water necessary to keep them alive. What was true of the desert products applied in varying degrees to the men now moving swiftly toward the hills so illusively near. Of some of them at least it could be said that they had survived because of the toughness of their fiber and the sharpness of their sting.

The day was still young when the party reached a cottonwood arroyo above Jonesboro.

‘Throw off here, boys,’ Sanborn said. ‘Rusty and I are going down to have a powwow with some of the respectable citizens of Jonesboro. I aim to look like a reasonable gent sticking up for his rights against a scalawag who has done me and mine dirt. You’ll understand why I can’t take you rapsallions with me. I’d get the horse-laugh.’

His smile was one of friendly derision.

‘Are you claiming you got a better reputation than we ’uns?’ Dave demanded, grinning at him. ‘If so, you’re certainly loading yoreself, young fellow.’

‘I’m a reformed character, Dave, and a fat chance I’d have of getting anyone to believe it if I rode in to town surrounded by a lot of tough *hombres* like you, every last one of you bristling with guns.’

‘You got a consid’rable nerve,’ Dave demurred. ‘Me, I’m a preacher’s son. But the point that sticks out like a sore thumb is that you’re liable to get into a rookus down there with no friends present except Rusty. We could drap in, kinda accidental, and clutter up the scenery while you have yore powwow. That sounds to me like good medicine.’

‘No, Dave. I’m not going down there looking for trouble. The idea is that I’m a humble hillbilly, as they call them in Tennessee, trying to make a stand against the great mogul who is robbing Mrs. Sanborn. I’ve got no friends. I’m playing a lone hand, and I’ve come to get advice from smarter men.’

‘Who are these smart galoots, Cole?’

‘I thought I’d talk with Hal Peters and Judge Fairley and James K. Cross, all of them props of the community.’

‘You’ll play a lone hand onct too often,’ grumbled Dave. ‘S’pose you meet up with Jerry Haskell—or Lauret—or Butch Preston, say?’

Cole smiled. 'I've met them before, Dave. They didn't molest me. I'm not expecting to visit any palace of sin. Don't you worry. Rusty will look after me.'

'Rusty, hmp! About the time she busts wide open, Rusty will be busy telling a windy.'

As usual Rusty had the last word. 'If there was two of you, Dave, you would be a pair of buzzard heads; if there was three, you'd be a passel of 'em.'

An hour later, Sanborn and the oldtimer drew up at the hitch-rack in front of the Peters house.

CHAPTER XIII

JUDGE FAIRLEY GIVES AN ORDER

MRS. PETERS opened the door for him. 'Good morning, Mr. Sanborn,' she said. 'Mary is out walking. Will you come in and wait?'

'No, thank you,' Cole replied. 'I'll call later in the day. Is Mr. Peters at his office?'

'I think so. I'll tell Mary you were here. She has been anxious about you.'

Cole had come to town partly on legal business. He and Rusty dropped in to see Peters.

The lawyer greeted them stiffly. He had been retained to protect the interests of Mary, but he did not intend to show any friendliness toward this gunman she had married. He liked the young woman very much, but it did not follow that he must like this outlaw whom she had attached to her cause.

'How is it going, Judge?' Cole asked.

'I have prepared the papers, but Judge Fairley declines to terminate the guardianship. He says the young lady must be protected against the consequences of her folly.'

Cole smiled grimly. 'I reckoned he would say something like that. I'm in favor of you and me having a li'l' talk with him. Maybe he would see the light and change his mind.'

Peters looked at him steadily. It took courage to say what was in his mind, but he did not intend to be intimidated by the reputation of this man.

'Where do you stand in this matter, Mr. Sanborn?' he asked. 'Are you trying to get the rights of your wife established? Or are you starting a feud with Radbourne? I don't intend to be anybody's cat's-paw.'

'I'm doing both,' Cole admitted frankly. 'What's the use of saying anything different? He'll jump anybody who stands up for her.'

Still the lawyer hesitated. Sanborn read his mind.

'You hate to have me for a client, don't you?' he went on, with a sardonic grin. 'I expect you're afraid one of these days I'll be asking you to keep me out of the penitentiary on account of the K. & J. express robbery.'

‘I wouldn’t take any case for one whom I believed to be a law-breaker guilty of a premeditated crime.’ Peters said firmly.

‘That’s fine,’ Cole drawled. ‘I wouldn’t want a lawyer who didn’t believe me innocent. Now we’ll get down to cases.’ He took a chair and sat down. ‘What I want to know is the legal way to get possession of Mrs. Sanborn’s ranch and cattle. Neither she nor I want any trouble with Radbourne, though we are going to get plenty. How do we end this guardianship and take over the property?’

The lawyer answered at once. ‘You’ve asked two questions, not one. I can tell you how to terminate the guardianship, subject to the decision of Judge Fairley that it ought to be terminated. After that, taking over the property ought to be automatic. Whether it will be is another matter. Chet Radbourne doesn’t always follow the letter of the law.’

‘So I’ve been told,’ Cole answered dryly. ‘I’m asking you only for the legal angle of this matter. The recovery of the Lazy B I’ll attend to personally, but I want to be clear about the law. Where do we start from here?’

From his desk Peters produced a paper. This the lawyer read. It was a petition, written by Mary Sanborn, née Landis, asking the court to end the guardianship and turn her property over to Cole Sanborn, now her husband. The signature at the bottom was attested by the county clerk.

‘Fairley can’t by rights get away from that, unless he claims it was obtained by duress,’ Cole said. ‘He’s holding court now. What-say we drift over and ask for action?’

Hal Peters knew there was danger in taking this case. Radbourne would resent it bitterly. The owner of the Circle 3 T would probably win out by hook or crook in the end, and he might think it advisable to punish as an example a lawyer who had espoused the cause of his enemy. But Peters had in him a substratum of stark courage. His father had been a Union die-hard in Kansas during the days of border warfare, and the son was proud of the family record. He was convinced that Radbourne was a menace to the community, that his domination of Boone County was subversive of all American principles. The man’s influence had to be fought and defeated before law and order would again obtain. It was true that Sanborn also had been an element of disorder, but he was not engaged in corrupt politics and in this case was clearly within his rights.

‘It is not likely that Fairley will reconsider and decide this in our favor,’ the lawyer mentioned. ‘I don’t like to say it about a member of my own profession, but the man is corrupt.’

‘He’s a lowdown scalawag,’ Rusty said, lighting his pipe.

‘I expect Judge Fairley to do Mrs. Sanborn justice,’ Cole said grimly.

Peters looked quickly at him, frowning. ‘No violence—no threats. Or I’m out of this.’

Cole nodded agreement, a sardonic gleam in his eye. ‘That’s right. We’re peaceable citizens asking for fair play.’

The three men walked to the old courthouse, a square two-story brick building set in a plaza dotted with cottonwoods. In the courtroom were two lawyers, a bailiff, and half a dozen other men. The judge was about to dismiss court when Peters presented the petition of his client.

Judge Fairley was taken completely by surprise. He was a Radbourne man, elected by the edict of the owner of the Circle 3 T, and he had no wish to offend his boss. But Radbourne was fifteen miles away in the hills, and Cole Sanborn, killer, was sitting in the room not fifteen feet from him. The cold, menacing eyes in the strong harsh face daunted him.

‘I’ll take this under advisement and give a decision later,’ Fairley said, and hastily adjourned court.

He rose to leave, but Sanborn’s big bulk stood in the way.

‘Just a minute, Judge,’ Cole said very gently. ‘Like to have a little talk with you before you go.’

Fairley was a plump, soft man. He looked round, hurriedly and helplessly, to see the other lawyers and the spectators leaving the room.

‘I’m in a hurry just now, Mr. Sanborn,’ he quavered. ‘Got an appointment.’

‘With me,’ Cole drawled. ‘I wouldn’t want to be in contempt of court or anything, Judge. Everything has got to be proper and legal. But I reckon we’ve all got to be courteous to ladies. I wouldn’t like to feel that anyone had slighted Mrs. Sanborn.’

Sanborn’s gaze drilled into the politician. The stomach muscles of the judge tightened. He felt a chill run down his spine. For he had been on the street the day this man had killed Buck Travis. It had been a clear case of self-defense, but Fairley saw again, as sharply as though etched before his eyes, the swift efficiency with which Sanborn had rubbed out the bad man. Travis had stepped out of a gambling-house and fired at his enemy. Three times his revolver had barked, that of Sanborn once. The one bullet had been enough.

‘I’ll let you know my decision tomorrow,’ Fairley promised. ‘I want to look up the law.’

‘Hadn’t you better look it up now, Judge?’ Cole asked still with silky softness.

In the hard, unblinking eyes the judge could find nothing soft. He tried to summon courage to stand out. He told himself this man dared not kill him, but could find no conviction in his assurance. Out of the corner of his eyes Fairley saw Peters and Rusty Hunter. Neither of them spoke. They were awaiting the course of events. From them no help was to be had. He gave way, because he had not the nerve to stand out.

‘All right. All right.’ His voice was sharp and irritable. ‘If it has to be done in such an infernal hurry. Just what do you want, Peters?’

The lawyer explained in detail, and the judge gave the necessary order.

‘Two other little points, Your Honor,’ Peters went on. ‘We would like an order restraining Chet Radbourne from disposing of any of the cattle, horses, or other property of his ex-ward pending the time we receive an accounting from him. I understand a sale of her stock is now being negotiated with a buyer from Jefferson County. Also, if Your Honor pleases, an order to the First National Bank of this town instructing its officials not to honor any checks drawn on my client’s account by Radbourne.’

Still under the compulsion of that stark, bleak look, Judge Fairley did as requested. It was in his mind that later he could find some excuse for repudiating his actions.

‘He’ll send a message to Chet hot-foot,’ Peters said as the three left the courthouse.

‘So he will,’ agreed Cole calmly. ‘But we’ve got him on record. Like to drop into the bank and say “Howdy” to Mr. James K. Cross, if you don’t mind, gents.’

‘Might as well see this out,’ Peters assented. ‘I’ve stuck my big foot in it too far to escape from annoying Chet. You’ve heard the proverb about the sheep and the lamb.’

On the way to the bank they met a cattleman emerging from Blossom’s Emporium. Cole promptly hailed him.

‘Glad to meet up with you, Mr. Perry,’ he said cheerfully. ‘Want to talk over a little business with you. D’you mind coming to the First National with us? We’re going to see Mr. Cross.’

Fred Perry hesitated, trying to figure out in his mind what the business could be. It probably had to do with the bunch of Lazy B beef steers he was buying from Radbourne. Sanborn looked so uncompromisingly sure he would go that the cowman assented. He was a little curious, anyhow, to discover what was in the air. He nodded assent.

They found James K. Cross at his office in the bank. He was a middle-aged man with a hearty manner and eyes cold enough to freeze the blood of some poor debtor caught in the toils.

If there was truth in the first flash of his eyes, before he called into service his good-fellow manner, he was not pleased to see Sanborn.

‘Well—well, boys!’ he exclaimed. ‘It’s certainly nice to see you-all. What can I do for you? Or is this a social call? For pleasure, as you might say.’

‘Both business and pleasure, Mr. Cross,’ Sanborn told him, with an air as genial as his own. ‘I’ve been making a round of leading citizens today. First Mr. Peters, then Judge Fairley, and last of all you. I’d like to include Mr. Perry, but unfortunately he is from Jefferson County and not a resident here. I reckon that’s his loss and ours too.’

‘Yes, we would like to claim Mr. Perry as our own,’ agreed the banker, his mind on a more important matter. This fellow Sanborn had something up his sleeve. What was it?

‘Jefferson is a good county too,’ Cole admitted. ‘How’s the grass on your range this year, Mr. Perry?’

‘Never saw it better. I’m taking back a bunch of feeders with me.’

‘What brand?’ asked Sanborn casually.

‘Lazy B stuff. Getting them from Chet Radbourne. They’re on the thin side right now, but they will put on tallow fast in our country.’

‘Made your deal yet, Mr. Perry? Paid for ’em?’ Cole asked lazily.

‘We’ve agreed on a price. I’m to pay tomorrow.’ Perry was surprised at the question. It was not customary to make inquiries into the business of other people. Moreover, Sanborn knew him only slightly.

‘I wouldn’t,’ Cole advised.

‘Wouldn’t what?’ the cowman asked.

‘Wouldn’t buy Lazy B stuff from Radbourne. He can’t deliver title. The Lazy B Ranch belongs to my wife, Mrs. Sanborn. I’ve just got an order of court restraining Radbourne from selling any of her stock.’

Perry was an innocent buyer. A gleam of anger flickered in his eyes. ‘Radbourne didn’t mention this to me. He said he was the guardian of the lady who owned the ranch.’

‘He was, but he ain’t now,’ Cole told him. ‘Anyone buying Lazy B stock from Radbourne will be throwing his money away. He can’t touch a hoof of one of them. Mr. Peters will explain the facts to you.’

Peters did, briefly and lucidly.

‘Much obliged,’ the cowman said. ‘You’ve saved me money. I’ll let Radbourne know the deal’s off.’

‘Talk some more, Mr. Peters—to Mr. Cross this time,’ Cole suggested, rolling a cigarette.

The lawyer explained to the banker that he had a court order restraining the First National from honoring any checks made out by Radbourne against the account of Mrs. Sanborn.

Cross smiled thinly. ‘Very well, gentlemen. As long as this order stands, the bank will pay no money belonging to Mrs. Sanborn to the order of Mr. Radbourne.’

‘What is the amount of Mrs. Sanborn’s deposit at present?’ Cole asked.

The banker rang for the cashier, found out the amount, and told Sanborn.

Cole looked at Cross, very steadily. ‘I’ll hold you personally responsible if any of my wife’s funds are turned over to Radbourne, even if the court order is withdrawn. Chet is a rascal, but I’m going to protect Mrs. Sanborn from his crookedness.’

James K. Cross was hand in glove with Radbourne. To their mutual advantage they had worked out a dozen dubious deals. But Chet and his warriors could not protect him from this man Sanborn except by rubbing him out.

‘You understand that, I hope, Mr. Cross?’ Cole persisted.

Cross was between the devil and the deep sea, but his guess was that Sanborn would be likely to erupt more violently than Radbourne. He could explain the situation to Chet and perhaps they could between them cook up some scheme to thwart this scam.

‘I understand, Mr. Sanborn,’ he said. ‘I shall do nothing not legal and proper.’

‘And nothing crooked,’ added Cole bluntly.

The banker bridled. ‘Was that necessary, Mr. Sanborn?’

‘If not necessary, I withdraw it,’ Cole said, a satiric smile on his sardonic face. ‘If necessary, *you’d better remember it.*’

He rose and led the way out of the bank.

CHAPTER XIV

NOT LOOKING FOR TROUBLE

PETERS stood on the sidewalk in front of the Haven of Rest. ‘Got to go in and see Pete Casey about a lease,’ he said to Cole.

But he did not go in at once. He stood looking at Sanborn, a curious reluctant admiration in his seamed face. ‘Young man, you’ve got me guessing,’ he went on. ‘I thought you were a bad egg, all the worse because you’re a fighting fool with guts. I’ve heard plenty of stories about you. Wherever you go you seem to leave trouble behind you. The other night Doctor Burns was busy mending three of your victims. They claim you robbed the Flyer. You’re supposed to be in all the deviltry that takes place within forty miles of here.’

‘I’ll know who to come to for a recommend when I need one,’ Cole drawled with a grin.

‘I don’t go to church myself, but the good people who do make a text out of your life. You’re a warning to all young people.’

‘Go ahead and finish the sermon,’ Cole said. ‘I’ll listen real attentive.’

‘By Gad, that’s the point, I don’t know how to finish it,’ the lawyer said. ‘Until a few days ago I never met you except to pass the time of day, and I don’t mind telling you I didn’t want ever to meet you. But I see I’ve got to revise my ideas. You’re not just a fighting fool with a vicious streak. There’s more to you than that. You may be bad, but you’re strong.’

Cole smiled derisively, not at the lawyer but at himself. ‘I’m turning respectable now I’m married. No more helling around for me.’

‘I give you up,’ Peters said, with a wave of the hand. ‘You don’t look like a train-robber to me, but then I’ve never been acquainted with one.’

‘And you’re not now. I didn’t rob the Flyer.’

‘Glad to hear it. I don’t want train-robbers for clients.’ Peters turned away abruptly and walked into the Haven of Rest.

Cole walked down the street with Rusty. The two men turned in at the office of the *Boone County Beacon*. Tim Alderson, the editor, was setting type. He was a bright-eyed midget of a man. At sight of Sanborn the color receded from his face. The *Beacon* had been urging insistently that the robbers of the Flyer were known to the officers and ought to be arrested.

Though the paper had mentioned no names, everybody knew who was meant.

‘We dropped in to tell you we’re with you in yore law and order campaign, Tim,’ drawled Cole amiably. ‘The sooner those scalawags are arrested and hanged, the better it will be for Boone County.’

Alderson was not reassured by the genial manner of Sanborn. He had a vision of the swift flash of revolvers, could almost hear the impending roar of guns. More than once he had criticized this gunman severely.

Dry-lipped, he offered his defense. ‘An editor of a paper has to speak out for the public, Mr. Sanborn.’

‘Y’betcha. I’ve got no complaint, Tim. I’m here to set myself right with you. If you’ve got time I’ll tell you how things shape. First off, I didn’t rob the K. & J. Had nothing to do with it. The fellow who led the miscreants rigged himself up like me so that I’d get the blame. You don’t have to believe me, but it’s true. Say anything you like in the *Beacon*. But that’s not what I came to talk with you about. You’re a square-shooter, and not one of Radbourne’s lick-spittles. I’d like you to know exactly how it is between me and Chet. There’s going to be war, and I’m going to tell you my side of it. I need public opinion back of me.’

The chill waves passed from the editor’s spine, the dry tightness from his throat. His tense nerves relaxed.

‘I’m listening,’ he said. ‘I’ll say to begin with that I’m no friend of Chet Radbourne. I think this county never will be free and prosperous until his evil influence has been destroyed.’

‘It’s because you think that out loud I came in to talk with you.’

Cole told the story of his relations with the owner of the Circle 3 T and of his intention to stick up for the rights of his wife.

‘This is a private fight in one way, Tim, and in another it’s not,’ he concluded. ‘If Chet wipes me out, he’ll be boss here for a long time; if I can hold out against him, his power will be broken. Forget that I’ve got a rep as this county’s worst character. I’m entitled in this struggle to the support of all good citizens. I don’t ask you to get yoreself in trouble by coming out actively on my side. All I ask is for you not to line up with Radbourne.’

‘I’ll not do that,’ Alderson promised. A light flamed in the bright eyes looking into those of Cole. ‘Maybe I’ve been wrong about you, Sanborn. Some of the boys have told me so. If you didn’t do this K. & J. job, and if you’re going through with this fight against Radbourne, you’ve got a great chance to serve this town and county. I won’t countenance violence, except

in self-defense. Understand that. But if what you do seems right to me, I'll support you till the cows come home.'

'Fair enough. It will be Chet that starts the trouble. The other night I had a chance to bump him off and I didn't do it, though I know his gunmen are laying for me.'

'I heard about that,' the editor said dryly. 'You shot up some of his men, the way it was told me.'

'Those two beauties Jerry Haskell and Curt Jordan, after both of them had their guns out blazing at me. I can't prove what I say. You'll have to take it or leave it. But it's like I say.'

'Curt Jordan is in town today,' Alderson mentioned. 'At least he was here an hour ago. A man told me he was making threats against you. I saw him on the street. He still limps some. Better look out for him.'

'Much obliged. I will. Be seeing you later.'

Sanborn and Hunter walked out of the office and turned down the street toward the Jonesboro House.

Rusty began to tell a story, but Cole stopped him.

'Not now, Rusty,' he warned. 'I've got a notion we're likely to be in a tight. If that fellow Jordan is still in town, he must know we're here. He's bad medicine and he'll shoot from cover if he gets a chance. We'd better keep our eyes peeled.'

'You got eyes in the back of yore head?' demanded Rusty irritably. 'What you mean if he gets a chanct? Can't he plug us after we're past from any door or window on the street? All he's got to do is to whang away at us. We're a pair of the dog-gondest idjits I ever met up with. Right now he's got the dead wood on us, betcha. I wisht I was anywheres but here. Me, I feel as goosey as a tenderfoot climbing aboard a buckner. What-say we duck into the Arcadia and take cover our own selves? We can sashay outa the back door and along the alley.'

'You're shouting, Rusty,' Sanborn agreed.

He pushed open the door and the two walked into the gambling-house.

As yet the place was doing only a perfunctory business, though after dark it would roar with life. Two cowpunchers were drinking at the bar. There was a stud game at the far corner of the room. In the dealer's seat, back of a faro table, Lauret sat smoking a cigar. Jordan was not present.

The cold, shallow eyes of Lauret had picked up Cole at once. They did not waver from him. The faro dealer shifted, almost imperceptibly, to get his

revolver into better position. He was not looking for trouble, but if it was looking for him he wanted to be prepared.

‘Evening, Lauret,’ Cole said, and his white teeth flashed in an ironic grin. ‘The flies not buzzing around the honey-pot yet?’

Lauret did not answer. Cole had spoken as he was passing and had not stopped.

From the stud game Sanborn beckoned a man with the slightest lift of the head. The man threw his cards into the discard, rose, and came toward them. He was the little sheriff, Samson Magruder.

‘’Lo, Cole,’ he said gruffly. ‘Don’t forget this ain’t any honkatonk town. You can’t come here and paint it no gaudy color.’

‘Law and order still flourishing in Jonesboro?’ Cole asked lightly.

‘Yes, Cole,’ the sheriff countered. ‘You been out of town, haven’t you?’

‘Roosting in the hills.’

‘Yeah, I heard about you. Up at the Circle 3 T one night, weren’t you?’

‘For a short visit, to see my old friend Chet Radbourne. I’m a reformed character, Magruder. A married man has to settle down.’

‘Did you settle down before you visited the Circle 3 T or afterward, Cole?’ the sheriff asked dryly.

‘I wasn’t responsible for that rumpus up there, if that’s what you’re hinting at. Some of Chet’s boys got to picking at me. That’s what I want to talk with you about. One of ’em is in town now, or was an hour ago. Curt Jordan. I understand he’s been looking for me. Now I don’t want to see him. Rusty and I came to town on business and we’ve finished it. We want to hit the trail without trouble. Do you know where Jordan is hanging out?’

‘I reckon I can find out. You’re not loading me, Cole. You aim to sidestep him if you can?’

‘If there’s a difficulty he’ll make it, not me,’ Cole promised.

‘All right. You and Rusty sit tight here and I’ll scout around. I’ll let you know what I find out about Jordan.’

The sheriff left the room. A few minutes later, Lauret rose and sauntered toward the door. Cole intercepted him.

‘Like to talk with you a while,’ Sanborn said.

‘What about?’ Lauret asked coldly.

‘About the weather,’ Cole said cheerfully. ‘And crops—and the state of the country.’

‘Did you come in here to make trouble for me?’ the faro dealer asked evenly.

‘No, Lauret. I’m not looking for trouble with you, now or any other time. Anything that has happened in the past between you and me is in the discard, unless you rake it out.’

‘Then what’s this play you’re making about keeping me here?’

‘It won’t hurt you to sit down and talk things over, will it?’

‘I’ve got nothing to talk over with you, Sanborn. Put your cards on the table. You’re trying to hold me here. Why?’

Cole explained quietly. ‘There’s a man in town looking for me. If you were to go out of here, and then right soon he was to drift in to the Arcadia, I might think you had sent him here. But if you stay and talk with me, I’ll know you’re not responsible for anything that happens—if anything does.’

‘I don’t care what you think,’ Lauret said curtly. He looked blackly at Sanborn, hung for a moment in hesitation, then turned sharply and resumed his seat. ‘But I’d as lief stay here. I’m not running to anyone with information about you. I have more important matters on my mind.’ He began to shuffle a deck of cards and deal a game of solitaire.

The sheriff returned and drew Cole aside. ‘Jordan is at Pete Casey’s place. He is sitting in a chair near the window with his eye on your horses. Pete tells me he has been drinking and has made threats against you. I’m having a Mexican boy bring your mounts here to the back door. ‘Soon as they show up I’ll give you the high sign and you boys can hit your saddles and get out. That suit you?’

‘Fine.’

‘Jordan claims he has proof you held up the K. & J. express. His story will be that he tried to arrest you and you resisted. I wish I knew whether you did that job, Cole. My business is not to help criminals escape.’

‘I didn’t do it, Magruder, but if Jordan gets me, you can bet Chet will work up evidence to prove I did, so this killer can get the reward. I was on Dead Horse Mesa the night of the robbery.’

‘Who says you were there—except you, Cole?’

‘Dave Pope will tell you he was with me.’

‘And you’ll tell me Dave was with you. Makes a nice alibi for you both, only it’s not worth a billy-be-damn, since everyone knows that if you were on this K. & J. job, Dave was with you.’

‘It’s the only alibi I have, but you can bet your saddle that if I was guilty I’d be fixed up with a nice airtight one. Like to ask you a question, sheriff. Did you ever make any inquiries to find out where Jerry Haskell was that night?’

Magruder stared at him. ‘Jerry Haskell. What you mean, Cole? Can you prove——?’

‘Not a thing. And I’ll bet if you ask Jerry he’s got an ironclad A 1 alibi. Likely you’ll find he was playing cards with two-three Circle 3 T riders, one of ’em a short, heavy-set guy and another a tall hairpin.’

‘Have you boys plumb forgot we’re allowin’ to make a getaway from this burg?’ Rusty interrupted impatiently. ‘Don’t you reckon that Mexican boy of yours is about due, Magruder? Unless he’s taking a siesta or something. I dunno about you, Cole, but I’m kinda anxious to get outa here while my skin hasn’t any holes in it. I’m peculiar thataway.’

Cole laid a hand on his shoulder. ‘No need for you to get mixed up in this, Rusty,’ he said. ‘Jordan isn’t looking for you. Stay around here with Magruder. I’ll make my break for a getaway. After a while you can mosey out to camp unmolested.’

The oldtimer shook the hand from his shoulder. ‘Say, young fellow,’ he snarled, ‘from where I come from a man don’t run out on his partner.’

‘You won’t be running out on me, Rusty. I’m not fighting, but ducking trouble. One can slip away more inconspicuous than two.’

Hunter shook his head vigorously. ‘No, sir, you don’t fool me worth a cent. Being as I’m drug into this jackpot, I aim to stay till the call. But I ain’t throwin’ up my hat and cheering. Not none. Like as not this scalawag Jordan will have a whole passel of gunmen with him. Dawged if I wouldn’t give four bits to be safe on my old broomtail in the hills. Reminds me of onct when I was down in Santone——’

Rusty was destined never to finish that reminiscence. The side door of the Arcadia opened swiftly, as though blown in by a blast of wind. A bullet whistled past Cole’s head and flung a splinter from the wall where it struck. In the doorway stood a man, a smoking revolver in his hand. The man was Curt Jordan. He moved a step or two forward, with wary, catlike litheness, body swaying slightly. The face was venomous, the mouth a thin cruel slit. His eyes were fixed on Sanborn. He came shooting, scabrous epithets dripping from his mouth.

Cole whirled to meet him. The young man’s arm swept up, dragging a forty-four from its scabbard as it rose. From the barrel of the weapon death

leaped.

The force of the bullet flung Jordan out of line, so that one of his shots struck an unlighted wall-lamp. The Circle 3 T killer stood in his tracks, distorted face shocked and bewildered. Then his knees sagged and he sank to the floor.

Cole leaned slightly forward, every nerve and muscle keyed to instant response. He watched his enemy intently, a cold, fierce eagerness shining in his eyes.

Jordan made a desperate effort to lift his revolver, managed to raise himself on an elbow, then collapsed into a huddled heap.

CHAPTER XV
SELF-DEFENSE

SILENCE followed the crash of the guns. Men emerged from the shelter of the tables and chairs behind which they had dived.

Cole stood as motionless as the crumpled form on the floor. Not until he was sure Jordan was dead did he lift his eyes from the body of the gunman.

Tongues began to buzz with excitement, released from the fear that had stilled them.

‘Curt made a mistake coming after he’d been drinking hard . . . He made a mistake coming at all. Cole was that cool and easy . . . Never fired but once . . . Well, Jordan sure asked for it . . . Me, I was almost in the line of fire. I sure took a running jump lickety-split . . .’

Sanborn pushed his revolver back into the holster. ‘I call you all to witness,’ he said evenly. ‘Jordan came in here shooting. I fired in self-defense. Nothing else I could do.’

‘That’s right,’ the sheriff agreed. ‘Cole was trying to get out of town without trouble, though he knew Jordan was threatening him. I’d just had his horse brought to the back door so he could slip away. He was noways to blame.’

A chorus of those present approved this verdict.

Cole looked down at the still body of the man who had been hired to kill him. After the fashion of the time the black hair of the dead desperado was plastered across the forehead in a quarter-circle with an absurd little curl at the end. On the little finger of the hand that still clutched the six-shooter was a plain gold ring. Sanborn found himself wondering if once the man’s mother or sweetheart had put it there. Not many years ago Jordan had been a little boy playing at marbles. Now . . .

Abruptly Cole plucked his thoughts back to the cold fact that the man had tried to murder him.

‘Send for Alderson,’ he told the sheriff. ‘I want to make sure the *Beacon* gets this right.’

Doctor Burns arrived and examined the victim. Presently he rose. ‘He’s past any help from me,’ he said. ‘Better send for the undertaker.’

The undertaker was also the coroner. He was a Radbourne man.

‘I want an inquest,’ Sanborn told him. ‘Right now while all the witnesses are present.’

The coroner looked at him sulkily. ‘What for? You claim it was a fair fight, don’t you?’

‘I claim I killed him in self-defense after he was firing at me. But what I say doesn’t go in this town. I want the facts brought out by unprejudiced parties.’

Magruder spoke up. ‘Yes, let’s have an inquest, Holt. Fair for both sides.’

Under pressure from others Holt reluctantly consented.

Alderson came hurrying into the room as the jury was being chosen. He looked at Sanborn accusingly.

‘Wait till you hear the evidence,’ the latter advised.

‘Nothing to it, Alderson,’ blurted out Rusty. ‘Jordan came in with his gun smoking. Cole let him have it onct. That ended the fireworks. Would you want Cole to stand there and let this scoundrel plug him?’

The jury listened to the evidence. Even Lauret was forced to testify that Jordan had been the aggressor, though he did it with bad grace. There was not a shred of testimony against Cole until Holt put Sanborn himself on the stand.

‘Ever have any trouble with Jordan?’ the coroner asked.

‘He tried to make trouble for me at the Circle 3 T not long since,’ Cole said. ‘Drew a gun and attempted to kill me.’

‘What were you doing at the Circle 3 T, Mr. Sanborn?’

‘I went there to talk with Chet Radbourne about my wife’s property and to warn Chet not to hurt a hair of her head.’

Cole had not raised his voice, but in the crowded room his words rang like a bell. There was a murmur of sympathetic accord. The general opinion in Boone County was that the owner of the Circle 3 T intended no good to his ward.

‘Isn’t it a fact, Mr. Sanborn, that you knew your presence would not be welcome at the Circle 3 T and that you went to make trouble?’ Holt asked.

‘I didn’t expect to have any fattened calf killed for me,’ Cole drawled. ‘But nobody except a locoed fool would go alone looking for trouble with more than thirty men against him.’

‘Wasn’t it your idea that maybe you might get a chance to kill Mr. Radbourne unnoticed and slip away? And when you were discovered, didn’t you try to get Mr. Radbourne? And didn’t you shoot the foreman of the ranch and this man Jordan when they interfered to protect him?’

‘No—to all three questions. Radbourne told me he was glad I had come. Jordan and Haskell drew and fired on me. I wounded them in self-defense.’

‘That’s your story. Have you any witnesses to back it?’

‘None. But anyone using his brains could guess I wouldn’t start trouble with thirty Circle 3 T men against me. I told you that before.’

‘Haven’t you hated and been jealous of Mr. Radbourne for years?’ Holt demanded sharply.

‘No. I have despised and loathed him because he is what he is.’

The coroner hesitated before he asked the next question. ‘Have you not been accused of robbing the K. & J. express car, Mr. Sanborn?’

‘No.’ Cole looked steadily at the man. ‘Are you accusing me, Mr. Holt?’

‘Not at all,’ the coroner said hastily. ‘But there are stories going round. Probably you have an alibi?’

‘If I have I won’t offer it here—unless you are trying me for the robbery,’ Cole said coolly.

‘By jacks, you ought to be tried and hanged for killing poor Shrader,’ a voice from the crowd called excitedly.

Shrader was the express messenger who had been shot down by the bandits at the time of the train hold-up.

Cole looked in the direction from which the voice had come. ‘Ought I to be hanged for a crime I didn’t do?’ he asked evenly.

‘Who does the description on that poster fit?’ someone else demanded.

‘It fits me too well,’ retorted Cole instantly. ‘If I were robbing a train, I’d have to be crazy with the heat before I would leave so perfect a description. Any fool can see the miscreant was trying to shove the thing on me because I have a bad name—and because he has a personal grudge at me.’

‘Might be thataway, Cole,’ a cattleman agreed. ‘I’ll say you don’t seem to me like the kind of a fellow would shoot down a man for doing his duty when there wasn’t any need a-tall of killing him.’

The coroner brushed aside the interruptions impatiently.

‘Ever have any trouble with Jerry Haskell before you shot him at the Circle 3 T, Mr. Sanborn?’

‘No.’

‘Something about a poker game at Summit.’

‘Oh, that. I wouldn’t call it trouble. We sat in a game together.’

‘Didn’t you beat him out of four-five hundred dollars?’

‘I don’t like the way you put it, sir,’ Cole said curtly. ‘I quit three hundred winner, if that’s what you mean.’

The coroner decided to drop the matter of the poker game.

‘Isn’t it true that you had a difficulty with Haskell at Casey’s place not long ago?’

‘We exchanged compliments,’ Cole said, with a smile.

‘He ordered you out of town, didn’t he? And you went?’

‘Yes. He gave me an hour, and I was so busy I couldn’t go right then. So he gave me another.’

Someone laughed. The coroner rapped angrily for order.

‘I suppose you’ll claim that you and Haskell are good friends,’ he said, with obvious sarcasm.

‘No, sir.’ Cole spoke lightly, but his words dripped with contempt. ‘I don’t make friends with coyotes.’

‘Do you deny you hate him?’

‘I don’t like a thing about him,’ Cole admitted promptly. ‘But I don’t see where you’re going. It wasn’t Haskell who came in here to kill me just now, was it? Are you aiming to prove I had to shoot Jordan because I don’t like Haskell?’

Again there was a ripple of laughter.

‘I’ll ask you one more question,’ the officer said, his face flushed with annoyance. ‘Didn’t you send someone to tell Jordan you were here so that when he opened the door you could kill him?’

‘No. I was trying to leave town without trouble as Mr. Magruder has told you. If I ever lay a trap for anyone, Mr. Coroner, I won’t give him three free gratis shots at me before I get my own forty-four into action.’

The jury did not leave the room. Within a few minutes the foreman announced the verdict. Curtis Jordan had come to his death from a bullet in the heart fired from a revolver in the hand of Cole Sanborn. The latter had shot in self-defense.

Rusty flung up his hat with a yell. 'You're damn whistling, boys! He's one straight-up rider, Cole is. Drinks on me. Everybody in the house.'

The sentiment was divided. There were Radbourne men present. Also there were good citizens not ready to accept Sanborn because in this instance he had not done wrong. Against him there was still the bad record of years. But there could be no doubt that his position with the public had been improved.

Alderson came up and congratulated him. 'I'm going to tell this exactly the way it happened,' he said.

As Cole walked along the dusty street of false fronts, Rusty and Alderson by his side, the change of atmosphere was like a fresh breath from the hills. A cowboy standing in the doorway of the Haven of Rest let out a yip at sight of Sanborn.

'Leave old King Cole to show these bully-puss killers,' he shouted. 'Boy, I was there and seen you do it. You was that cool and easy, but bingo! and it's Mr. Jordan gone to hell on a shutter with his boots on.'

'Sorry,' Cole told him. 'Had to do it. He had his neck bowed and wouldn't have it any other way.'

On the porch of the Jonesboro House sat Preston, the bad man from the Nation with whom Cole had once had a difference of opinion.

At sight of Sanborn a smile, sarcastic but not ill-natured, rested on the brown, clean-cut face of the man who had migrated under pressure of too much attention from United States marshals.

'You're certainly one hell-a-miler, fellow,' he called to Cole. 'I reckon you 'n' I will have to bury the hatchet. You don't know it, but you've just done me a service. This bird Jordan was some overbearing, and yesterday it looked like he was getting set to run on me. What-say we call it quits?'

'Suits me fine,' Cole said, and shook hands on it. 'Fact is, just now I've bit off about all I can chew in the way of enemies. Glad to smoke the pipe of peace with you. I don't mind saying now that the crack I made about gents fagging it here from the Nation wasn't meant for you at all, but for another guy.'

'Well, it landed sock on my jaw,' Preston said, with a grin. 'But if it wasn't meant for me, that's all right. When a fellow is on the dodge he's some sensitive to remarks he wouldn't notice at another time. And all I did at that was to hide a friend who had shot up a deputy marshal.'

'Be seeing you one of these days,' Cole said as he swung to his saddle. 'Drift up to the Lazy B when you've got nothing else to do.'

‘Would I find you there or some of Chet Radbourne’s warriors?’ Preston asked, with a chuckle.

‘Don’t push on your reins and you’ll find me in possession,’ Cole said coolly. ‘Say in a week or so.’

‘Y’betcha!’ corroborated Rusty. ‘We aim to cut loose our dog on Mr. Radbourne one of these-here days. And then, gentlemen, hush!’

‘In a perfectly legal way,’ Cole amended, with a bland smile.

The two riders moved down the dusty street at a road gait. To the man seated on the porch Rusty’s cracked voice, lifted in exultant song, drifted back.

‘Yes, we’ll come to the table
As long as we’re able.
And eat every damn thing
That looks sorter stable,’

the oldtimer croaked.

Cole swung from the main street into the residence section of the town. He stopped in front of the Peters house.

Once more the wife of the lawyer came to the door.

‘Mary isn’t back yet,’ she said. Perhaps she caught a disturbed look on the face of Sanborn, for she added: ‘You needn’t worry about that. She goes back into the hills and stays for hours—takes a book with her. If you would care to wait?’

Cole shook his head. He was disappointed. ‘No, Mrs. Peters, much obliged. We’ve got to shove on. Will you tell her I’m sorry I didn’t see her, and that what I did today I had to do? It wasn’t my choice.’

Mrs. Peters was puzzled. What had he done today? But she asked no question. ‘I’ll tell her,’ she said.

The two men on horseback rode out of town.

‘Looks like you’re safe on your old broomtail headed for the hills like you was wishing to be awhile ago,’ Cole said cheerfully. ‘By the way, you was starting to tell about once when you were in Santone and Jordan interrupted you. I’ll listen now, if you like. I wouldn’t want to say for sure, but my view is that your singing is worse than your story-telling.’

‘No such thing,’ Rusty denied with spirit. ‘My singing has bedded down more trail herds than you ever saw, young fellow. Onct on the old Chisum Trail in a thunderstorm, when the lightning was so clost you could see it glancing off’n the horns of the cattle——’

Rusty was off on another windy.

CHAPTER XVI

'I'M NOT PAID TO LIKE THEM'

SLIM CALHOUN sauntered forward to the porch where Radbourne sat slumped in a home-made armchair. Haskell was standing beside the boss engaged in talk with him. Evidently the foreman had just ridden up, for his big sorrel with the roached mane had not been tied to the hitch-rack, but had been left free, reins grounded.

Haskell looked sourly at the black-haired puncher in shining leathers. The slender body of the man was graceful as that of Apollo, his young brown face good-looking beyond question. The foreman did not like the fellow, never had. The Texan was too reckless and independent to kowtow to him.

It was the boss who spoke. 'I hear you're quite a lad with the ladies, Slim,' he said. 'If I set you to ride herd on one who came back to visit us today, do you reckon you could get her back to the ranch safe and innocent?'

'I'm just a country boy from Texas,' Slim answered. 'Maybe you'd better send an experienced man like Jerry here.'

'Jerry has got other business,' Radbourne said; and added, with an insulting giggle: 'Anyway, Jerry is out; last time he chaperoned this lady she made a monkey of him.'

The foreman flushed angrily. 'I took her to the Jonesboro House, where you told me to leave her.'

'Did I tell you to fix up a marriage for her with that scalawag Sanborn?' Radbourne asked, with a bitter jeer.

'You talk like you expected me to be a mind-reader, Chet,' Haskell retorted angrily. 'She had never met the cuss. How was I to know she would marry him right off the bat?'

Radbourne ignored the defense, speaking instead to the cowpuncher. 'Miss Landis wants to go for a ride. You're to trail along and have her back here by noon. Don't go any farther than Dry Gulch. If you ride south, stay this side of the Fiddleback. Take a rifle with you, on the off chance that Sanborn may be hanging around. If you see him, don't forget there's an open season on that wolf. There's a reward waiting for the man that gets him. Dead or alive.'

‘There’s a reward for the fellow that held up the express,’ Slim corrected. ‘How am I going to prove Sanborn did it?’

‘I’ll have him sworn to by witnesses,’ Radbourne promised. ‘Don’t worry about that. Not that you’re likely to see him. He’s on the dodge somewhere in the brush.’

‘I reckon,’ Slim said.

‘You’re a better-looking young squirt than that wall-eyed buzzard. If you put your mind to it, maybe you can beat his time. I shouldn’t wonder but what the young lady is right hungry for some powwow with a scatter-brained young jackass with a good line of talk. You’ve got my permission to go as far as you like—within reason. Give yourself a good time, fellow.’

‘Suits me,’ the Texan said. ‘Anyhow, it will be a change from high-tailin’ after longhorns over the hills.’

‘If I was running this show I wouldn’t let her go galloping all over the country,’ Haskell growled. ‘I’d keep the little devil penned up and feed her bread and water. I would so.’

The little black eyes of Radbourne jeered at him. ‘I reckon you would. Different here. She’s my ward, not my prisoner. That’s the story. So I treat her well. Give her all reasonable privileges. Let her ride every day. I could wring the little hellcat’s neck, but I don’t. Instead, I use my brains.’

Slim did not hurry to avail himself of the opportunity to flirt with the young woman in his charge. He rode beside her knee to knee, offering only the most desultory conversation.

Mary made note of one point. The other men who had accompanied her on the daily rides had called her Miss Landis, as they had evidently been directed to do. Slim Calhoun addressed her as Mrs. Sanborn. His manner was easy but deferential. He did not seem interested in making a good impression, nor did he rush into talk lest she might think he had nothing to say.

The girl asked questions about his experiences. He told her about Texas, of the long trail drives, of the wild frontier towns where Northern buyer and Southern seller met. Greatly daring, she ventured a remark about his home life. Instantly he became reserved.

They rode through the dancing heat of an alkali plain to the wooded uplands bordering the desert. Through the foliage a stream of morning sunlight dappled the forest carpet and filled the park with pools of fretted gold. Above their green-roofed fairyland they could see stretches of blue sky unflecked by clouds.

‘It’s lovely,’ she said.

‘Right pretty,’ he agreed, smiling at her. Perhaps he was not thinking of the landscape.

He was a wild young fellow and had been in trouble. It was not hard to guess that he had come to this country because of something done in his turbulent past. But she could not understand why such a man, no matter how foolish and reckless he had been, was content to become one of Chet Radbourne’s ruffians.

She flung a question at him bluntly. ‘How do you come to be working for the Circle 3 T?’

‘Jobs are right seldom these days,’ he told her.

‘I know, but——’ She broke off, to ask another.

‘Do you like Mr. Radbourne—or Jerry Haskell?’

Slim gave her a Yankee answer. ‘Do you like them, either one of ’em?’

‘No, I don’t,’ she cried. ‘You know that. I think they’re both hateful. I think they are terrible men—Mr. Radbourne especially.’

‘Then why would you expect me to like them?’ he drawled. ‘I’m not paid to like them.’

‘What are you paid for?’ she demanded, looking directly at him.

‘Right now I’m being paid to ride with the prettiest young lady I’ve seen since I left Texas,’ he parried.

‘You’re being paid to be her jailer, to make sure she doesn’t escape from a man who means to ruin her life if he can,’ Mary accused. ‘And I had heard that Southerners are chivalrous.’

‘When he hired me Chet didn’t mention any young lady,’ Slim said gently. ‘I don’t reckon you could say I’m yore jailer.’

She pulled up her horse. Her eyes challenged his stormily. ‘How can you say that? Do you mean that if I start to ride away, across the Fiddleback, you wouldn’t stop me?’

‘I couldn’t let a young lady go off into the desert alone,’ he parried. ‘You’d never get out alive.’

‘I thought so,’ she said bitterly.

‘If you don’t want to be here, why did you come back?’ he asked.

‘Because your boss dragged me here an hour ago. I didn’t have a chance to get away.’

‘Would you have a chance now?’

‘No.’

‘Well, then, what’s the use of talking about running away? Since you’ve asked me, I’ll say that Chet Radbourne is my idea of something spewed up from hell. But as long as I’m taking his pay I won’t work against him.’

‘For thirty dollars a month he has bought you body and soul, then?’

Slim Calhoun looked with cool eyes at this glamorous girl, caught so hopelessly in the net woven for her. If the desperation of her case touched him, he gave no sign of it.

‘I wouldn’t say that,’ he replied lightly. ‘But when my trail don’t go the same way as his, I’ll tell him so. That may be right soon, and then again it may not.’

‘I’ve heard you quarreling with Jerry Haskell. I don’t see why, if you don’t like him——’

‘I don’t like a thing about him. He’s a bully-puss kind of a fellow, and I don’t aim to let him run on me. Not none. But I’ll ask you a question, Mrs. Sanborn. If I get my time and go down the road, will it help you any?’

She shook her head. ‘No. No, it won’t. Nothing will help me, unless ——’

‘——unless yore husband whops Chet and the Circle 3 T, and you can see right off he has no chance to do that.’

‘You think he hasn’t,’ she said, and her voice pleaded for a reversal of judgment.

‘It’s a fifty to one bet against him. Anyone with horse-sense will tell you that.’ A sudden light gleamed in his eyes. ‘But that rascalion of yours is a sure-enough go-getter. He’s liable to pull off a miracle, and, by jacks, I’d like to see him nail the old weasel’s hide to a fence. For two bits I’d throw in with him.’

‘Why don’t you?’ Mary asked, a glow running through her lithe young body. ‘You don’t belong with these . . . murderers.’

‘Don’t I? What do you know about me? And about where I belong?’ The mask was on his face again. ‘And I don’t reckon we’d better call names, Mrs. Sanborn. Cole has the rep of being a killer just as much as Jordan has—or Chet himself, in a different way.’

The girl felt the warmth drain out of her. What this man said was true. The man she had married was known as a bad man too. But she defended him none the less.

‘He doesn’t kill for pleasure—or for money. If he has killed bad men, I’m sure he couldn’t help it.’

‘Maybeso,’ the Texan assented. ‘I’ve heard he’s a square-shooter in his way.’

‘Then why don’t you join him? He can’t be as bad as the men you are with now.’

‘I’m lined up on the other side. A fellow can’t jump around like a toad.’

Calhoun spoke with curt decision, but his mind was not so decided. He did not like his environment at the Circle 3 T. He was an outlaw from his native state. A wild young hellion, he had known the riproaring life of trail’s-end towns. For months he had hung out in the brush on the edge of a big outfit’s range and rustled the stock of absentee owners. While on a drunken spree he had helped hold up a gambling-house in San Antonio. But at the worst he had played his hand openly and aboveboard. There was something about the Circle 3 T atmosphere that got under his skin.

First, there was the old man. Radbourne was not a wholesome scoundrel. His methods were cruel and sinister. What Sanborn had said at the Haven of Rest was true. He was fighting to help the fat slug of a villain rob a defenseless girl of all she had. More than once Slim had been on the point of quitting the outfit. All he needed was a push from outside. But it had to come from Radbourne and not from this girl.

Yet she had given him impetus to start him on the way. There was a point about which he had been curious. Now he meant to find the answer if he could.

This determined upon, he at once moved the conversation back to a safer channel. He pulled up and pointed with his quirt.

‘There’s a big rattler. See. There by the bush. Hold yore horse steady.’

From its holster he drew a forty-four, took deliberate aim, and fired. The reptile collapsed.

‘A good shot,’ she said.

‘Just a mite low, but it did the work.’ He looked at the sun. ‘Don’t you think we’d better be heading for home, Mrs. Sanborn?’

‘For *home*,’ she echoed bitterly. ‘All right. We might as well turn back.’

He disregarded her ironic comment. All the way to the ranch he was full of irrelevant and cheerful talk.

CHAPTER XVII

‘I’VE HAD AN ELEGANT SUFFICIENCY’

CHET RADBOURNE shuffled out to the porch as the two young people drew up at the house after their ride. Slim lifted Mary to the ground.

In her soft curved cheeks pink was glowing. The eyes of the girl sparkled with life.

‘Thanks for bringing me *home* safely,’ she said, with a touch of almost gay malice.

Light-footed as a deer, she walked past Radbourne into the house, paying no attention to him.

The owner of the Circle 3 T lowered his bulk into a chair, overflowing in every direction.

‘The young lady certainly has got a sunset in her cheeks,’ he said to Calhoun, with his mocking te-he-he of a giggle. ‘Maybe I hadn’t ought to send a respectable married woman out with a wild rapsallion like you. We don’t want a scandal on the Circle 3 T.’

‘That young lady grades A 1, Chet,’ the cowpuncher said, looking straight into the jeering eyes of his employer. ‘There won’t be any scandal about her anywhere.’

‘Not if I have her chaperoned by a model young Christian like my Texas man, eh? I’ll bet you’d like to take on the job permanent, and let my longhorns stray. Did she tell you how she’d feel about that?’

‘She didn’t mention it.’

‘Well, she’s surely made a complete recovery, whatever your treatment is,’ Radbourne said. ‘Here she was mooning like a sick calf. One ride with Doctor Calhoun, and she comes back pretty as a painted wagon. You’d ought to hang a shingle out, Slim. “Young lady specialist. Cures guaranteed.” I’ll bet you got a fine bedside manner, te-he.’

‘I’ll give you my recipe,’ Calhoun said. ‘Treat her decent. When she saw I was a white man, not looking for any personal advantage, she perked right up.’

‘You wouldn’t mean to imply I didn’t treat her decently,’ Chet suggested. ‘Or that I’m not a white man.’

‘I don’t know how you treat her,’ the Texan answered. ‘She acts to me like she’s scared. I don’t know what of. Maybe of this fellow she married. I’d say she needed to be gentled, but it’s none of my business.’

‘You’re right about that last, Slim,’ his employer agreed pointedly. ‘I don’t recollect that when I hired you I mentioned needing advice from you.’

‘And I’m not offering any,’ Slim said coolly. ‘You good as asked me how I treated her. I told you she forgot her troubles for a while and was happy, kinda.’

‘She’s got troubles, has she?’ Radbourne asked, with silky malice.

Slim looked at the older man hardily. ‘What’s the use of picking at everything I say, Chet? You wanted me to be nice to her. I was. Have you got any kick at that? I’m not looking for trouble.’

The Texan may not have been looking for trouble, but inside of the hour he found it. After leaving Radbourne he went to the bunkhouse and left the rifle he had been carrying. The place was empty. Four or five of the men were down at the corral and one or two more at the stables. Of Jerry Haskell he had seen nothing. Someone had mentioned in his hearing that the foreman was riding out to see a bunch of stock on the north mesa.

Calhoun stood for a moment at the door of the bunkhouse, then stepped quietly to the cabin used by the foreman. After a quick look around to make sure he had not been observed, he stepped inside and glanced about the place.

The room was a litter of disorder. In one corner of the room, tossed on the floor, were a saddle, quirt, and sweat-stained blanket. Several pipes, tobacco ashes, an old boot, a soiled shirt, and a dozen other odds and ends had been flung on the table. The bed was not made, the floor looked as if it had never been swept. On the only chair were a pair of muddy boots and two Spanish spurs.

The Texan’s lip curled with contempt, ‘He’s sure one prize hog,’ he murmured disdainfully.

Close to one wall a trunk stood. The range rider threw open the lid. The tray was filled with a nondescript pile of shirts, ties, tobacco sacks, pictures of nude women, foul pipes, and papers. This he lifted to the floor. In the lower part of the trunk he found the articles for which he was looking—a blue polka-dot bandanna, a gray cotton shirt, a rattlesnake skin hatband.

‘So you’re the pilgrim that led the road agents when they robbed the express, Mr. Haskell,’ he said to himself. ‘And you wished the blame on Cole Sanborn, you dirty yellow coyote.’

He replaced the tray, closed the trunk, and moved toward the door. But before he got there he pulled up short. He heard footsteps, saw the shadow of a man in the doorway. Jerry Haskell stood at the entrance scowling, suspicion written large on his sullen face.

‘What you doing here, fellow?’ he demanded.

‘Ran out of the makings and came to borrow some,’ Slim said casually.

The foreman ripped out an oath. ‘What you get is the best whaling you ever had. I’m gonna work you over, fellow, so’s yore mother wouldn’t know little Slim.’

Calhoun made no protest. For a moment he had a fleeting regret that he did not have a gun with him. Then he gave his whole mind to the matter in hand. An unholy glee filled the face of the foreman. Haskell was a notorious rough-and-tumble fighter. He weighed thirty pounds more than the rider. Slim knew he was in for an unmerciful beating.

Haskell crouched, put up his fists, and moved forward. He lashed out with the right. Slim ducked, landed hard on the sneering mouth, and dodged out of reach. With a roar of rage the foreman rushed, broke down the defense of the other, and slogged at his brown good-looking face.

Slim fought back as best he could, but he took a savage mauling before he escaped from the corner into which his opponent had jammed him. He was still groggy when Haskell nailed him again and sent blow after blow crashing into him. Calhoun’s arms fell and his knees sagged. He slid down the wall into unconsciousness.

The foreman flung a bucket of water over his head. The range rider came back to life and stared up at the cruel, vindictive face glaring down at him.

‘And I’ve always been told Texas is a he-country in pants,’ the foreman jeered.

A grin broke through the blood on the disfigured face of the man on the ground.

‘You’re damn whistling it is,’ Slim said. ‘Fellow, you pack a wallop like a piledriver. I’ve got no business putting my maulers up before you.’

‘If you haven’t had a bellyful, get up and take some more,’ Haskell urged. ‘I haven’t started yet.’

‘Me, I’ve had an elegant sufficiency,’ Slim told him promptly.

‘Say the word and I’ll break you in two.’

‘I ain’t saying it,’ the battered puncher announced.

‘I’m the best fist-and-skull fighter ever showed his face in Boone County,’ the foreman boasted. ‘If you know any other Texas man who doubts it, shove him along.’

Slim sat up, then slowly rose to his feet. The room was still swimming before his eyes. ‘By jinks, I’m not sure whether there are two or three of you there, Jerry,’ he laughed, out of the corner of a disfigured mouth.

‘Don’t you try to gun me from behind,’ Haskell warned. ‘I’ll be watching you every turn of the road.’

Calhoun looked at the big rangy fellow contemptuously. ‘What’s eating you? Think I can’t take a whopping without yelping about it? You beat me fair and square. You haven’t heard me kick, have you?’

‘Better not let me hear it either, or I’ll give you another where that came from.’

‘Not if I see you first, Jerry. Well, if you’re through with me, I’ll rock along.’

Slim sauntered from the room, his battered head still up. He was a bit unsteady on his feet, but as he moved toward the bunkhouse he chanted jauntily two verses of a cowboy song.

‘Roll yore tails and roll ’em high,
We’ll all be angels by and by.’

At the door of the bunkhouse he came face to face with Bud Calloway and Hank. Bud stared at him.

‘Holy smoke, Slim. What you been doing to yourself?’

Slim laughed, cheerfully but lopsidedly. ‘Wrong guess, Bud. Another guy did it to me. Our beloved foreman handed me a few souvenirs to enforce discipline. Fetch me a bucket of water from the pump. I got to make repairs.’

Bud brought the water, then sat down on a bunk and asked questions. Slim answered some of them. He did not mention what he had been doing in the cabin of the foreman.

CHAPTER XVIII

SLIM GOES DOWN THE ROAD

THE little black eyes of Radbourne fixed on Mary. His big body, slumped in the chair, was motionless. Only his jaws moved, as he chewed his quid of tobacco.

‘Sit down,’ he snapped.

‘Is it worth while?’ Mary asked. ‘I won’t be staying long.’

‘You’ll stay long as I like, Missy. Don’t you try to be hoity-toity with me. I’ve got a recipe for taming hellcats. Listen. I sent to get you to sign this paper. It’s a legal document asking the court to annul your marriage to that ruffian Sanborn.’ He pushed the paper across the desk. ‘You sign on this line.’

‘Only I don’t,’ she told him. ‘I’m quite satisfied. Why should I ask for an annulment?’

‘Because he scared and trapped you into this marriage. That’s why. This paper gives reasons a-plenty.’

Slender and vivid, with contempt in her deep violet eyes, she looked down at his swollen, unwholesome bulk. ‘Reasons that aren’t true, unless it says I married him because I was trapped by and was afraid of you. They say you own the courts here, but even you can’t make them give me an annulment I don’t want and won’t take.’

‘Makes no difference to me what you want. You’re nothing but a crazy girl. If you think I’m going to let you interfere with my plans, you’re ’way off. Not for a holy minute. You’ll sign this paper. Understand?’ He snarled his ultimatum savagely.

‘I won’t!’ she defied, her eyes flaming. ‘You can’t make me. All you can do is threaten. But you daren’t hurt me. If you did, my husband would stamp you out of existence just as he would a poisonous snake. You’re afraid of him. You may pretend you’re not, but it’s a lie you feed to your vanity. As long as he is alive I’m safe.’ She picked a phrase out of her memory. ‘As safe as if I were in God’s pocket.’

‘I reckon your outlaw husband told you to say your prayers and you’d be all right,’ he jeered. ‘God doesn’t function in this neck of the woods, Missy.’

‘So you think. You’re swollen with conceit, and some day soon you are going to be struck down for your sins.’

He showed his teeth in a derisive grin. ‘By God’s representative, Cole Sanborn, I reckon. Girl, you used a word just now. You said, *as long as Sanborn is alive*. I’ll hand it right back to you. If you don’t sign this paper, he won’t be alive twenty-four hours. I’m telling you.’

The heart of the girl died under her ribs. Had he caught Cole in a trap? Was that why he had sent for her, to force her under pressure to sign this paper? It would be like him.

‘You are so full of lies,’ she answered. ‘You’d like to kill him. I know that. But he’s looking out for himself. He won’t let you get him.’

‘I know where he’s roosting, and I aim to dig him out of his hole—unless you sign this paper. It’s up to you to say whether he lives or dies. He don’t mean a thing to me, except when he gets in my way. If this marriage is annulled, he can skedaddle out of this country soon as he’s a mind to hit the trail. But one way or another, I’m putting an end to this fool marriage. Take your choice. If you want him dry-gulched, it’s all the same to me.’

She tried to still the panic in her breast. It probably was not true that he knew where Cole was. Even if he did the attack on Sanborn’s camp might fail. Moreover, she knew Radbourne could not be trusted. No matter what he promised, if he ever had her husband at his mercy he would kill. It would do no good to sign the paper, but would only rob her and Cole of the strategic advantage they had gained.

‘When you have dug him out, as you call it, bring him here to the ranch,’ Mary said, driving down her fear. ‘If he asks me to sign this paper to save him, I’ll sign it.’

Angrily he slammed a fat fist down on the desk. ‘You’ll sign it now.’ He leaned forward, his pallid face filled with malevolence. ‘Ever hear of Mr. Curt Jordan? He’s a famous bad man with nine notches on his gun. Just now he works for me. When he starts on a trail, he rides it to a finish. Never fails. If I say the word he’ll take after this fellow Sanborn. And I’ll say it damn quick if you annoy me.’

Slim had told her about Jordan. She knew he had killed for pay, not once but many times. If Radbourne put this man on Cole’s trail to assassinate him, her husband would not have a chance.

‘You might say it anyhow,’ she temporized. ‘I don’t trust you.’

‘No need to burn that in like a brand,’ he said harshly. ‘You go too far, girl. If I give you my word, I’ll keep it. I’m offering to make a trade with

you. This fellow Sanborn's life for your signature on this paper. I don't give a continental cuss which you choose. I'd as soon have you a widow as an ex-wife.'

His little black eyes gloated. As she looked into them she shuddered. Neither honor nor mercy was in this man. She knew she could not trust any promise he made. He was a liar, and the truth was not in him.

Her resolution hardened. If Cole were standing here, she knew what he would tell her to do.

'I'll not sign,' she said swiftly.

Rage contorted his face, but before he could speak someone knocked on the door.

'What you want?' he snarled.

The door opened, to let in Slim. Mary stared. His face was terribly beaten and bruised.

'Just heard some news,' the cowpuncher said, ignoring the fact that he had interrupted a scene. 'Mex was coming down the road from Box Cañon and met a Rocking Horse rider who had just been to town. He says Jordan had a run-in with Sanborn at the Arcadia and got killed.'

Radbourne stared at the rider, his clammy face colorless. 'You mean—Jordan—got—killed?'

A flicker of enthusiasm crossed Slim's face and was instantly sponged out. 'Y'betcha! Curt went after him—fired two-three times and missed. He'd been drinking, it seems. Sanborn cracked down on him, once. That ended it.'

'Who told this?'

'They call the guy Yorcky. Says he was at the inquest. Jury said Sanborn killed him in self-defense.'

Radbourne gasped like a fish out of water. This was a body blow over the heart. He had depended on Jordan to get the fellow. It had never occurred to him that his killer would fail.

'You're sure? This fellow couldn't have been loadin' Mex?'

'No, sir. Nothing like that.' Slim took pleasure in handing his employer another jolt. 'It seems Jonesboro backs Sanborn every way from the ace. The best people are all with him.'

From ashen lips Mary murmured, 'Thank God.'

‘How come they to have trouble?’ Radbourne asked. The thought that had jumped to his mind was that Jordan might have told the truth before he died.

Slim looked at his employer coldly. ‘I dunno,’ he said. ‘Jordan claimed he was out to get him. ‘Far as I know he didn’t tell why.’

Chet could not get away from the stunning fact. Jordan was a hangover from the old days, a killer who usually set the scene for his murders before he moved to action. Yet Sanborn had rubbed him out as if he had been an amateur. The owner of the Circle 3 T was shaken. He had been top dog for so long. Had the luck turned on him? This girl had told him that soon he would be struck down for his sins. Was it a prophecy?

‘Sure it was Jordan? Couldn’t have been someone else?’ he asked, his question almost a supplication.

‘It was Jordan all right. Yorky saw him lying on a billiard table after the inquest. Sanborn got him right spang through the heart.’

Again Mary murmured her faint cry of thanks to God.

Radbourne turned on her with a snarling oath. ‘Get out of my sight or I’ll quirt you till your back is raw.’

As Mary turned to go, her eyes fell on the cowpuncher. The eyes in his rigid face had grown cold and steely. She realized he was her friend, and the thought of it warmed her forlorn heart. She walked from the room.

Slim, too, turned away, but his boss called him back.

‘Want to talk with you,’ Radbourne said abruptly.

‘I’m here,’ Slim said curtly.

‘Sit down.’

The cowpuncher took a chair, but his spine was as straight as if there had been a poker in it. He knew he was not being invited out of friendliness. Radbourne wanted something from him.

‘Looks like I haven’t a man on the job who isn’t a bungler,’ Chet complained bitterly. ‘This scoundrel Sanborn makes every last one of you look like three for a nickel. First there was Grat. All he could do was give him a flesh wound. Then Jerry fails me. Now Jordan.’

‘If you want a thing well done, you have to do it yoreself, my dad used to say,’ Slim mentioned, a flicker of derision in his eyes.

‘Jordan came here with a rep as a bad man,’ Radbourne went on, disregarding the sneer. ‘Hadn’t been another like him since the old days of

John Wesley Hardin, I was told. And he turns out a false alarm. Starts drinking and throws me down without the least consideration.'

'He threw down on himself too,' Slim said. 'Don't forget that. And paid for his foolishness.'

'What's it matter about him?' Radbourne replied sourly. 'He needed killing anyhow. One of these days it was coming to him.'

The Circle 3 T owner's callousness revolted Slim. The young man looked at his employer as one does at some species of unpleasant reptile.

'Sure. His death was inconvenient to you. Outside of that——'

Chet interrupted his rider. Not sensitive to atmospheres, he did not feel the other's contempt. 'I'd ought to have known he wasn't dependable. That's the trouble with notorious killers. They get all swollen up with their own importance. Now a smart young fellow like you, Slim——'

'With nothing to get swelled up about,' Slim interpolated.

'You'd go about a business of that kind with some sense.'

'A business of what kind?' Slim asked coolly.

He was shaking tobacco into a cigarette-paper. Before Radbourne answered him he had rolled and lit his smoke.

'This fellow Sanborn is a bad citizen,' the ranchman said, watching the other. 'He's a killer, bad as Jordan was. On top of that he's a professional gambler, an outlaw, and an immoral character. His marriage to my ward, Mary Landis, is an outrage against decency. I'd be a traitor to my trust if I let him get away with it. But the fellow's slick. He has the law on his side, to a certain extent. Before I've got him beat, he'll have this young girl's life ruined—if I let him get away with it. I can't do it, Slim. I've got to protect her and her interests.'

'I'll bet it's a moral duty laid on you by yore conscience,' Slim said evenly. He guessed what was coming, but he would not forestall it. If Chet had a proposition to make, let him come out with it plainly.

'She's a young girl, and the court has put it up to me to see she gets a fair break. I aim to do that, Slim. Ain't I right?'

Slim looked at him out of level eyes which said nothing. 'I don't reckon a man can be criticized for seeing an unprotected girl gets a square deal,' he agreed.

'There's only one way to do it, Slim,' Radbourne told the young man, leaning forward and speaking in a whisper.

He waited for Calhoun to ask him what way that was, but Slim did not speak, only continued to watch him from black opaque eyes.

‘’Long as Sanborn is alive that girl is in danger,’ the big man went on wheezily. ‘If she’s to be saved he’s got to be stomped out.’

‘And Jordan was a false alarm when it came to stomping him out,’ Slim suggested. ‘He made a bad mistake—gave Sanborn an almost even break and got rubbed out himself.’

‘Exactly what the lunkhead did,’ Radbourne cried irritably. ‘I figured him sure-fire. He loaded me with how he would wait till he had this fellow right. Instead, he got himself bumped off, losing just fifteen—hundred—dollars thereby.’

The owner of the Circle 3 T fixed the gaze of the cowpuncher as he dragged the last words out, stressing the sum almost by syllables.

‘And his life,’ Slim added. ‘Though I think you said that wasn’t important.’

‘A lot of money, fifteen hundred plunks,’ Chet mused aloud. ‘Waiting for the fellow who brings in the man that led the K. & J. express bandits.’

‘Meaning Sanborn?’

‘Yes, sir. If I was tackling that job, I’d bring him in dead and not alive.’

‘It would be safer, don’t you reckon?’ Slim murmured. ‘A tough guy is as easy to dry-gulch as any other kind. Yes, I expect he would pack better as pork. But after I’d done it, I’d be worried for fear I wouldn’t get the reward. Some galoot would raise the point it wasn’t proved Sanborn was the bandit. And the authorities would likely decline to kick in with the mazuma.’

‘I would attend to that. I have some influence, you know.’

‘I’ll bet you have,’ Slim assented.

‘The money would be as good as in your pocket—after you had earned it,’ Chet urged. ‘It would give a young fellow a start in business, and if he was the right kind of a man he might marry Miss Landis and run her ranch.’

‘So he might,’ Calhoun nodded. ‘But don’t you reckon she might object some to marrying the bird who had killed her husband?’

‘She’ll do as I tell her. And you’re a good-looking waddy, Slim.’

‘Much obliged.’ Slim rose from his seat and looked down at the hulk of a man back of the desk. When he spoke scorn etched his voice and contempt blazed in his eyes. ‘You’ve made a mistake, you dirty double-crossing wolf. I’m no hired killer, if I have got outside the law off and on. I don’t shoot men down from ambush, and I don’t work for a cur who hasn’t enough sand

in his craw to do it himself, but gets another scalawag to do it for him. Nor for one who bullies women and talks about quirting them. I'll take my time, for I'm going down the road tonight. And every minute till I go I'll be watching to see that none of your crooks empties his gun into me.'

The dark blood poured into the sallow face of Radbourne. He glared at the reckless cowboy, for the moment so choked with rage that words would not come.

'No waddy alive can talk to me like that,' he ground out at last. 'Every word you've said is a nail in your coffin, fellow. The road you're going down tonight is a one-way trail. Get out of my sight right damned now.'

'Pleases me to death,' Slim said promptly. 'I'm hoping this will be farewell to you till you rattle yore hocks on the other side of Jordan. But don't bet too heavy on that one-way trail. My pinto is saddled in front of the house, and I aim to land in the saddle with the horse a-running. But first off I'll take my paycheck.'

Radbourne calculated the sum due and wrote a check. Slim pocketed it.

'I'll be drifting,' Slim went on. 'If I meet up with Cole Sanborn, I'll tell him how badly you're worried by him. So long, you damned sidewinder.'

Slim backed to the door, watching him to make sure he did not reach for a gun. Without turning, he reached the knob and opened the door. Swiftly he slid through, jumped for the hitch-rack, pulled the slip-knot, and landed in the saddle without touching the stirrups.

The pinto gathered itself to a gallop and pounded into the darkness of the night.

Radbourne heaved his big bulk out of the chair and waddled to the porch. He gave the alarm by firing his revolver at the shadowy figure disappearing in the gloom. Savagely he cursed his folly. He had made a mistake—two of them. The first was in sizing up the Texan wrong, the second in threatening him. The latter was the more serious. If he had let Slim go to the bunkhouse to pack up his roll, he might have had him shot down before he left the ranch. Now the fellow had got away. He would talk, of course. He would spread the story of the attempt to get him to kill Sanborn. All Boone County would have more evidence of what it already suspected, that Radbourne rubbed out the men who got in his way.

That could not be helped now. The thing to do was to draw the sting from Slim's testimony. He must come out in the open with the claim that he had given Sheriff Magruder clear proof Sanborn was the K. & J. bandit and that the sheriff would not lift a hand to arrest the criminal. Out of a sense of

patriotism he was now posting a reward for the capture of this notorious bad man dead or alive. This he was doing as a public duty to free Boone County from the outlaws who infested the brush country.

Yes, that would be good medicine. He would make the reward a thousand dollars. For that sum it was reasonable to think that some one of Sanborn's enemies would take a crack at him.

CHAPTER XIX

MARY WRITES A LETTER

MARY heard the sounds of clattering hoofs, of shots, of strident voices. Softly she raised her window, trying to make out what had occurred. But though she listened intently she could not learn the cause of the disturbance. The speakers were too far away for her to hear what was being said. Only once did she catch a sentence, and that in a high-pitched shout of excitement. 'Betcha he's high-tailin' it to town like a streak of greased lightning.'

There had been a fight, of course, and someone had run away. Could it have been Cole? Was it likely he had come alone to the ranch a second time? Not probable, since she could think of no urgent reason for him to take such a risk. Unless he had come to kill Chet Radbourne because the owner of the Circle 3 T had hired Jordan to assassinate him. Or had in some way heard of her capture. That was possible, but it did not seem to her likely.

Her spirit was still riding the hilltops because of the news Slim had brought. In memory she could still see the shock of fear registered in Radbourne's sallow face. His enemy had struck home a jarring blow that had shaken the man's confidence. To kill a man was a terrible thing, but just now she could not think of the death of Jordan that way. Her husband, who was a stranger to her, whom she had met only for one hour vividly significant among months of stagnation, had been too much for the notorious killer attempting to take him at advantage. What he had done had been forced on him while he was defending her interests. Men called Cole Sanborn a killer, too, but she had an unshaken conviction that he had never killed from choice, but always of necessity. He was wild and reckless, scornful of public opinion, but she would not believe that he was bad. It was written on the hard, sardonic face that there burned in him a dynamic spark of self-respect which would not let him follow a path of shame.

The noise outside died down. Mary tried to read, but the words of the book meant nothing to her. Hours passed. She waited, for what she did not know. The lights in the men's bunkhouse went out, as did the lamp in the foreman's cabin. The two night guards must be awake, but except for them the ranch had gone to sleep. It was time for her to go to bed.

A light tap sounded on the window. It set her pulses drumming. She moved noiselessly to the casement.

‘Who is there?’ she asked in a whisper.

The answer came back in a murmur no louder than her own. ‘Slim Calhoun. I had trouble with Chet and lit out. Can I speak with you a minute?’

She moved back to the coal-oil lamp and blew it out. Very slowly, in order to make no sound, she raised the window higher. A dark form lifted itself and dropped lightly to the floor.

Her heart was beating wildly. Never before had she been alone with a young man in a dark bedroom at night. She felt sure that in his visit lay no amorous intent. He had never made the least effort to ingratiate himself with her. But all the training of a chaperoned life protested at such a situation.

‘Don’t be scared, ma’am,’ he reassured. ‘Nobody saw me come. I left my horse tied to the pasture fence quarter of a mile away. You know I don’t aim to hurt you any.’

‘I know,’ she said, and could not keep the quaver out of her voice. ‘The shooting I heard—— Was it you and Chet Radbourne?’

‘It was Chet. I never fired a shot. He wanted to hire me to kill yore husband. I let him make his proposition, then told him what a skunk he was. After that I lit out. That was when he got to burning powder. Here’s the way of it, Mrs. Sanborn. I’ve been dragged into this feud. Looks like I’d better join up with Cole. But if I propose it, he’ll shy off like a wild colt. I had words with him at Jonesboro that time, and up here we exchanged shots. He won’t believe a thing I say. The notion that will stick in his craw is that Chet is trying to plant a spy with him. If you can give me a line to him, he’ll know I’m all right.’

‘Yes,’ she assented, still in the whisper they were using.

‘Providing you’re satisfied in yore own mind about me,’ he added.

What Slim had said was true. It would be a characteristic Radbourne trick to stage a pretended quarrel with one of his own men and send him into the camp of the enemy. But Mary felt sure that back of this man’s recklessness was loyalty.

‘I’m satisfied,’ she said quietly. ‘I’ll write a note, well as I can in the dark.’

She moved to a table, sat down, found paper and pencil. A pulse of excitement beat in her throat. How should she address this man who was her

husband and yet not her husband at all? What should she call him? Once he had said he must be Cole to her and she Mary to him, at least in public. She wrote, without any word of endearment from start to finish.

Cole, I am sending this by Slim Calhoun, until tonight one of Chet Radbourne's men. He is what you call square. I am sure of it. Today he fought with Jerry Haskell and has a badly wounded face from the battle. Later, he quarreled with Mr. Radbourne, who tried to kill him as he rode away. He has slipped back to see me, to take a message from me to you.

I must explain why I am here. Jordan and another of the Circle 3 T men caught me, and the other man made me come here with him. I am writing this in the dark, for there are guards outside. So that you may know this is not a forgery to bait a trap, I will remind you that once you promised, after our stage kiss, not to let your enemies and mine kill you. Every night I pray that they may not.

I am quite safe here. Do not worry about me. Mr. Radbourne treats me well, even though he is very angry at me because I will not sign a paper asking for an annulment of our marriage. As safe as in God's pocket. You once said that. Please—please do not do anything in a hurry. Take your time. Work out whatever plans you have.

For what you told me about Mr. Radbourne is true. As long as you are alive he will not harm me. He dare not. He is afraid of you. I was with him tonight when Slim came in with word that you had killed that dreadful man Jordan. Cole, I could see fear riding him. So, to protect me, you must look after your own safety.

I am sorry you had to do what you did tonight, but I do not blame you. I know it was self-defense. I am sure you would never kill for any other reason.

MARY

She folded the letter, sealed it in an envelope, and gave it to Slim. The cowboy put it in the pocket of his shirt.

'I hate to leave you with that wolf,' he said.

'It won't be for long,' she said confidently.

'I know, but—what he said tonight to you.'

'About quirting me till my back is raw? He'd like to do that, but he dare not. I have a husband, and he is afraid of him. Didn't you see his eyes tonight when you told him about Jordan?'

‘Yes. It handed him a scare sure enough. If the scare lasts.’ He added, with a touch of embarrassment: ‘Wish I could help you.’

‘It will last long enough. Slim, if you line up with my husband, try not to let him expose himself. They’ll kill him if they can. That’s the one way you can help me. Look out for him.’

‘I’ll certainly do that if I can,’ he promised. ‘I’ll be saying “adios” now.’

He slid out of the window, after listening for a moment for the watchers. Mary waited, nerves tense, fearing every instant she might hear the sound of a shot. The minutes passed, with the silence unbroken. She measured in anxious thought the distance he had to cover. Now he would have reached the root house, now the blacksmith shop. He must by this time have crawled through the barbed-wire fence into the pasture. The guards had not seen him.

CHAPTER XX

A RECRUIT

PETE DAGGETT brought a prisoner into camp, a gun trained on him.

‘C-claims he’s got a m-message for you,’ stuttered Pete.

Cole looked at the black-haired young fellow in plain leather chaps and recognized him at once.

‘A message from Chet Radbourne?’ he asked.

‘Not from Chet,’ Slim answered, and he handed Sanborn a letter.

Before looking at the letter, Cole made another remark. ‘Last time we met you came a-shooting.’

‘And the time before that,’ Calhoun amended coolly, ‘yore horse was on the jump and I didn’t score a hit. Glad of it now.’

‘How did you find our camp?’

‘A nester gave me a line on it. I loaded him with a story I knew already and he kinda let slip where it was.’

‘You’re one of Chet’s riders?’

‘Was,’ corrected Slim.

‘I get it.’ Cole’s voice held an edge of sarcasm. ‘You’ve had a quarrel with him and so you’d like to bury the hatchet with me.’

Slim smiled. ‘I’m handing you a big laugh, Sanborn. That’s exactly the way it is.’

‘I must be a mind-reader,’ Cole said evenly.

He read the letter, not without difficulty. In the darkness some of the words had run over the edge of the paper. Lines were crossed. His first impression was that it was a forgery, but the reference to the stage kiss convinced him of its genuineness. Nobody except Mary could know he had said this.

Cole flung a swift, abrupt question at Calhoun. ‘When did Jordan send Mrs. Sanborn back to the Circle 3 T?’

‘Yesterday morning. He sent Gildea back with her. It must have been only an hour or two before you killed him.’

‘Is she safe at the ranch?’

‘I’d say quite safe. Chet isn’t fool enough to harm her.’

‘He’d better not,’ Cole said harshly.

After the first reading, he turned back and went over the scrawled sheets a second time. No man could have called this a love letter. She had not even begun with the conventional ‘Dear Cole.’ But between the lines he read an emotion that set his blood racing. *Every night she prayed they might not kill him.* His brown face reflected no feeling, but a bell of joy pealed in his heart. He saw her kneeling beside the bed, slender and dainty, a remote mystery in a white nightgown, and the picture filled him with awe.

Cole looked into the black eyes of the Texan and liked what he saw there. He liked, too, the fellow’s cool and easy manner, his assumption that no apologies were necessary for past alignments. But Chet was a tricky devil. He would have sense enough to choose an emissary who looked frank and honest. Perhaps they had pulled the wool over Mary’s eyes.

‘So you had a rumpus with Chet,’ Cole said. ‘How-come?’

‘I been on edge for quite some time,’ Slim replied. ‘More with Haskell than with the old man, though I never liked a hair of the old wolf’s head. Yesterday Jerry beat the stuffing outa me. Whaled me till I couldn’t stand.’

‘Yes?’ Sanford said, with a polite coolness that might have been incredulity.

‘You might like to hear about that,’ Slim continued, reaching for the makings. ‘I got a leetle mite curious about something was none of my business, and Haskell worked me over real thorough on account of it.’

‘Am I supposed to ask what you were curious about?’ Cole wanted to know.

‘Up to you as to that,’ Slim said lightly. ‘You’ll be interested before I’m through. Got a match?’

Slim lit the cigarette he had rolled and went on with his story. ‘I was camped near the mouth of Box Cañon the day before the K. & J. express robbery. Three fellows rode up the gulch. They didn’t see me, but I saw them. One of the three was Jerry Haskell. I couldn’t swear to the others account of the sun getting in my eyes.’ The ex-Circle 3 T man stopped to flash a grin. ‘Next time I saw Jerry was two days later. He was back on the job at the ranch. What kinda got my attention the day he rode up the cañon was that he was wearing corduroy pants, a blue polka-dot bandanna, and a rattlesnake skin band round his hat. I hadn’t seen him in that get-up before, and I’ve never seen him in it since.’

The black-haired man had kept his promise to interest Cole. The latter looked at him, steadily, without speaking, but he could not repress the eager excitement in his eyes.

‘Me, I put two and two together, and it added just four,’ Slim explained casually. ‘Like I said, it was none of my business, and I let it ride until Chet picked me to ride with Mrs. Sanborn. She took a smile to me, and we became friendly. I don’t claim to be anything but a hell-raisin’ young rooster. Still and all, I know a lady when I meet up with one. If I could do Mrs. Sanborn a good turn I was ready to be Johnny-on-the-spot. ’Course I knew there was war between you and the Circle 3 T, and I began to wonder if Haskell was handing you the burnt end of the stick in the K. & J. robbery matter. So I visited his hogan when he was out on a look-see expedition. In a trunk I found the corduroy pants, the polka-dot bandanna, and the rattlesnake band. I hadn’t hardly more than closed the trunk when Jerry walked in on me. He was nowadays welcome. Before he got through socking me with his maulers I was plumb tired of him.’

‘That why you quit the Circle 3 T?’ Cole asked.

‘No, sir. My system can absorb a licking when it’s coming to me without any hard feelings. I’ll tell you why I quit. It just happened I was the guy who carried Chet the news that you had rubbed out Jordan. It made him plenty sick. When he came out of that, he made me a proposition. I was to bushwhack you and get the K. & J. reward money. Seeing I was sore at the skunk, anyhow, for telling Mrs. Sanborn he’d like to give her a quirting, I up and told him where to get off. He threatened me. I hit my saddle and lit out, with the old toad pumping lead at me. But I wasn’t satisfied to leave without seeing Mrs. Sanborn, since I had figured I’d try to fix things up with you. I know the Circle 3 T layout, and it wasn’t much risk to sneak back, tap on her window, and have a talk. That was when she wrote me the letter to give you.’

The imperturbable face of Sanborn was hard as a rock wall. When he spoke his voice was ominously quiet.

‘He said that—to Mrs. Sanborn?’

‘After she’d cried “Thank God” when I spilled the news that you had got Jordan.’

‘He said he’d—quirt her?’

‘He threatened, but he won’t do it. That old devil ain’t anyways easy in his mind. He’s plumb scared you’ll get him. ’Long as you’re alive and

kicking he won't do Mrs. Sanborn any personal harm. That's my guess, for what it's worth.'

'She says in this letter you've been kind to her.'

Slim waved that aside lightly. 'Nothing to that. I claim to be a white man, and when I went riding with her I acted like one. If I wanted credit for that I'd be proving I wasn't.' He hesitated a moment before he carried on: 'That old skunk is full of tricks. He hinted if I bumped you off, it would be my turn with Mrs. Sanborn. My guess is I'd be dry-gulched inside of a week.'

The doubts of Cole had vanished. This Texan was not a spy from the camp of the enemy, unless his whole manner and appearance were lies. On the frontier character is etched upon the face and stamped into the bearing of a man. Slim was reckless and lawless, as Cole had always been himself, a rebel against the smug safety of conventions. He had followed joyously rough and crooked trails. But he would do to ride the river with when the stream was full and turbulent. More than once Sanborn's life had depended upon not making a mistake in his judgment of a man. He felt sure he was not making one now.

'Did you come here only to bring me this letter?' Cole asked. 'Or is it your idea to throw in with us?'

'That last would be up to you, don't you reckon?'

The hard eyes of the two men met and held. There was as yet no friendliness between them, but each felt a curious sense of kinship with the other. Both had strayed to the edge of that borderland beyond which a decent man may not go, and both had turned their backs forever on dishonor.

'This is no picnic we're starting on, Calhoun,' said Cole gravely. 'Some of us are liable to get bumped off.'

'Not me,' Slim grinned gaily. 'I was born lucky. I'll help do the bumping. Lead me to this war.'

'I'll lead you to it soon enough if you've made up your mind. No use telling you the odds are heavy against us. Chet may blast us off the map.'

'You're such a hell-a-miler I'd hate to sweat a game^[1] when I can horn in beside you,' the cowpuncher said cheerfully.

[1] Sweating a game is looking on without participating.

Abruptly Cole flashed a question at him. ‘How many men does Chet keep at the Lazy B?’

‘Four. He changes them every three-four days.’

‘Instructions are to kill, I reckon?’

‘The season is open on you whether you attack or don’t,’ Slim said. ‘Any Circle 3 T man who takes a crack at you will be the white-haired boy with Chet—if he shoots straight.’

‘Will Chet’s warriors go through?’

Calhoun gave this consideration before he answered. ‘They’re tough nuts. Pick of the riff-raff in this neck of the woods.’

‘Loyal to their boss, you’d say?’

‘There ain’t a horse, dog, or man on the place loyal to Chet,’ Slim said bluntly. ‘Nothing in him that calls for loyalty. But I’m not saying they won’t fight for him. They will. That’s what they’re paid to do. A man doesn’t throw down his outfit.’

Cole knew this was true. These men regarded themselves somewhat as a soldier of fortune does. They hired out to the side that would pay them best. It would be a mistake to assume they would not fight as savagely for a bad cause as for a good one.

But they had to be kept well fed and comfortable. They would not endure hunger and thirst and cold nights among the rocks far up in the hills as Dunc McCoy and Dave Pope and Pete Daggett would because of friendship and loyalty. They were Circle 3 T men because of strictly business reasons.

CHAPTER XXI
ON THE WAY TO THE WAR

INTO JONESBORO from the hills dropped seven riders. They crossed the bridge at the lower end of town and stopped at the hitch-rack in front of the hotel. One of the group stayed with the horses, the others moved up the street of false fronts, their spurs jingling as they went. They made no pretense of not being heavily armed. All of them carried rifles. Some wore revolvers in belts. The rest, no doubt, had their small-arms in scabbards under their arms or in other convenient places.

In advance of the compact group word spread that Cole Sanborn had come to town with his gang. The news passed from one to another citizen, not without excitement. The presumption was that Sanborn was on his way to avenge the abduction of his wife. This display of force was taken as an open declaration of war against the Circle 3 T. In an incredibly short time saloons and honky-tonks buzzed with murmured conjecture.

Sheriff Magruder teetered down the walk in his high-heeled boots to meet the new arrivals.

‘Morning, Cole—boys,’ he said. ‘Today Fourth of July or something?’

‘News to me if it is,’ Cole replied.

‘Didn’t know but what you lads were mixed on yore dates,’ the little officer said. ‘Haven’t come to hurrah the town—or anything like that, have you?’

‘We’re here only for a short visit, sheriff,’ Cole answered. ‘On our way through to the Lazy B. I aim to take possession today.’

‘Have you arranged that with Radbourne?’

Cole looked at Magruder coldly. ‘Not yet. He didn’t arrange with me when his scoundrels took Mrs. Sanborn to the Circle 3 T.’

‘I don’t blame you for feeling sore, Cole,’ the sheriff said. ‘All I want to know is that you’re going to stay within the law.’

Sanborn laughed, bitterly, without mirth. ‘Will the law reach to the Circle 3 T and bring my wife back here?’

Beneath the tan Magruder flushed. ‘There’s been no complaint made to me, Cole. Far as I know officially Mrs. Sanborn is on a visit to the Circle 3

T.'

'And there won't be any complaint made, Magruder. I'll attend to that as personal and private business of my own. But there's another point might interest you. One of my boys has a little information for you about the K. & J. robbery. Speak yore piece, Slim.'

Calhoun told the story of what he had suspected about Haskell and the confirmation he had later found in the foreman's trunk. The sheriff did not show enthusiasm, though he did not reject the tale.

'How-come you recognized Jerry Haskell as he rode into the gulch and didn't know those with him?' Magruder asked.

'He was between me and them. Couldn't swear to them.'

'Funny. Mighty funny. I reckon you have no idea who they were.'

'Nary a notion,' Slim said cheerfully, his white teeth flashing in a grin.

The wrinkled little officer gave an incredulous snort.

'Yore evidence ain't worth a lick. If you recognized Haskell, you did the others. No two ways about that.' He added, resentfully: 'Whenever any mouthy guy wants to let off steam, he roasts me for not maintaining the law. How the heck can I get anywhere running down criminals when all you fellows hold back information it doesn't suit you to tell?'

'I wouldn't know about that, sheriff,' Slim said, shaking his head.

'Another thing. You're a Circle 3 T rider, I'm told.'

'Not now. I was.'

'Had a row with Radbourne or Haskell?'

'I told Chet he was a skunk. You might call it a row. He was pumping bullets at me as I left.'

'I heard some story about Haskell beating you up,' Magruder probed.

'Correct. He whaled the tar out of me.'

'So now you tell a story that ties him up with the K. & J. robbery.'

'You'd call me a prejudiced party, I reckon,' Slim admitted. 'But I got my info before I was worked over by Haskell, if that is important.'

'What you expect me to do about this?' Magruder asked, turning to Cole. 'Go up to the Circle 3 T and arrest Haskell on this man's story?'

'No, Magruder, I'd keep this under my hat if I was you,' Cole replied. 'Presently you'll pick up evidence to back what Slim says. When you have enough, it will do to talk about an arrest.'

The party broke up in front of the Arcadia. Sanborn and Calhoun walked down the street to the office of the *Boone County Beacon*.

Tim Alderson was scratching a news item on a pad of paper.

In a sing-song voice Cole recited another one for him.

Slim Calhoun and Cole Sanborn dropped into town from the rimrock country and paid a visit to the *Beacon* office. They report that the grass is good and cattle are taking on weight. Come again, boys. Jonesboro always has the glad hand out for visitors like you.

Tim Alderson grinned. 'What deviltry are you two boys up to now?' he asked.

'None,' Cole demurred. 'I'm on the way up to the Lazy B with a bunch of riders. Going to take over the place and run it for Mrs. Sanborn.'

'Does Chet agree to that?'

'He will, I reckon. When I mentioned I was aiming to do it, he didn't raise any objections.'

The editor's smile had vanished. 'You understand what this means, Sanborn?' he said.

'I have a rough idea.'

'I wish you didn't feel you had to do it,' Alderson went on gloomily. 'I don't like it a bit.'

'Neither do I, but it will make news for the *Beacon*,' Cole said sardonically.

'You know you're starting a war. There will be bloodshed. Bound to be. Radbourne won't quit now. He has gone too far. If he gave up, his prestige would be gone.'

'I'm not starting the war,' Cole corrected. 'If there's one started, it won't be by me or any of my men. When he took my wife to the Circle 3 T, he made it my move next. We're going on a legal errand. I'll say another thing. If everybody in Boone County lies down and lets Radbourne ride over him, there won't be any trouble, but it will pop when anybody stands up for his rights. That fellow would be looking for trouble if that's the way you view it. But I would think different. My opinion would be that Radbourne was to blame one hundred per cent.'

'Mine, too,' assented Alderson. 'I wasn't thinking about blame, but about the fact that lives are going to be lost.'

‘Every time an engineer builds a big bridge or a great irrigation dam lives are lost,’ Cole reminded him. ‘He can’t stop for that.’

‘I’ll do the best I can to see that public opinion is with you,’ the editor promised.

Cole nodded. ‘I read your last editorial. Much obliged for it. I realize that one of Radbourne’s plug-uglies might make you trouble, but I don’t figure any of them will. There has been a change of sentiment in Boone County and Radbourne is too smart to try to buck it in too raw a way. There’s an open season on me and my boys. We’re supposed to be a bunch of wild hellions. But you represent the best sentiment of the good people of this section. Chet won’t let his warriors ride roughshod over you.’

‘I’m not afraid of that,’ Alderson said.

Cole and Slim walked back up the street just as the rest of their group came jingling out of the Arcadia.

‘Did you pass along the tip I gave you?’ Cole asked Dave Pope.

The lank cowpuncher nodded. ‘I mentioned in Lauret’s hearing at the faro table that we were headed for the Lazy B to take possession. He finished the deal and excused himself for a minute. I saw him talking to a man who beat it on the jump. Dunc says he saw a fellow faggin’ it outa town on a big roan not five minutes later.’

Cole turned to McCoy. ‘Know the rider?’

‘Aye, I know him,’ the brindle-headed man answered. ‘It was the man they call Mex. He’s a Circle 3 T rider.’

‘Gone to carry the good news to Ghent,’ Sanborn said, with a memory of his McGuffey Reader days.

‘My thought was that maybe he had gone to carry bad news to Chet and Jerry,’ McCoy differed. ‘Though only the Lord knows for which of us it’s going to be bad and for which good.’

‘If that weighs on you, now’s the time to quit,’ Cole said lightly as he swung to his saddle.

‘I’ll no’ deny it weighs on me, man. I’m a person of experience and sagacity. But I’ll thank you not to insult me by suggesting I’m a fair-weather friend.’ The Scotchman found his horse and mounted.

The seven riders jogged soberly out of town. They might have been going to a prayer-meeting. But a hundred eyes watched them as they rode up the dusty road. They were going to make history.

CHAPTER XXII

UP SUICIDE TROUGH

THE seven riders passed along a draw from the dusty baked plains into the foothills. In front of them was a cleft in the rimrock.

Rusty eyed it dubiously. 'Fine if they do what we're expecting them to do, Cole, but not so good if they don't try to ambush us at Big Pine Point and come on down to the mouth of the gulch instead.'

'They won't do that,' Cole replied. 'Big Pine Point is the best spot for a trap on the road. They'll figure we won't know they have heard we're coming. But I'm coppersing my bet some. Slim and Pete, you two swing round the bluff and climb it from the rear. Give us the come-on signal if there's nobody up there. If you meet any warriors, don't stay to fight, but come back on the jump.'

Slim and Pete moved ahead rapidly. The others followed at a walk. It would be half an hour before the two scouts reached the summit of the bluff at the entrance to the gorge.

Sanborn was confident that Lauret had sent a messenger to warn the Circle 3 T men of his approach. Mex would stop at the Lazy B to tell those on duty there to be prepared and would then ride across country to the Circle 3 T. The men at the Lazy B would hold a consultation. It was an easy guess that they would not wait there to be attacked, but would decide on an ambush for the invaders at Big Pine Point. From the rocks above they could pick off Cole's party without exposing themselves. If they had luck, they could end the war in one brief battle. So they would reason.

While they were waiting for their victims, Radbourne's men would have to leave the Lazy B unguarded. Cole meant to slip into the ranch-house during that period. There was a chance the plan would not work, but he thought the odds were very much in its favor.

The five men loitered in an arroyo a few hundred yards from the rock wall. The heat waves played above the sand.

'I don't reckon there's anybody down the cañon this far,' Dave Pope surmised. 'Cole has got this figured out right. They're waiting for us up at Big Pine Point. Wouldn't be any sense to their doing anything else. We might as well save time and move on into the gulch.'

The faded eyes of Rusty rested on him as the oldtimer drew a plug of tobacco from his pocket and tore off a ragged chew with his teeth.

‘Nobody has got a holt of you. If you’re so crazy to save time, by gum, you can start right damn now. Any last words you’d like conveyed to friends, if any, we’ll pass along.’

‘Me, I’ll wait till we have information on the subject,’ Dunc McCoy announced definitely. ‘I’d hate to get jostled off my horse in that narrow cañon by any of you anxious lads trying to outrun bullets. There are no road laws in a stampede.’

Presently they made out two riders on the summit of the bluff. One of them made the signal that all was well.

‘What did I tell you?’ Dave jeered.

‘It’s not important what you told us, son,’ McCoy answered. ‘You might ram-stam in a hundred times and be right. Fine. And the next time, if you were wrong, it would be bury him out on the lone prairie.’

The cavalcade moved forward into the defile. Cole led the way, on the off chance that the enemy might be waiting for them at the first bend in the trail. They wound up in single file. A few hundred yards from the mouth of the gorge a rock slide had scorched a path down to the bottom.

Cole put his horse at this precipitous ascent. The other riders followed him. The cowponies clambered up like cats, ropy muscles standing out as they went. There was a good deal of rubble among the rocks. More than once a horse went to its knees, fought to its feet again, and sent stones clattering down on those behind.

The slide terminated in a chimney leading to the top of the wall.

Rusty looked up the narrow, dangerous pitch. ‘Holy smoke! This is sure a rough road to heaven, boys. Better grab the apple with a strangle holt and say yore prayers.’

‘Can do,’ Cole called back. ‘I once went up here on a bet when I was a crazy kid.’

‘That don’t make it no ways safe if you did,’ Rusty complained querulously. ‘I recollect some of the boys figured yore head ought to have been examined. And now I’ve been drug into the same fool business. Right now I’m naming this spot Suicide Trough.’

‘If it was easy we wouldn’t be going up here,’ Cole made cheerful answer. ‘It’s only because they won’t imagine we’re soft-headed enough to try it that we’re taking this back doorway to the Lazy B.’

‘Well, get going, fellow,’ Rusty snapped. ‘Might as well get stove up now as later.’

The sides of the horses were pumping like bellows. ‘We’ll give the broncs a rest,’ Cole said. ‘Not far to the top. We’re ’most there. Say forty or fifty feet.’

‘Not far,’ agreed Dave, squinting an eye along the trough. ‘Only trouble is it’s straight up. I wisht I had practiced old Baldy climbing the sides of houses.’

‘My p-pegleg is p-plumb whipped already,’ Pete Daggett stuttered. ‘But he’ll m-make it if any hoss here does.’

‘You never had a lick of sense about that broomtail since you let Arapahoe Bill saw the wall-eyed critter off on you,’ Dave reproved.

‘S-say, if you ever had one as good——’

‘Let’s start, irregardless of consequences,’ Rusty urged. ‘We’ve done burned our breeches behind us, as the old saying goes. I’m gettin’ goosey sitting here on the edge of nowhere.’

‘All right,’ said Cole, with a grin cheerful but meretricious. ‘All we have to do is to keep going.’

‘Yeah,’ derided Rusty. ‘He means up, boys, not down. If anyone gets started the other way, we can kiss that baby good-bye. There won’t be enough of him left to collect.’

They watched Sanborn’s roan take the finish with a rush of scrambling hoofs.

‘Me next,’ Rusty said. ‘If Old Socks comes sliding down with me, remember the brake’s done bust and get outa the way.’

Rusty reached the summit safely. The other horses clawed their way up, each with a clatter of falling rocks and rubble.

Cole drew a deep breath of relief. He had been dubious about taking this hazardous cutoff. Against all probability there was not a broken leg among the forty-two which had just come up the slide.

‘Lady Luck is with us, boys,’ he said.

‘Yes, sir,’ drawled Slim. ‘All we got to do now is whop thirty or forty of Chet’s warriors. Nothing to worry about after this.’

‘We’ll try to meet them a few at a time,’ Cole said.

The riders cantered across the mesa to a cottonwood draw running parallel to the rimrock. They followed it, taking the shelter of the lower

ground and the trees. The draw dropped down to a mountain valley in which the buildings of the Lazy B nestled against a green hillside. Smoke rose lazily from the chimney of the main house. There was no movement about the place.

‘I don’t reckon anyone is home, unless they’re holed up waiting for guests,’ Slim surmised aloud. ‘What say I make a detour and investigate?’

‘I’m doing that,’ Cole differed. ‘Wait here, boys. If the land is clear, I’ll give you a signal.’

‘And if it ain’t clear, if they plug you like a sieve, that will be a signal not to come, I reckon,’ Dave said. ‘No, sir, I’m going with you.’

Cole nodded assent. ‘All right, buckaroo. That will be fine. If they only get one of us, maybe it will be you.’

The two men made a wide circle, dropping back of a hill into an arroyo that fell gradually to the valley of the park. From a clump of live oaks they watched the house for a few minutes. It seemed to be entirely deserted.

‘Filled with absentees, looks like,’ Dave murmured.

Between the live oaks and the main house lay a stretch of two hundred yards of open ground.

Cole looked at his companion. ‘Got to make a run for it, Dave. No other way.’

Their two horses came out of the timber on the run. The men reached the back of the house, flung their reins to the ground, and ran in the open door of the kitchen.

Unwashed dishes were piled everywhere. The stove, still lit, was grimy with grease. The floor had not been swept within the memory of man.

Dave motioned to the stove. ‘Not away for long.’

‘No,’ agreed Cole.

They passed warily into the big living-room. Nobody was there, though there was plenty of evidence of recent habitation. Spurs, saddles, tobacco sacks, old boots, a pair of chaps, newspapers, and other odds and ends littered the place.

The two men made a tour of the bedrooms. When they were satisfied the occupants had departed, they signaled to their friends in the cottonwoods.

The five riders cantered down to the ranch-house.

‘Better get the horses out of sight in the stable,’ Cole said to Daggett. ‘No need telling the boys they have visitors.’

Rusty dismounted stiffly. ‘Well, you done got the hacienda, Cole. An’ now you got it, can you hold it? Reminds me onct when I was in Abilene, after I had druv a herd there for Shanghai Pierce——’

‘We’re not aiming to hold it,’ Cole drawled.

The men stared at him, surprised. ‘Not hold it, man!’ McCoy said. ‘Did you take us up Rusty’s Suicide Trough for exercise?’

‘Not exactly. This will be the way of it.’

Cole explained in detail what he had in mind.

CHAPTER XXIII
TRESPASSERS WARNED

FIVE disgusted Circle 3 T riders trooped back from Big Pine Point. Mex had brought them a false alarm. He had said that Sanborn and his gang were on the immediate way to the Lazy B. They had waited up there among the big rocks for their victims until they were hot, hungry, and tired. All the way back to the ranch they had been quarreling with one another.

Straight to the ranch-house they rode and dismounted.

‘Quit yore beefing, Hank,’ Bud Calloway said, loosening the saddle cinch of his horse. ‘You don’t have to run on us because Cole Sanborn didn’t ride up the cañon and ask to be shot. We’re nowadays to blame.’

A figure stood in the doorway.

‘Looking for me, boys?’ a voice drawled.

Cole was leaning against the jamb. He had not drawn a weapon, though the butts of two revolvers were close to his capable hands.

Five pairs of amazed eyes stared at him.

‘You—here!’ Bud gasped. ‘W-where did you come from?’

‘From Jonesboro. Didn’t Mex mention I was on my way? No, don’t you, Gray Shirt. It’s not safe.’

Gray Shirt recognized the truth of this advice. A man had come round the end of the house, a rifle in his hands. A second one with a scatter-gun was sitting in an open window. Still a third had emerged from back of the root house. He carried a forty-four trained on the Circle 3 T men. Radbourne’s riders were trapped.

‘How did you get here?’ Bud asked. ‘We was guarding the pass.’

‘You couldn’t have come round by Hankins Fork,’ another said. ‘You didn’t have time.’

‘A balloon drapped us in here,’ Slim said, in his soft, derisive drawl. ‘What-say, boss? Hadn’t I better collect the hardware off the boys? They’re too young and tender to play with firearms.’

Cole invited his guests into the house. He told them where to sit.

‘We’ve just finished dinner,’ he explained. ‘Sorry there isn’t anything more cooked. It is too late to start fixing food now. You’ll enjoy your supper

more after missing a meal—if you get any.’

‘What you aiming to do with us?’ Hank growled unhappily.

‘What were you going to do with me and my boys as we came up the pass?’ Cole asked, his face hard and cold as a mountain lake in winter.

‘We were going to warn you to go back,’ the man mumbled.

‘That’s a lie,’ Cole said harshly. ‘You meant to shoot us down without a chance for our lives. Have you anything to say why we shouldn’t do the same to you?’

‘My God, you wouldn’t do that, Cole!’ Bud pleaded, tiny beads of perspiration all over his forehead. ‘We wasn’t fixing to harm you. Honest we wasn’t.’

‘Tie their hands in front of them,’ ordered Cole. ‘We’ll take them back to Big Pine Point.’

The face of the man called Hank blanched. His mouth twitched. From one to another of his captors his skim-milk eyes darted, seeking help.

‘What for?’ he asked, in a whine. ‘Goddlemighty, boys, you ain’t aimin’ to—to——’

The dry whisper died away. He could not put into words his fear. To do that would be to make it too real.

The twelve men got to horse, the five prisoners with their hands still bound.

Before they started, the frosted granite eyes of Cole bored into those of his captives. ‘You’ll go to sleep in smoke if any one of you makes a sound to warn Chet’s riders when they come in.’

‘We’ll do like you tell us,’ Hank promised.

Gray Shirt was a hardy ruffian. ‘Radbourne will be pleased to find out what company you’re keeping, Slim,’ he said.

Young Calhoun looked at him, a challenge in his cool eyes. ‘I’m worrying a lot about what Radbourne thinks,’ he answered.

‘The Circle 3 T hired you, didn’t it?’

‘Hired me and fired me, Jim. But it didn’t take a mortgage on the rest of my life.’

‘So you tie in with this fellow McCoy, the guy who almost killed Gildea of our outfit; and with Sanborn, who has shot up several of the boys.’

‘Neither McCoy nor Sanborn dry-gulched the men they got, like you were going to do us, did they?’ Slim asked pointedly.

Gray Shirt let his frozen, insolent eyes travel from Slim to Cole. 'This *hombre* whose dust you are eating, Slim, takes in too much territory when he gets on the prod with Chet. I'll give him a week before he's bucked out and cashed in.'

'You never can tell,' Slim retorted. 'I'll bet after Mex came in here a while ago, so fast his bronc was draggin' his belly in the sand, you wouldn't have given Cole an hour, let alone a week.'

'What's the idea in making them sore, Jim?' asked Hank, between a whine and a growl. 'The thirty dollars a month I get from the Circle 3 T don't keep me from being reasonable.'

'I'll bet it don't,' Gray Shirt said, contempt in his glance. 'You're plumb scared to death and look so bad yore ears flop. Fellow, get it into that buzzard head of yours that it doesn't matter a lick what we say. This bird Sanborn has his mind made up. 'Long as there's a button on Jabe's coat I'm not crawling to him. He knows damn well we were aiming to stop his clock. No use making a holler if he's fixing us up with a through ticket to Kingdom Come. But we don't have to act like we're three for a nickel.'

The trail divided, one branch dropping down into the cañon in front of them, the other rising to the rimrock above.

'I reckon I'll take that sign now, Cole,' said Slim. 'One of the other boys better go with me to keep a lookout while I stick it up.'

Cole passed to Slim the top of a small table from which the legs had been sawn. Upon it a legend had been neatly printed with a blue marking pencil.

TRESPASSERS WARNED!

COLE SANBORN'S PRIVATE ROAD

DANGEROUS

Daggett joined Calhoun. They took the right-hand trail.

Rusty shouted a warning after them. 'I don't reckon Chet's killers will be there yet, but you boys keep yore eyes skinned. Good men are right seldom, and yore mummies would miss you, if you still have them.'

'I never yet throwed down on myself,' Slim called back gaily.

Cole dropped back and rode beside the man called Jim.

‘I’ll say this for you, Gray Shirt,’ Sanborn said. ‘You’re a game villain. I don’t care much for you, but I prefer your kind to that of your friend Hank.’

Gray Shirt met him eye to eye. ‘Am I supposed to say thanks?’ he asked coolly. ‘And who said this yellow dog was my friend? I’m some particular who I call by that name.’

He spoke loud enough for Hank to hear. That ill-visored specimen squirmed but said nothing.

‘Apologies offered,’ Cole replied. ‘What I’m here to tell you is that I don’t kill in cold blood. I’m not like Radbourne and his hired riff-raff. You’re safe enough, unless you make a mistake.’

‘Such as?’

‘Attempting to escape, or trying to warn the Circle 3 T men as they come up the cañon.’

‘Are they coming up the cañon?’ Gray Shirt asked, almost too casually.

‘You know it. A big bunch of them, soon as they can catch and saddle after Mex gets to the ranch.’

‘Smart as a whip, aren’t you?’ jeered the prisoner.

‘I’d be a fool not to guess that.’ Cole’s questioning gaze rested on him. ‘Point is, must I gag you to keep your trap shut?’

‘You aiming to dry-gulch the boys, if they come up the cañon?’

‘It may surprise you, but I’m not. This property belongs to Mrs. Sanborn, and I’m here as her legal representative. I expect to order these intruders to keep off it. If they go, fine. There won’t be any trouble. If they don’t, I won’t hold myself responsible for what takes place.’

Gray Shirt looked steadily from opaque eyes at the man riding beside him and came to a decision.

‘If you’re going to warn them, I’ll sweat the game and not put any chips in the pot,’ he promised.

Captors and captives rode up the ridge back of the rimrock. In a clump of live oaks they dismounted. The prisoners were fastened together. One man was left as a guard. The others climbed up the steep, rough ascent to Big Pine Point.

CHAPTER XXIV

‘IF COLE WASN’T SO DAMNED LEGAL’

FROM the bed of boulders at Big Pine Point the pass below could be covered for a distance of two hundred yards.

Dunc McCoy let his glance sweep along the trail. ‘A fat chance we would have had if we’d come up there, lads. I’ll remember that when I cut loose at Radbourne’s wolves.’

Cole looked at him. The Scotchman’s blue eyes, mere slits, were drained of color. Anger was in his grim face.

‘No, Dunc,’ Cole said to the red-headed man. ‘We’re trying to stay inside the law. Unless they force it there won’t be any shooting. We’re here on our legal rights. I don’t want to throw away that advantage.’

‘Then what in Mexico did we come up here for if we ain’t going to give this bunch of scalawags what their friends were fixing to give us?’ Rusty asked sharply.

‘Don’t you reckon that if they go crawling back to Chet with their tails between their legs, Boone County is going to get a good laugh?’ Cole answered. ‘Here’s how it shapes. Chet has been the big auger in this country. Whatever he has said has gone. Nobody stood up against him. If we can show that all his claims don’t amount to a barrel of shucks, his power will be gone. The important thing isn’t to bump off a lot of his warriors, but to show him up for a bluffer. If we do that, folks won’t let him crowd them. What they need is confidence. With enough of that, a brush rabbit will spit in a rattler’s eye.’

‘Maybeso,’ Dave Pope assented. ‘I’m sure a whole lot less scared of Chet and his deviltry than I was before you began to call his hand, Cole. I’d like a crack at these killers he brought in to terrorize the country, but what you say goes with me.’

Below them they could see Slim Calhoun and Pete Daggett on the trail. Exactly in the center of it they were propping up the sign with big rocks.

‘If there are a dozen or more of Circle 3 T riders, that sign won’t stop them,’ Rusty said. ‘They will come pouring up like longhorns with their tongues hanging out when they smell water after a hot drive.’

‘That will be their lookout,’ Cole said. ‘They will have had their warning.’

He gave his men explicit instructions. Nobody was to fire unless he gave the signal. He might have to drop a bullet in front of the invaders as a warning, but this would not mean that the battle had begun. Radbourne’s men were to be given a chance to withdraw if they would.

Cole stationed his men among the boulders. Presently Daggett and Calhoun joined them.

‘We d-done p-posted yore road for you, Cole,’ Pete said. ‘I r-reckon their eyes will b-bug out when they read the sign.’

Dave Pope chuckled. ‘I hope these guys aren’t going to disappoint us the way we did their friends,’ he said.

‘We’ll know about that inside of half an hour,’ Cole mentioned.

‘They’ll be here,’ Rusty prophesied. ‘Y’betcha! Don’t buzzards always come when a cow critter dies on the desert?’

The oldtimer was right. They had not to wait long before sounds of approaching riders drifted up the cañon walls to them. Those posted in the rocks could hear voices, laughter, the striking of horses’ hoofs against stones. The party below was making no attempt to conceal its approach. Evidently danger was the last thing in mind.

A man rode around a bend in the gulch trail. Others followed. Cole counted twelve. Jerry Haskell was in the lead.

At sight of the sign he pulled up with an oath. ‘Look!’ he cried.

An exploding bomb could not have been more unexpected. The men gathered in a huddle and discussed the meaning of the warning. Had Sanborn broken through the ambush set for him? Had there somehow been a slip-up? Or was this Hank’s idea of a joke? Everybody had a suggestion, but Haskell’s heavy voice bore down the others.

‘If Sanborn’s fellows were here, they would be cutting loose at us right now,’ he shouted. ‘I’m going on. I don’t scare worth a cent.’

Braggadocio was in his words and manner, but he flung a nervous glance up at the big boulders above. What he saw there riveted his gaze. The bulbous eyes of the foreman fixed on a figure that had risen from the rocks.

‘Sanborn, by jacks!’ broke from his lips.

In his hands Cole held a rifle, loosely, the end of the barrel pointed skyward.

‘I’ve taken possession in my wife’s name,’ he called down. ‘This road is closed, for the present.’

‘How did you get there?’ Haskell demanded. ‘Where is Hank? And the other boys?’

‘Don’t get to worrying about them,’ Cole advised. ‘Keep your mind on Jerry Haskell and those with him. That ought to keep your thoughts busy.’

‘You—killed them?’ a Circle 3 T rider cried, almost in a gasp. He was thinking that in another moment the roar of guns would fill the gorge.

‘First off, drop your weapons right where you are, every last man of you,’ Cole ordered sharply. ‘We’ve got you covered. You haven’t a chance.’

There was one critical moment of hesitation. Someone in that party of hired gunmen might decide to fight it out, even with the odds heavily against them. Perhaps the men waited for Haskell to give the signal by drawing his gun and blazing away.

The face of the foreman twitched. Conflicting emotions surged in him. There was the venomous desire to throw away caution and fight it out with his enemy. There was the urgent fear of instant violent death. The men in the rocks had the drop on them. It was almost certain that they had been instructed not to let him escape if there came a clash. In racing brain flashes he decided against battle. The chances were not good enough.

‘What you mean to do with us?’ he asked, exactly as Hank had done less than an hour earlier.

‘I’m not discussing that,’ Cole answered, his harsh face expressionless as the spar of quartz on which he stood. ‘My men will empty half your saddles first crack. We’ll get the whole caboodle of you.’ His voice took on the sharp accent of command. ‘Drop those guns!’

Rifles and revolvers clattered to the ground.

‘Move back into that rock pocket,’ Cole ordered.

The disarmed men did as they had been told.

‘Out of your saddles.’

Twelve men dismounted.

‘Tie your horses together, in bunches of six. Two of you move up far as that clump of Spanish bayonet with the broncs. No farther.’

Again the imperative in Cole’s curt mandate gained obedient answer. Two Circle 3 T men moved the animals as directed.

‘Looks like these boys have been slandered,’ Dave jeered. ‘They’re good Sunday School lads who have been taught to say their little pieces proper.’

‘Don’t take any chances on them, Dave,’ Cole advised. ‘I’m asking you and McCoy and Pete to fork your broncs, ride down, and take charge of the beauties. Gather the weapons and make sure they haven’t any concealed about them. I’ll have you hold them till the rest of us can get down. Don’t lift your eyes from them a moment. They’re tough nuts.’

Not until the three riders came round a bend in the cañon trail did the prisoners realize the party above had split. It was too late to attempt a break now, even if any of them would have been foolhardy enough to try it had they known in time.

McCoy lined the Circle 3 T men up with their faces to the rock wall.

‘All right, Cole,’ he called up. ‘Everything pretty. We’ll be responsible for these blackbirds till you get down.’

‘You’d bump us off the way you did Gildea!’ Haskell cried, with an oath.

‘I’d do just exactly that any time you reach for a gun to kill me as he did,’ McCoy told him bluntly. ‘So put that in your pipe and smoke it, man.’

‘Don’t l-look so cast down, boys,’ Pete said cheerfully. ‘Y-you’re getting a g-great break, considering what you deserve. You’ll be joshed a-plenty all the rest of yore lives, but, hell’s bells, funning at yore expense won’t break any bones. If C-Cole wasn’t so damned legal he would start a little b-boot hill of his own right here.’

A cavalcade came round the bend in the cañon twenty minutes later. The five prisoners rode in advance, their hands still bound. Behind them came their captors.

Gray Shirt counted aloud the men lined up against the wall. ‘Seventeen of us in all,’ he summed up bitterly. ‘Trapped—disarmed—and not a shot fired. Grab it from me, that’s a nice story to spread around Boone County, Jerry. I’m damned if I don’t almost wish I’d gone out in smoke. We’ll never live it down.’

Cole ordered the hands of his latest batch of prisoners tied. Haskell resisted when McCoy approached him and took a swipe from a revolver barrel on the head.

After the red-headed Scotchman had knotted the rope fastening the foreman, Cole suggested carelessly that he had better bind up the bleeding head with a handkerchief.

‘He’s got quite a distance to walk,’ Sanborn explained. ‘We don’t want him playing out on us.’

‘I’m not walking a step,’ Haskell said stubbornly.

‘Suits me, Jerry. Just as you say. Anyone who doesn’t want to walk will be dragged with a rope back of a bronc. Take your choice.’

‘Where you taking us?’ growled Hank.

‘I’m taking you home—to the Circle 3 T.’ The smile on Cole’s face was blandly derisive. ‘You boys are too innocent to be let out alone. We’re going to herd you back to Chet. A coyote or a skunk might rise up and bite you before you get back to your little trundle-beds. I dassent risk it.’

The prisoners clumped down the cañon on foot in their high-heeled boots. Two of Cole’s men herded the seventeen saddled horses in the drag.

Slim watched the pedestrians, a grin on his face. Before they reached the mouth of the cañon, some of them were beginning to limp. Cowboy boots are not made for tramping trips. The high heels fling the weight forward against the cramped toes. It was seven long miles to the Circle 3 T ranch-house. By the time they came to it, every man on foot would be in torment.

Cole rode beside Slim.

‘You figure there won’t be more than two or three men at the Circle 3 T,’ Sanborn said, raising a point that had been discussed before.

‘Can’t be. There’s always a dozen or more out on the range looking after the stock. Jerry picked up every last man he could when he came tearing over here to help skin yore hide. I’d say not more than two besides Chet, and one of those will be the cook who is a tenderfoot and doesn’t know how to fire a gun.’

‘That’s about the way I figure it, Slim. I want to get out of this without having to kill anybody. We’ve had nigger luck so far. Hope it will hold.’

‘A fellow with luck like you ought to go hunting for lost gold mines,’ Calhoun said.

Slim moved a few steps forward at a road trot, to listen to some remarks from Jerry Haskell.

‘You were saying something,’ he suggested.

Haskell turned on him a furious face and blistered the air with oaths.

CHAPTER XXV

‘SEVENTEEN OF THEM—COUNT THEM’

COLE realized that his luck had stood up better than he could have reasonably expected. He had, to be sure, planned the counter-traps into which the enemy had fallen, hoping that Chet would be hoist with his own petard. But it had been sheer good fortune that events had dovetailed perfectly enough for him to achieve victory without the loss of a life. This ought to help his cause greatly, for it would prove, far better than any statement he could make, that he was trying to win Mary’s rights peaceably and was not seeking a feud with Radbourne.

Moreover, his triumph held just the flavor that the frontier relished. The biter had been bit. The Circle 3 T men had been caught, not once but twice, in the trap they had set for Sanborn. The story of how he had outgeneraled them, forced a surrender, and driven them on foot like a herd of cattle back to Chet, would be told in every ranch-house within a hundred miles. Radbourne’s stock as dictator of Boone County, already declining, would go down with a crash in the market of public opinion.

The party trailed through the desert, strung out for a distance of several hundred yards. Guards on horseback flanked the prisoners. Back of these were the saddled broncos. Heat shimmered in front of the moving men. Dust rose in clouds from their dragging feet. The dry throats of those on foot were like lime-kilns.

The Circle 3 T men took their punishment according to the nature of the individual. Gray Shirt plodded on stoically, his lips closed. He knew he had no grievance. Sanborn’s gang might justifiably have killed him, since that was the fate he and his associates had meant for them. Hank whined for a horse. His feet were killing him, he complained almost tearfully. Curses dripped from the lips of Haskell.

Two riders crossed the desert in front of them and stopped to find out what this strange drive could be. The men were Preston and Lutz.

They stared in astonishment at what they saw.

‘I’m herding these boys home,’ Cole explained. ‘They got off their own range and wandered up to the Lazy B. Lucky I found them, or they would probably have starved to death. This is no country for amateurs. They’re

some gaunted, but after Chet has nursed them up, they won't look so whipped out, don't you reckon?'

Rusty Hunter took pains to let the two travelers know exactly what had occurred. He told the story in picturesque language, and it lost nothing in the telling. Preston and Lutz were headed for Jonesboro. In another hour or two everybody in town would know of the crushing defeat Cole had inflicted on the warriors of Radbourne.

The cavalcade moved slowly. The sun, a ball of fire, was dropping behind a peak in the sawtoothed range when the party drew close to the home ranch of the Circle 3 T.

Three men and a girl came out of the buildings to find out what this invasion meant. One of the men was Chet Radbourne. His vast bulk shook like a jelly while he watched Slim cut the ropes on the wrists of his men.

Cole swept off his hat to Mary, dismounted in front of her, said a word or two in a low voice, then turned his attention to Radbourne as the young woman vanished inside the house.

'I've brought back your boys, Chet—seventeen of 'em, count 'em,' he said. 'You oughtn't to let them stray so far. When greeners like these get off their range, they get into trouble right away.'

Radbourne's fat tallowy face was ghastly. He was so completely taken aback he did not know what to say. It was astounding. Seventeen hard-bitten fighting men, well-armed, had gone out to finish Sanborn, and they had come back disarmed, bound, scarcely able to drag one foot before the other. Did Sanborn know they had set out to murder him? Had he come here to destroy his arch-enemy before them all?

'I—I—don't reckon I—understand, Cole,' he gasped out. 'If my boys have been annoying you in any way——'

'It wasn't by any order of yours,' Cole interrupted. 'We all understand that. You wouldn't hurt a hair of my head.'

Gray Shirt laughed, with sardonic and bitter mirth. 'Go ahead, Chet. Explain everything nice. Talk him out of it. Tell him you aimed to have him rubbed out easy and gentle. Make him believe Mrs. Sanborn came up here of her own free will. Likely he'll swallow anything you say.'

Haskell sank down on the porch and pulled the boots from his tortured feet. 'What's the use of lying, Chet?' he spat out, with a vile curse. 'He knows we acted under yore orders. I'll say this. He'd better kill me right now. If he don't, first chance I get I'll drop him like I would a wolf.'

‘No use talking thataway, Jerry,’ the master of the ranch reproved. ‘The idea is to fix this up with Cole. I aim to be reasonable, and I reckon he does.’

‘There’s nothing to fix up, Chet,’ said Sanborn. ‘I’m not having any dealings with you. Keep your hands off my affairs and those of my wife. You’ve made one bad mistake about her. Don’t make another. I’m a law-abiding man, but don’t presume on my reputation for wanting peace. You sent these boys out to kill me and my men. We had a chance to get every last one of them. This time you and they are lucky. But you won’t get a break like that twice. I ought to shoot you down now. You’re a black-hearted scoundrel, and it would be better for this country if you were dead.’

‘You don’t get me right, Cole,’ the fat man whined. ‘Haven’t I taken care of your wife like a father since I saw you last?’

‘You threatened to whip her with a quirt, you villain. I ought to wipe you out for that.’

‘No, Cole. That doesn’t matter. He hasn’t hurt me.’ Mary had come out upon the porch. She was wearing a riding costume. Her voice was low and urgent. ‘All I want is to get away and never see him again.’

‘That’s all right with me,’ Radbourne said, in a whining, ingratiating plaint. ‘You can go any time you like, Mrs. Sanborn. I don’t wish you anything but well.’

Cole told him, his face like the Day of Judgment: ‘Mrs. Sanborn will be staying with friends in Jonesboro. You’ll not annoy her, you or any of your dogs. If you do, or if they do, you’d better pray to the Devil you serve for an easy death.’ Before he turned away, he flung a piece of information at Radbourne, as one would a bone to a cur. ‘You’ll find your horses at the Longhorn Corral.’

Most of the prisoners had dropped down where they were to take the stiff boots from their swollen and inflamed feet. But Gray Shirt stood erect, his cold light blue eyes fixed on Sanborn.

‘What do you mean about annoying Mrs. Sanborn?’ he asked. ‘Maybe you’re the sort of yellow dog that pesters women. I’m not, and I don’t reckon many of these boys are.’

‘Not even your boss, Mr. Radbourne,’ Cole said, with icy sarcasm.

‘He can talk for himself, and I’ll talk for myself. For a red cent I’d send you out in smoke, and I wouldn’t touch her for a million dollars.’

Cole gave the man his sudden friendly smile. ‘You’re a man, Gray Shirt. I’ll take back what I said about annoying Mrs. Sanborn. Just the same, you’re fighting with this scoundrel to take her property from her. You’re in

the wrong camp. He's not worth the powder to blow him up. I'll tell you something else. You're backing a losing horse. Radbourne is bucked out. This country has had enough of him. He's through.'

Gray Shirt turned to his boss. 'Tell him he's a liar, Chet. Tell him you'll hang his hide on a fence to dry inside of a week.'

'You boys get on the prod too much,' Radbourne said irritably. 'I got nothing against Cole, except he's so damn rambunctious. Someone has been filling him with lies about me. I'm a man of peace. Not looking for trouble.'

Disgust in his face, Gray Shirt looked the owner of the Circle 3 T up and down. 'Sanborn is right. You're a yellow-bellied, crawling sidewinder. That's what you are. And I'm through with you. I never did like you or your outfit. You can dish out orders to bump off some other guy and it doesn't hurt you any, but when it's yore own turn you can't stand up on yore hind legs and take it. Me, I'm going down the trail tonight.'

'Rats and a sinking ship. That the idea, Jim?' sneered Haskell.

Gray Shirt looked the foreman over with a cold, implacable eye. 'Say that again when we're both heeled, Jerry.'

Cole gathered his party to leave. Before going, he spoke to Gray Shirt. 'After what you've said, it isn't going to be healthy for you up here.' He waved a hand toward the saddled horses. 'Pick out your bronc and fag along down the trail. If you don't, I'd hate to bet you ever do.'

The level eyes of the hired killer looked into those of Sanborn. They were still as hard as jade.

'I'll take you up on that,' he said. 'It's lean forward and shove for me. That palomino is mine.'

He reclaimed his horse and came back to where Cole stood. 'You are one of these high-heeled smart alecks I never could go. I reckon you're all swelled up like a poisoned pup because you ran a whizzer on us today. But I'll say for you that you act like a white man. Listen. This skunk Radbourne isn't through. You want to watch him every lick of the road. If you don't, you'll never be the big auger here you're figuring on being.'

Gray Shirt rode to the bunkhouse and presently emerged with a roll. He was tying it behind the saddle as the Sanborn party passed.

Cole stopped, to hand him a revolver. 'You might need this,' he said.

'So I might,' the man said with cool hardihood. For you or for Haskell one.'

‘If it has to be one of us, make it Haskell,’ Cole answered, grinning at him.

The former Circle 3 T man permitted himself a sour sardonic smile.

‘It won’t be you, fellow. Too many coals of fire. I’ll say one thing. I’m almost glad I didn’t get a chance to fill you full of lead today.’

‘So am I,’ Cole told him.

Gray Shirt put his horse to a gallop and vanished down the road.

CHAPTER XXVI

IN THE DUSK

MARY rode beside her husband, an odd breathless excitement filling her being. It was absurd, she told herself, that she should feel any emotion in the presence of this harsh dynamic stranger who by some strange quirk of fate happened to be the man to whom she was married. Their partnership was a business arrangement. Nothing more than that. Yet she felt not only the prickling in the throat that adventure brings, but a queer suffocation around the heart ridiculously unnecessary. She told herself it was embarrassment. This straight-backed rider with the hard-packed muscles and the granite face was a man she did not know at all; yet he was the man she had promised to love, honor, and obey, the one she had given her word to cherish until death parted them.

‘Tell me about it,’ she said, in her low, melodious voice. ‘How did you disarm and capture all those men? It seems impossible. Yet you did it.’

He told her, simply, as if what he had done had been easy and a matter of course.

‘Why didn’t they think you might take the cutoff up the arroyo in the gulch?’ she asked.

‘Nobody had ever been up there.’ He modified his statement. ‘I did go up once when I was a boy. But it never struck them seven men could make it. Fact is, the slide is rather a breakneck precipice. We were lucky that none of us were hurt.’

She looked at him, with parted lips and shining eyes. A wave of emotion crashed through her. She would never love him. Frequently in the past weeks she had told herself so. That was not possible, since he had lived as he had, but she would know, would never forget as long as she lived, that she had married a man among ten thousand.

‘And you were lucky when you trapped the first bunch of men, and lucky again when you got the others,’ she said, with warm and friendly derision.

‘Yes.’

‘Just like Napoleon at—at Marengo and his other battles.’

Cole laughed. ‘Don’t pull that before any of the boys, or they will never quit joshing me.’

‘Why?’ she challenged. ‘Isn’t that what a good general does—takes the enemy by surprise?’

‘It may be the other way round next time,’ he said.

‘We’re going to win,’ she cried vibrantly. ‘I didn’t think so—at first. It was a desperate jump in the dark . . . what we did. I was selfish, thinking only of myself. But I’ve had plenty of time since to think of the danger into which I’ve dragged you. The worst of it is that I can’t be sorry. I know you walk every hour in danger, with so many men ready to destroy you. Sometimes I am shaken with fear. Then I know that no harm can come to you.’

‘I’ve rocked along all right so far,’ he reminded her.

‘You’ve saved me from that man,’ she went on. ‘Very likely you will save my property. It is fine for me. But all you get out of it is terrible danger. Assassins try to kill you. Men lie in wait.’

‘Is that all I get?’ he asked, smiling at her.

His rock-ribbed face did not betray him. She had no guess that he found her loveliness sweet and glamorous.

‘Wouldn’t it be best for you to guard me to the nearest railroad station, put me on a train, and send me home? I wouldn’t be responsible then if—if anything happened to you.’

‘You won’t be responsible, anyhow. Radbourne had a black mark against my name before I ever met you. No. This fight is on. It will have to go to a finish. When I began this thing it was personal. Cole Sanborn against Chet Radbourne. There’s more to it than that now. All over Boone County men are watching to see if the influence of the Circle 3 T, which has corrupted public life and made honest citizens walk in fear, can be destroyed. Nesters who were scared to call their souls their own are saying what they think. Square-shooters in Jonesboro are speaking out. If Radbourne’s killers get me, this fight won’t stop. He is coming to the last mile of his crooked trail. I think he sees it himself, but he daren’t quit. He has gone so far he has got to go on to the finish.’

As she listened, the color in her violet eyes deepened. She had married a man practically an outlaw, one generally believed to be a criminal, known as a desperate gunman, a mocker at the fine and decent things in life. But this man telling her quietly of the fight for right, seeing himself as one who carried a banner for others, was not at all the villain public opinion had

pictured him. Mary knew that on the frontier the borderline between good and evil is sometimes shadowy. Circumstances may sweep men who are not bad along lawless paths. Along such trails Cole Sanborn had galloped wildly. But this she knew. Whatever wrong there might be in his past, he had now turned his back forever on dishonor. The blood beat stormily, exultantly, to her heart.

‘Yes, he is afraid,’ she agreed. ‘I could see it in the way he treated me. But won’t that fear drive him to desperation? He will see his one chance is to—to get rid of you. If he can do that—and tighten his grip again on those who have been afraid of him——’

She did not finish her sentence. To pass a clump of prickly pear she had swung away from him for a moment.

‘That’s on the cards,’ he assented, after they were again riding knee to knee. ‘We’ll have to be on guard every minute.’

‘Where are you going to leave me?’ she asked.

‘At the Peters house, if that suits you all right.’

‘Would they be in any danger because of me?’

‘No. You heard what that man in the gray shirt said, the one called Jim. I don’t know his last name. What he says is true. He and his kind respect women. I would trust you on the desert with him just as I would with Dave Pope or Dunc McCoy. He isn’t fighting women. Neither are the other Circle 3 T riders.’

‘And Chet Radbourne—isn’t he fighting women either?’

‘Not now he isn’t,’ Cole answered. ‘He daren’t. For the first time he has come to understand the power of public opinion. He can kill me and get away with it because I have the reputation of being a bad man. But he won’t bother you any more. ‘Far as he is concerned, you’re dynamite from now on. He knows that if he lifts a hand against you, he is likely to blow himself up.’

‘So it comes to this,’ she said. ‘I’m safe, and you are in more danger than ever. And it started in as my fight, not yours.’

‘Before I ever said a word to you or had become acquainted, you heard Haskell serve notice on me that he was going to wipe me out. I had chips in the jackpot then, and even if the pot has built up a lot since, I’m still playing a stack.’

‘You say that out of kindness to me, to keep me from worrying about having got you into trouble.’

He looked at her, smiling. ‘I’ve been in trouble ever since I landed in this country.’

‘You win the battle, then I get all the rewards,’ she told him reproachfully.

She felt his gaze burning into her. It seemed a long time before it shifted to the dying light on the distant hills. Night was dropping down over the valley. Soon it would envelop them.

‘How do you know what rewards I get?’ he asked, his voice studiedly light and casual.

‘The Lazy B—and the cattle. I don’t suppose you would let me divide them.’

‘I reckon not.’

‘Then you haven’t anything to gain.’

‘I’ll tell you some day what I have to gain,’ he said, still carelessly. ‘Or else I won’t.’

Mary heard him, with a fluttering heart beating against her ribs. This might mean nothing, or it might mean a great deal. She did not want him to explain his words, not yet at least. The barriers in her soul, defenses built as safeguards against the emotion he always stirred in her, were falling far too fast. She was a fool, of course, she told herself accusingly. Never for an instant had he broken the compact made the day of their marriage. He seemed to be cased in hard chill steel. Yet when he looked at her flashes burned her bosom. Always she had been high-headed and independent, but when she was with him her arrogant will melted into his. She had made him promise not to break faith. It had not been necessary, she felt then, to make herself do the same.

She had to say something, for silence was too significant.

‘Is that a riddle?’ she asked, after she was sure of her voice.

‘I’ll say this now, no more. I’ve fooled away my time, with nothing worth while to live for. You know what my reputation is. I earned it, partly at least. Now I am at work on a good job, for others as well as myself. That’s something, don’t you reckon?’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘That’s a lot.’

From somewhere back of them a voice was lifted in song:

‘Oh, old Ben Bolt was a fine old boss,
Rode to see the girls on a sore-backed hoss;
Old Ben Bolt was fond of his liquor,
Had a li’l’ bottle in the pocket of his slicker.’

‘I was like that boy, with a heap more of the devil in me,’ Cole said. ‘I was on the road to ruin, and hell-bent to get there in a hurry. It’s funny. I don’t understand it myself. The way it seems to me is that the man you saw sitting on the porch of the Jonesboro House has quit living and another one is here in his place. Of course I’m talking foolishness, and yet I’m not.’

‘I don’t think you are talking foolishness at all,’ she told him, almost in a murmur.

A wild and primitive joy beat a drum in her.

CHAPTER XXVII
COLE ADVERTISES

THE return of Sanborn to Jonesboro was almost a triumphal procession. Men had watched him go, the opinion strong in them that he was leading a forlorn hope and would probably never come back. Now, within twelve hours, he was leading his victorious band up Main Street, beside him the lovely girl whose plight had transformed this private war from a sordid feud to a thrilling romance. During that time Cole had captured more than half of Radbourne's men, had dragged them back to the den of the old fox, had reclaimed his wife, and was bringing to town with him the spoils of battle in the form of the mounts and the weapons of the gunmen he had taken.

This was the most amazing episode that had occurred in Jonesboro's turbulent life. If Sanborn had fought a bloody battle and won, he would have found a divided sentiment. Many good citizens would have felt the feud was lawless, and that one gang of ruffians had defeated another. But to have captured the enemy without firing a shot, to have had the Circle 3 T men completely in his power, to have freed them unharmed after making them ridiculous; this was a triumph approved by all the good people of the county seat.

Preston and Lutz had brought the incredible story to town. It had swept like wildfire from house to house. Now men, women, and children lined the road to see the victors. Cole rode straight-backed, imperturbable and grim, nodding now and again to someone he recognized.

But Mary was all smiles. When a good old deacon of the church called to her a fervent 'God bless you!' she waved a hand at him gaily. It did not occur to her that she supplied the element which made this dramatic entry romantic. Her eyes were bright as Arcturus because of the sweeping tide of approval the actions of Cole had met. She glowed at the cheers, at the frank comments flung out by men on the sidewalk.

'You sure combed Chet's hair for him, Cole! . . . Good old scout, you can carry weight and whop that old devil any day of the week! . . . They was certainly duck soup for you, boy, but you want to watch out some of 'em don't dry-gulch you. . . . I wouldn't make no holler if you had rubbed out that bull rattler Haskell, for he just naturally wore out his welcome with me first time I met him. . . . Hi-Yi, Cole, you're the curly wolf for my money.'

Mary loved it all. She felt the campaign was won, an illusion Cole did not share for an instant. But he felt it wise to make the occasion as impressive as possible.

‘Will someone get Jim Poston the blacksmith and tell him to open up for business?’ he asked an acquaintance. ‘I’ll be round at his shop in ten minutes.’

He ordered the saddled but riderless horses driven to the Longhorn Corral. ‘Stick together, boys, and meet me in ten minutes at the blacksmith shop. Bring all the Circle 3 T guns with you.’

‘You want to look out for yoreself, Cole,’ Dave warned. ‘There are still two-three birds in town would like a peck at you. Don’t forget that.’

‘Maybeso, but they aren’t likely to do their pecking tonight,’ Sanborn answered. ‘Still, I’ll keep an eye cocked.’

Cole and Mary rode to the residence of Hal Peters. The lawyer was just returning with his wife. They had been down to Main Street.

‘Quite a Roman triumph,’ Peters said dryly. ‘All it needed was Radbourne in chains at your chariot wheels.’

They could still hear the pop of revolvers celebrating the event.

Cole smiled, a little sheepishly. ‘The boys overplayed it some.’

He lifted Mary from the saddle.

‘Mr. Peters and I are so glad you are back, Mary. We are hoping you will come to our home and spend a long visit.’ A hearty sincerity was in the voice of the lawyer’s wife.

Mary loved her for her gracious kindness. ‘If you are sure I won’t be a nuisance,’ she said, and added impulsively: ‘I won’t ever forget how good you are to me.’

‘Nonsense,’ the older woman said at once. ‘It will be good for us, as it was before, to have a young person in the house to brighten it.’ She spoke to Cole, offering her hand. ‘Mr. Peters tells me he has hopes that you will save this country from the corrupt ring that has run it so long.’

‘I’ll try to help him do that,’ Cole answered, with his swift rare smile.

‘We’ll all have to do our part,’ the attorney said. ‘I think from what I hear folks say that you have them on the run. I’ll dig up some evidence of their corruption and worry them some more. No trouble to find traces of crookedness. It is all over the place.’

Cole excused himself. ‘Have to get back to the boys,’ he said. ‘The show isn’t quite over.’

‘Think I’ll go along with you,’ Peters said.

‘He’s afraid I’m going to start something,’ Cole told Mrs. Peters. ‘Can’t trust me out of his sight.’

‘You’ll be back before you leave town,’ Mary said in a low voice to her husband.

‘I’ll be back,’ he promised.

Sanborn led the horses back to Main Street, the lank lawyer walking by his side. They moved down between the false-front buildings to the blacksmith shop. Several hundred people were gathered in front of it, most of them men. A cheer greeted Cole. He paid no attention to it.

‘Poston is inside, and we’ve brought the guns,’ Slim said. ‘What you aiming to do with them?’

Within fifteen minutes each rifle and revolver had been put on the anvil and its usefulness ended by heavy blows from the blacksmith’s hammer.

The spectators approved. They shouted encouragement.

‘You’ll do to take along. Cole. . . . Show Chet he can’t cut it when he hatches up a fuss and lays it on yore lap. . . . We’re with you, boy. We’ll show his slit-eyed sons-of-guns they can’t bully-puss this country.’

Cole understood that this enthusiasm would not last. These men would go home and get to wondering if after all Radbourne would not strike back at his foe swiftly and mercilessly. Tomorrow they would be much more careful in the expression of their opinions. They would remember that Chet had spies in town who reported to him all that went on.

After the guns had been smashed, Cole paid a visit to the office of the *Boone County Beacon*. Tim Alderson was setting type on an editorial, composing it as he went along.

The little man’s gimlet eyes fastened on the visitor. ‘The *Beacon* comes out tomorrow. You want to read it, young fellow. I’m sure going to make the eagle scream. I’ll betcha when the Circle 3 T gallows birds read it, they will want to sell themselves a dozen for thirty cents.’

‘Much obliged, Tim. I’ve got another job for you, if you have time to set it up.’

‘I’ll be working half the night, anyhow,’ Alderson said. ‘I haven’t any time to take on odd jobs. What is it you want?’

Cole explained.

The bright eyes of the small man fairly smoked. ‘Say, I’ll take on that job. You sit right down at my desk and write your poster.’

Sanborn was no journalist. He spent some time at his task before he got it finished. Alderson made some suggestions, then set up and ran the job.

‘How many you want?’ he asked before he finished the printing.

‘A hundred will do. I want to plaster the town with them and stick some up at crossroads here and there in the country.’

‘Then I’ll strike off two hundred,’ the editor said. ‘There are going to be a lot of citizens in this town come to me to get a copy of this poster as a souvenir. If you whip Radbourne, they will paste this masterpiece of yours on their walls; if you don’t, they will bury them deep in their trunks.’

‘Looks like I’m going to be either a live hero or a dead dog,’ Cole said dryly.

‘One or the other,’ Alderson agreed. ‘And I can tell you this, that if you slip up and don’t have eyes in the back of your head, you won’t be around to have any medals stuck on your chest by an admiring public.’

The poster read:

F O U N D

Sixteen Broomtails with the Circle 3 T Brand Straying at the Foot of Big Pine Point. Picked Up Wednesday Afternoon. May be Reclaimed at the Longhorn Corral by Paying Feed Bill.

Also Sixteen Rifles and Sixguns Come Upon at Same Time and Place After having been Abandoned by Tenderfoot Owners. These May be Called for at Poston’s Blacksmith Shop and can be Gathered from the Junk Pile of Scrap Iron.

COLE SANBORN

An irruption of six bowlegged men in chaps created a diversion.

‘I got the hammers and the tacks for you, Cole,’ Dave shouted. ‘Though what in time you want with them is more than I can guess. I found Dink Blossom at Pete Casey’s and dragged him to the Emporium. The old coot said he could understand how you might want six Colt’s forty-fours, but he’d be dad-gummed if he could figure what you could do with a mess of hammers and tacks. I told him you were plumb crazy anyhow, and let it go at that, seeing I didn’t know myself what yore plans are.’

Cole divided the posters. He gave each of the men fifteen.

‘I want them posted all over this town. Stick ’em on trees, walls, fences, in saloons, and any other conspicuous spots you notice.’

The six bowlegged bipeds read the poster and whooped.

‘That’ll bring the lid off’n Jerry Haskell’s private can of cuss words,’ Rusty said. ‘Dawged if it won’t peel the thick hide from two-three gents who don’t feel noways loving toward you. I recollect onct when I was sitting the buck^[2] in a corral on Colonel Goodnight’s ranch in the Panhandle a galoot cracked down on me with his cutter and——’

[2] Riding an outlaw horse.

‘Did he kill you?’ asked Dave anxiously.

The old man slewed his wrinkled eyes round at Dave and considered him. ‘No, sir, he didn’t kill me. After the buckjumper had got through with his meanness, I got down from the saddle and asked this bird what was eatin’ him. He was sure a whipped-out lookin’ specimen. Well, gents, he explained he was married and had a little pest at home was a holy terror. This kid was such a nuisance he couldn’t make up his mind whether he oughtn’t to drown the brat in the Cimarron. Even when he was fur from home he’d get to thinking about the little devil and it would make him so crazy he didn’t know what he was doing. When he had fired at me he was having one of these spells. He said his name was Pope. Seems the kid was called Dave.’

Rusty finished his story on a note of placid indifference and turned to ask a question of Cole.

‘Meet me at Hal Peters’s house in about half an hour,’ Cole said. ‘And don’t get careless, boys. We corralled most of the Circle 3 T riding stock, except what is on the range or in the big pasture. I don’t expect the warriors of Chet will be down here on the peck for quite some time yet, but you never can tell. I wouldn’t want any casualties among you at the end of a perfect day.’

The six men in chaps trooped out to see that Cole’s advertising got a good display.

CHAPTER XXVIII

LAURET MAKES HIS CHOICE

COLE talked with Alderson a few minutes before he followed his men into the street. He pulled the slip-knot that tied the bridle rein of his horse to the hitch-rack in front of the *Beacon* office.

As he swung to the saddle, a puff of wind lifted the hat from his head. Almost at the same time there was the crack of a revolver. Swiftly Cole slid to the ground, on the same side of the horse from which he had mounted. Before his feet touched earth a forty-four had leaped from its holster to his hand. Back of the animal he waited, watching the dark alley where he had seen the flash.

He heard a rustling sound and flung a random shot into the alley.

Alderson's voice came from behind him. 'What is it?' the editor asked.

'Someone fired at me from the alley,' Cole explained. 'He's there yet. Better drift back into the office, Tim. You're in the line of fire.'

'You better come too,' Alderson advised, and vanished.

Cole did not take his advice. He had important business on hand. His senses were keyed to an acute pitch. Intently he listened. The faintest murmur of a sound might be invaluable information. His eyes bored into the patch of blackness that was the alley. Crouched against the wall there somewhere was a man with murder in his heart.

Again the stealthy rustling. Cole's gun flashed. There came to his ears the pounding of feet in rapid retreat. The ambusher was no longer trying to conceal his whereabouts. He was flying in panic for his life.

Snatching up his hat, Cole vaulted to the saddle, swung the horse, and drove straight for the alley. A shadowy figure ducked round a corner. The rider wheeled his peg pony into an alley at right angles with the first. Abruptly he pulled up. Nobody was in sight. No sound came to him, except the roar of many voices from the Arcadia. The back door of the gambling-house was open.

Cole dismounted, pushing the sixgun back into its holster. A black object on the ground caught his eye. It was a hat. Cole picked it up. He trailed the bridle reins and passed through the door into the Arcadia.

The place was filled with drinkers, gamblers, loafers milling about, and onlookers ‘sweating’ the games.

Cole’s entrance created some attention from those nearest him, and that interest moved with him as he walked through the crowd. A dozen men greeted him. He answered perfunctorily, his eyes sweeping the place, back and forth, back and forth. He was looking for some man who might be an enemy, and he did not want notice of that person’s presence to come to him in the form of a bullet.

His glance picked up Lutz. The cattleman did not even look at him. He was playing poker and his attention was concentrated on the cards. Evidently he was trying to make up his mind whether to throw away his hand or call a bet. No, not Lutz, Cole reflected. His mind was too easy, and in any case he had not had time to get set and into a jackpot. Moreover, Lutz was not the assassin type. He might kill in the open, if he could bring himself to scratch, but he would not fire from ambush.

Cole continued toward the front of the house. He saw Lauret. The man was pretending to watch a faro game, but Cole observed that he was breathing deeply. He noticed also that he could not keep his eyes on the table. They went stabbing here and there uneasily. As yet he had not seen Cole.

Sanborn stepped in close to the man, back of him, on his right side.

‘I’ve brought the hat you dropped, Mr. Lauret,’ he said evenly, in a low, distinct voice.

Lauret could not prevent a start. He swung round, hand at hip.

‘What do you mean—my hat?’ he demanded.

‘Isn’t it your hat?’ Cole drawled, his words spaced. ‘You dropped it at the back door, and it has your initials in it.’

The faro players looked up. A chill sensation ran down their spines. The words were simple, but the manner of them was ominous.

There were tiny beads of perspiration on the white forehead of the gambler. He swallowed a lump before he replied.

‘Not my hat,’ he answered huskily.

It was his opinion that the breath of death was fanning him. Should he draw now, before his enemy moved, and take a chance, he might prevent the other’s bullets crashing into him.

‘Never saw you without a hat before,’ Cole said, watching him intently. ‘Where *is* your hat?’

‘That’s my business.’

‘And mine. You look like you have been running, Mr. Lauret.’

‘That’s not true.’

‘Bad for the heart when a man leads the kind of life you do,’ Cole told him. ‘You’re out of practice, both as a runner *and with a sixgun.*’

The eyes of Lauret narrowed. Now was the time, while Sanborn was still talking. In a fraction of a second, if there was no hitch, this jeering mocker might be lying dead at his feet. *If there was no hitch.* That was the joker. A picture flashed before his eyes. He saw Curt Jordan standing at the side door of the Arcadia, his sixgun blazing. He saw him sagging to the floor, muscles limp and lax. The gambler tried to flog his courage to action. But he could not bring himself to it, not with that chill bleak gaze boring into his.

‘This is no country for shorthorns, Lauret,’ Cole said, his voice low and steely.

One of the faro players rose abruptly. He was in a panic to get away from this spot.

‘Sit down,’ Cole ordered swiftly. ‘You’re not in this.’

The man sat down, white-faced and shaken. He was a young tenderfoot just out from Ohio.

Cole had not lifted his eyes from Lauret. His implacable voice carried on. Its message was for the gambler.

‘Not safe for a man like you to carry a gun. I’ll take yours now.’

He held out his *left* hand. The other was hitched by the thumb to the cartridge belt, not an inch from the butt of a revolver.

Lauret moistened his dry lips with his tongue. Something was gripping him tightly by the throat. He told himself he was going to kill the fellow now. Sanborn was making it easy. He would pretend he was going to hand the weapon over, and instead would fling bullets into the stomach of his enemy.

Sanborn read his thoughts aloud. ‘No, it won’t be that way, Lauret. You don’t get another crack at me. Draw the gun out slowly, with the butt pointing my way—*and don’t make a mistake.*’

This was his chance, the professional gambler told himself again. A tilt of the wrist and a crook of a finger. The thing would be done.

Once more Cole guessed his impulse. ‘Don’t let a finger wander to the trigger. Remember you’re an amateur.’

Lauret found he could not do it. His flaccid will was not able to drive his trembling fingers to action. He drew out the six-shooter and passed it to the iron man whose gaze held him hypnotized.

Cole examined the revolver. 'Like I thought,' he said. 'One chamber empty—fired recently. You're not thorough enough, Lauret. It will take a better man than you to kill me.' He gave an order, in a voice through which a blizzard seemed to sweep. 'Get out of this country and never come back. I'll give you an hour—no longer. If you're not gone——'

He did not finish the sentence. It was not necessary.

'I didn't shoot at you,' Lauret said, lips colorless. 'Must have been someone else.'

'An hour,' Cole repeated.

He handed the revolver back to the gambler, not even taking the precaution to remove the cartridges.

Apparently Cole dismissed him completely from mind. The young man turned to the tenderfoot who had been playing faro. His smile was friendly and apologetic.

'Sorry if I spoke roughly,' he said. 'I wanted not to start any stampede.'

The tenderfoot looked at him, awe and admiration in his face. He would have a story to tell when he went back home that would last him the rest of his life. 'It's all right, Mr. Sanborn,' he said.

Cole turned and walked out of the Arcadia. His erect flat-backed body was a mark Lauret could not have missed. But he knew the West too well to shoot now. If he killed Sanborn while the man's back was toward him, after he had been given his chance and lacked the nerve to take it, inside of an hour he would be hanging from a cottonwood.

A dozen men looked at Lauret, gravely, silently. He had been judged and found wanting. Head down, he moved toward the door. He noticed that a path opened for him as he went.

CHAPTER XXIX

MARY PICKS UP A HAT

THE roan was waiting patiently in the alley for its master. Sanborn swung to the saddle and rode to the house of Peters.

He found Mary at the table eating a meal Mrs. Peters had cooked for her. An extra place had been set.

‘Your wife couldn’t wait for you, Mr. Sanborn,’ explained Peters. ‘She didn’t know when you would get back. Draw right up.’

Cole hesitated.

‘Only bacon and eggs,’ the lawyer’s wife said. ‘But I have hot coffee and biscuits in the kitchen.’

Cole took the proffered chair. He was hungry. But this supper satisfied more than his physical appetite. It had been a long time since he had sat as a guest at a table set with immaculate linen, old china, and silver spoons worn thin with age. That this girl with the wild hyacinth eyes sat opposite him was even more significant. Peters had called her his wife. She was far from that, even though the law had formally declared her so. What she thought of him he could only guess, but it was impossible for her to be indifferent to him. They had been flung into a wild adventure together, were partners in it. In her behalf he had risked his life, not once but several times. He had seen the eager interest shining in her eyes. Her future was wrapped up in his success. He must be in her mind often. Did she think of him as a ruffian with redeeming traits?

‘Any new adventures since I left you, young man?’ Peters asked.

‘None of any importance,’ Cole answered. He knew they would hear tomorrow of his encounter with Lauret. Better not tell it now, since he could not even sketch it without seeming to boast. The facts would do that for him no matter how he related them. ‘I had a talk with Alderson.’

‘A good man, Alderson. He is with you, of course.’

‘I found him writing an editorial on our side.’ Cole chuckled reminiscently. ‘I had him do a piece of job work for me.’

He rose, found the posters he had left with his hat, and passed one to each of the three present.

‘You rub it in,’ Peters said, after he had read the poster. ‘It will make Chet and his beauties sore.’

‘They are some annoyed already,’ Cole suggested mildly.

‘I shouldn’t wonder,’ the lawyer agreed dryly. ‘Maybe it is a good plan to broadcast something of this kind. Shows you are not afraid of them.’

‘Does he need to show that now after what he has done?’ Mary asked demurely.

‘I was going to add, young lady, that it is a good thing to set everybody laughing at these scoundrels. This town is doing that already, but it will get another chortle out of this poster.’ Peters turned to Cole. ‘I don’t need to tell you that this is more fuel to the Circle 3 T anger. Those fellows can’t hold up their heads until they wipe out the score.’

‘By rubbing me out,’ Cole said.

‘Yes, sir,’ agreed Peters bluntly. ‘No sense in not recognizing facts. They will get you if they can. From now on every last one of them will be trying to hunt you down.’

‘What were they trying to do at Big Pine Point?’ Cole asked, helping Mary and afterward himself to another biscuit. ‘I gathered they had some sort of notion like that.’

‘Yes, but—— Don’t get the idea Radbourne will quit after he has gone this far.’

‘No, he won’t quit.’ Cole lifted his eyes and looked straight at the lawyer. ‘But I’m through going easy on him. If he asks for war, he’ll get it. I’ve gone a long way to avoid trouble. Twice I have had him at the end of a gun and let him go. Wouldn’t you say that was often enough? If he keeps crowding me?’

Peters said deliberately: ‘If he lifts another hand against you, the verdict of the people will be that he is one hundred per cent wrong and that you must defend yourself.’

Mrs. Peters rose from her chair and drew the window blinds down. All of them knew why she had done it, but none of them mentioned the reason.

‘We’re a little tired, Mr. Peters and I,’ she said. ‘If you young people will excuse us, we will retire to our room. I hope you will decide to stay all night and eat breakfast with us, Mr. Sanborn. You must have a great deal to talk over with your wife.’

Cole flushed. He did not dare look at Mary. ‘It is very good of you to ask me, Mrs. Peters,’ he told her. ‘But my men will be here in a little while.’

‘Soon as they come I must take the trail with them.’

As soon as Peters had followed his wife from the room, Mary flung a question at Cole.

‘They don’t know you are here, do they? They couldn’t have followed you?’

He did not ask her whom she meant by *they*. ‘No,’ he answered.

‘A lot of people saw you bring me here. If the Circle 3 T men have reached town, and if they asked questions——’

‘They haven’t reached town,’ he assured her.

‘You can’t be too careful,’ Mary urged. ‘It’s as Mr. Peters says, from now on every man of them will want to get you.’

‘Don’t worry. We’ve a hundred miles of hills to camp in. We’ll hop around like fleas.’

‘If anything happened to you, I would never forgive myself.’ There was a note of passionate wistfulness in her voice. In her heart flamed the fire of primitive woman for her mate. He might think of her whatever he liked. She was afraid. She could not let him go from her with that manner of negligent indifference. It was all very well to show contempt to the enemy. But in reality he must be wary to the verge of caution. She tried to impress this on him.

He listened gravely. ‘I’ll be watching every minute,’ he promised.

There came a clatter of horses’ hoofs. Evidently the riders had drawn up in front of the house.

Someone knocked on the door. Dave Pope called to Sanborn. ‘Ready when you are, Cole.’

‘Be out in a minute,’ Cole answered.

He looked round for his hat. Mary picked it up, perhaps because of some vague impulse to hold him a moment longer. She glanced at it, and her eyes grew fixed. Her finger pointed to two small holes, one in the side and the other in the crown.

‘They weren’t there this afternoon,’ she said, and looked to him for an explanation.

He could not find one readily. Before he had formulated an answer, she put her thought into a charge.

‘Someone shot at you.’

Cole smiled, as if it were of no consequence. ‘He didn’t hit me.’

‘Who was it?’

‘A man named Lauret. He is a professional gambler with whom I once had some trouble. He hid in an alley and shot at me. You need not worry about him. He is leaving this part of the country tonight, never to come back.’

‘Did you—kill him?’ she asked quickly, her heart a-flutter.

‘No. I advised him to leave. He will go. You can forget him.’

She flung out her hands in despair. ‘That’s just it. Things like that. You are in danger all the time.’

‘That troubles you?’ he questioned.

‘Of course it troubles me.’ A glowing color poured into her cheeks. ‘Didn’t you ask me once if—if a husband couldn’t be a friend too?’

‘A husband could even be a lover,’ he said, ‘if it wasn’t in the agreement that he was only a foreman.’

Her eyes held to his. She had a sudden sense of stilled pulses followed by a clamor of beating drums. Then she was in his arms.

CHAPTER XXX

AT THE END OF A WAGON TONGUE

THE two men rode through a patch of greasewood to the end of a spur which looked down upon a little oasis in the desert. Evidently there was subsoil water here, for in the valley hemmed in by low cowbacked hills the ground was green with alfalaria. Against the bluff at the far side of the park were a sod house, a corral of thorny ocotillo, and a barn built of sahuaro poles and mud.

‘Looks like some nester had settled here onct and gave it up,’ the younger man said. He was almost a boy, still red-cheeked, with only a soft blond down on his face.

His companion was Rusty Hunter. They had ridden down close to the deserted homestead. The roof of the sod house had caved in and there were gaps in the corral.

‘He settled here and he gave it up,’ Rusty said significantly. ‘There was a spring, and he put in a windmill and did some irrigating. He was a young fellow no older than you, Morse. Name of Reineke. Soon as he got things to growing, he was figuring on getting married and bringing his girl up here. Only he didn’t.’

‘Why didn’t he?’ Morse asked.

The old man’s faded eyes came back from surveying the landscape to the cowpuncher by his side.

‘He disappeared.’

‘Disappeared?’

‘He was in Chet Radbourne’s way. Chet wanted the spring and the grass for his stock. He served notice to Reineke to skedaddle. But the nester was a German, and some obstinate. This was his property, taken up lawfully, and he figured on staying, he said. Chet tried to scare him out, but he had sand in his craw. Well, like I said, he disappeared.’

‘Maybe he lost his nerve and lit out.’

‘No, sir. The girl wrote out. He hadn’t been seen back there from where he came. He never was seen again.’

‘You reckon Chet had him dry-gulched?’

‘Do yore own guessing, son. He started to town to file his final proofs, but he never got there. Maybe a hydrophobia skunk bit him.’

‘I’ll bet that skunk’s name was Radbourne.’

‘You couldn’t get me to bet with you on that.’ Rusty’s gaze had rested on a small bunch of grazing cattle. ‘There’s a two-year-old over there would do, boy.’

They were out to get meat for the camp.

‘With the Circle 3 T brand,’ Morse said.

‘Meat with that brand tastes sweeter to me than any other,’ the oldtimer said placidly.

‘But Cole told us not to kill any of Chet’s stuff.’

‘What Cole don’t know won’t hurt him none.’

Rusty rode forward and raised his rifle. At the crack of the gun the steer fell.

The men dismounted and started to skin the animal. They would carry only the hind quarters back to camp.

The old man stopped work, knife poised in hand. ‘Looky here, boy. Here’s something funny. This brand has been blotted. Notice how the hair hasn’t hardly grown yet round the circle and the upper part of the 3 and the T. By jacks, the original brand was a Lazy B. That’s what it was. Some more of Chet’s dirty work. The old scalawag has been stealing our stock. He’s nothing but a damned rustler.’

The indignation of Rusty was so genuine that Morse grinned. Evidently Hunter considered there was a moral distinction between rustlers. To prey on the enemy was one thing, to steal from a girl quite another.

‘I’m gonna take this part of the hide back to Cole,’ Rusty said. ‘My idea would be for him to nail it on the courthouse wall. A kind of Exhibit A, you understand. It won’t do Chet any good.’

Morse heard a sound and looked up quickly. A man on horseback was on a grassy knoll about sixty yards away. The young man glanced round. His eyes picked up two other riders. All of them carried rifles.

‘Reach for the sky,’ one of the men called to them.

There was no help for it. The rifles of the men skinning the steer lay on the ground half a dozen yards away. They might as well have been stacked in an armory at Santa Fe or Denver. Four hands were lifted reluctantly.

The men with the rifles rode forward. They kept their captives covered every instant. One of them swung from the saddle, bowlegged to the prisoners, and relieved them of their revolvers.

Rusty nodded to the leader, a big ugly man with a scowling face. 'Can't say I'm glad to see you under these circumstances, Jerry,' he said.

Haskell swore violently. 'Rustling. Caught in the act. A rope round yore gullets is what you need and what you'll get.' There was savage triumph in his voice.

The old man continued to chew his cud of tobacco. 'You got us wrong, Jerry,' he said equably. 'We ain't either one of us rustlers. I'm old enough to be yore daddy, I reckon, and I never blocked a brand or ran one over, nor never bought a wet horse. My eyes ain't what they onct were, and maybe I didn't read the brand right. Anyone is liable to make a mistake.'

'You've made yore last, you old rascal,' Haskell jeered. 'Tie 'em up, boys. We'll drift back to the ranch and see what Chet has got to say.'

'Chet will be reasonable,' Rusty said. 'I been in tights a heap worse than this. Onct when I was gathering bones near Dodge after the buffalo days _____',

'Slip a rope round their necks,' the foreman ordered. 'I'd drag 'em at our horses' heels if I had time, but I want to get to the Circle 3 T soon as I can. These birds will wish they had never been born before we're through with them.'

The warm color had deserted the cheeks of Morse. He knew that Rusty was making talk to ease the strain, but he had no hope the old fellow could talk Radbourne out of his vengeance. The young fellow walked to his horse firmly enough, but already a sickness was creeping over him. The pleasant sunshine no longer held any heat. A chill ran down his back.

The prisoners were lifted to their saddles. Due westward the party rode, as straight for the Circle 3 T as the contour of the country would permit.

'Don't you weaken, son,' Rusty said to his companion. 'They haven't stopped our clocks yet, not by a jugful. Cole will cut loose his dog 'soon as he learns what has happened.'

'Yes,' the boy agreed huskily.

It was all very well to talk, he thought, but long before Sanborn knew they were missing, Radbourne and Haskell would blot them out. Neither of the Circle 3 T men would forget the part they had had in humiliating them.

They rode the hills across a land creased by draws. From the summits, as far as the eye could see, the long swells stretched like waves of an ocean. Once they saw a small band of antelope moving through the mesquite. The riders left the miles behind them. A horseman in the chaparral watched the party pass. He chose not to make his presence known.

At the Circle 3 T, Haskell strode into the ranch-house and summoned his chief.

‘Come here, Chet,’ he roared, ‘if you would like to take a look at a couple of wolves I’ve got roped out in front.’

Radbourne shambled to the porch. His little eyes gleamed with triumphant malice.

‘Where did you jump them up?’ he asked.

‘Found ’em skinning a Circle 3 T steer at the old Reineke place.’

‘Rustlers, eh? Well, they know what happens to cattle thieves in this country when caught,’ Radbourne gloated.

A cold prickling of the skin ran over Morse. He opened his parched lips to mention that the steer had originally been a Lazy B calf, but he caught sight of Rusty frowning at him. It came to the boy that to mention this incriminating fact would be to seal his fate. Radbourne would never let them live if he thought they had evidence of brand-blotting against him.

‘Now, Chet, that ain’t any way to talk,’ Rusty remonstrated amiably. ‘We ain’t rustlers. You know that dog-goned well. Like I told Jerry, I’m some near-sighted and read the brand wrong.’

‘You’ll hang just the same,’ Radbourne retorted cruelly. ‘Don’t I know you both? Didn’t I see you here the other day with that villain Sanborn? Would you try to tell me you don’t belong to his gang?’

‘We been riding with him a few days,’ Rusty admitted. ‘That’s true. But, dad-gum it, we never done you any meanness, Chet. When we had the dead wood on you, we didn’t hurt you a bit. Let’s be reasonable about this.’

‘I’ll be reasonable,’ Radbourne said, showing his bad teeth in an evil grin. ‘You’re outlaws and rustlers. I’ll hang you reasonably to a wagon tongue. This country will be well rid of you both.’

‘The quicker the sooner,’ Haskell said callously. ‘Prop up that wagon tongue, boys. You first, Rusty. We got to pay a proper deference to age.’

‘Don’t push on the reins, Jerry,’ Rusty suggested, still chewing his quid evenly. ‘Time is one thing we all got plenty of. I’ve knowed many a man’s

sixgun go off half-cocked who rued it later. Any fool can take life, but even God Almighty doesn't bring it back onct its gone.'

'All right. I'll give you a chance,' Radbourne said. 'If you will lead us to the place where Sanborn is camped, I won't hang you, but will turn you over to the authorities.'

The washed-out eyes of Rusty met steadily the small black ones of the Circle 3 T owner.

'That's a subject on which I've got no information,' he said.

'You'd better have,' Radbourne snarled, and spat out a vile epithet. 'You're going to talk, or have that scrawny gullet burned with a rope. Better men than you have tried to stand up to me and yelled for mercy before I got through with them.'

'I'm brush-bred, and I don't scare, Chet,' Rusty told him quietly. 'I learned when I first turned waddy to hold up my end or turn in my string of horses.'

'We'll find out about that,' the fat man sneered. 'String him up, boys.'

The man called Hank spoke to Radbourne in a low voice. Chet looked at the younger prisoner. The face of the boy was colorless.

'Wait a minute,' Radbourne said, with a te-he of mocking laughter. 'Here's a game young cock will find his tongue and tell us where Sanborn is roosting. Say your piece, young fellow.'

From a dry throat Morse murmured that he did not know where Sanborn was just now.

'You'll tell me or you will hang,' Radbourne flung at him furiously. 'Don't play with me, you poor fool.'

'Don't be a hog, Chet,' Rusty cut in. 'One of us is enough. If it has got to be, hang me and let this boy go. Don't you see he's only a kid?'

'Are you going to talk?' Radbourne demanded of the boy angrily. 'Or hang?'

Young Morse was sick with fear. He thought of Reineke, blotted out of life when he had everything to live for. It would be that way with him. He would never again see the sun rising over the hills. He would never ride along the high trails with the cool wind blowing in his face. Not ever again would he kiss a girl. His mother would wait for his letters . . . and wait . . .

Again Rusty intervened. 'If you and Haskell do this, Chet, I wouldn't give either of you a week to live. Cole will get you both, and these warriors of yours, too, sure as two nickels make a dime.'

Radbourne slammed a fat fist down on the railing of the porch. ‘Last chance, fellow!’ he shouted at Morse. ‘Which is it to be? I’m through fooling with you.’

Morse looked at the propped-up wagon tongue. The landscape tilted upward. His body swayed, so that the man holding the other end of the rope had to steady him. Waves of nausea swept through him.

‘I . . . don’t know where Cole is at,’ he gasped, summoning the last remnants of his resolution.

‘Suits me if it does you, Mr. Rustler,’ Radbourne said. ‘We’ll get that business out of the way right now, Jerry.’

Someone put an arm under the elbow of Morse and began to propel him toward the wagon. The young fellow looked at Radbourne piteously. The ranch-owner was smiling, but his smile was malignant.

Morse cried out a strangled word. ‘Wait.’

The boss of the Circle 3 T lifted a fat clammy hand to stop the procession. ‘Your memory better?’ he asked, sneering at the young man.

‘I’ll . . . tell what I know,’ Morse said brokenly.

‘You’d better know enough. No playing horse with me. I’d as soon bump off a fool like you as take a drink, if you get in my way. Listen. Do you know where Sanborn is?’

‘Y-yes.’

‘And you’ll lead my men there?’

‘Yes.’

‘If you don’t, you’ll be riddled with lead.’ An unholy triumph lit the evil, pasty face of Radbourne. ‘Tote this old coot Rusty to the bunkhouse. You, Bill, tie him up there and guard him. Four more of you stay here close to your guns. Jerry, take all the rest of the men you can gather and go with this young squirt. If his actions look bad to you any time, you know what to do. Round up Sanborn and his gang. Don’t take any chances. If they resist, mow them down. You don’t have to bring them in alive. Dead will suit me just as well.’

Rusty was taken to the bunkhouse and fastened to a heavy staple in the wall. Through the window he could see men roping and saddling. In a cloud of dust they swept past noisily and vanished. For a minute he could hear the diminishing clatter of the hoofs. Then the last faint tinkle died away.

The heart of the oldtimer was heavy. Sanborn and his men would be surprised and shot down. Chet would be top dog again, as he had been for

years before Cole challenged his supremacy. Well, that would not matter to old Rusty, he told himself bitterly. He would not live to see the evil days that would come upon Boone County. Probably the story given out by Chet would be that he had been shot with a gun in his hand trying to escape.

The guard sitting on the bunk next to the one upon which Rusty lay rolled and lit a cigarette.

‘Might as well take it easy. I don’t reckon you’ll be paying us a long visit, but you’re an old vinegaroon, and I don’t reckon you got much ahead of you anyhow,’ he said callously.

‘Old nothing,’ retorted Rusty, with energy. ‘To hear some of you one-gallus brakemen talk, I must of come out to this country when the Chiricahuas were a hole in the ground.’

‘You’re old enough to know better than to buck Radbourne, even if you are only eighty or ninety. We got you and yore friend Sanborn where the wool is short.’ He spoke with rancor. ‘That geezer has been putting on lugs long enough. I don’t reckon he’ll ever reach this ranch alive. He druv the last nail in his coffin the other day when he pulled the funny business on us. Making us walk. Jerry ain’t liable to forget that.’

The lean jaws of the prisoner moved evenly. He aimed at a knothole six feet away and scored a center shot with tobacco juice. ‘I never did see such birds for counting up yore chickens before they are hatched as you Circle 3 T roosters. Betcha four bits to a plug of tobacco you don’t get Cole dead or alive.’

Rusty spoke with a manner of sprightly confidence not reflected in his thoughts.

‘Take you,’ the guard said promptly. ‘’Course it won’t make no difference to you whether we get him or not. Either way of it you’re a dead ’possum.’

‘By jacks, I’ll live to tromp the ground down on yore grave,’ Rusty flung back in his high falsetto.

The guard laughed. He had his own opinion about that.

CHAPTER XXXI
COLE GUESSES

A VOICE shouted. 'Hello the camp! 'Lo, Cole—Dunc! It's Art Simmons. I'm coming up.'

'Swing to the left,' Cole answered. 'The trail is better.'

A small brown man in chaps with an unshaven face like a bristly brush wound up among the rocks.

'Bad news for you 'uns,' he said bluntly. 'I was in the brush when a bunch of Radbourne's men passed. Jerry Haskell was with them. They had two prisoners. One of 'em was Rusty Hunter.'

This was a jarring blow. McCoy was the first to speak.

'The other must have been young Morse.'

'Were they headed for the Circle 3 T ranch?' Cole asked.

'Straight as a crow flies.'

'Any of them see you?'

'No, sir. I took good care of that.' Simmons had not finished his story. 'I lit out soon as it was safe to bring word to you. Had to pass through the Reineke place. Well, sir, I found a dead steer there. Shot today. Partly skinned.'

'The boys were out after meat,' Dave Pope explained.

From his saddlebags Simmons drew a piece of fresh hide. 'This was jammed kinda under the steer. I'm wondering if Rusty shoved it there when he found Haskell had got him.'

Cole examined the bit of hide. Upon it was the Circle 3 T brand. But that was not all he read there. The brand had been blotted over another one. The first one was the Lazy B.

'What will Chet do with the boys?' Pope asked.

Slim laughed, without mirth. He, too, had been examining the branded bit of hide. 'Ask a harder one, Dave. Jerry will know from the earmarks it was a steer claimed by his outfit. Chet will hang the boys as rustlers. That will give him a good excuse. Or if he is scared to do that, he'll pull the old one of shooting them while they are trying to escape.'

Cole's mind swept over the probabilities. When he looked up, his harsh face was bleak.

'Will he do that right away, Slim?' he inquired. 'You know the old fox, maybe better than I do. Won't he first try to get out of them information about our hide-out?'

Slim assented. 'That's right. He'll sweat that out of the boys if he can.'

'And I reckon he can,' Cole added, thinking aloud. 'Morse is only a kid. Likely he'll break down. I wouldn't blame him if he did. Then what will Chet do?'

'He'll start his warriors out to collect our scalps.'

'Not knowing we've been warned by Art.'

'That's right,' Slim nodded. 'We're one up on the old wolf there.'

'We would be if Rusty and the kid weren't his prisoners,' Cole corrected. 'Our first job is to save them. How?'

'Bust straight for the ranch. Rescue the boys. Jerry and his crowd will be high-tailin' it over the hills to get us.'

'So they will, if we've got this guessed right. But where will Rusty and Morse be? Jerry isn't going to start for us without a guide.'

'That's so,' Pete Daggett spoke up. 'D-dad-gum it, we got to mix with Jerry's bunch of w-warriors first.'

'Where? On the plains, with them two or three to one against us. That would be bad medicine. We might get three-four of them, but they would come pretty nearly wiping us out.'

'T-that's right, too,' Pete admitted. 'W-what's the matter with sticking right here in camp where we got rocks for cover?'

Cole shook his head. 'We've got to strike first—and hard. I want a prisoner, so I can come back at them and say if they hurt our boys we'll retaliate. Who would be the best one to round up?'

'If I had my ruthers I would gather in Jerry—or the old man himself,' Slim said. 'But of course that's just talk. We'll have to take whoever we can get, if any, don't you reckon?'

'Would it stop Radbourne if we captured one or two of his men? The old scoundrel would play his hand just the same, wouldn't he?'

'Y'betcha,' Slim replied promptly. 'He'd sacrifice them quick as he would a couple of worn-out Broomtails.'

‘My opinion, too,’ Cole said. ‘I say let us try to make a good gather, boys. We’ll try to get Radbourne himself. Let’s pack our stuff, catch, and get going.’

While the others were catching the mounts, saddling, and putting the camp equipment on pack-animals, Cole was writing a note.

It read:

You and your boys have a nice picnic among the rocks, Jerry. Don’t let any diamond-backs bite you. Remember, we’ll be watching you every minute. If you do any harm to Hunter or Morse, I’ll skin you alive. This goes for your whole bunch. See you later.

COLE SANBORN

He weighted the note down with a large rock on a conspicuous flat boulder.

Before they started, Cole had a word for his men.

‘If I’ve guessed this thing wrong, boys, I’ll only be leading you into a trap. Now is the time to drop out if any one of you doesn’t want to take a chance.’

Dave Pope looked at him irritably. ‘Fellow, what do you take us for? We’ll go from hell to breakfast to help the boys. Push on, you dog-goned idjit.’

‘I only mentioned it,’ Cole said apologetically. ‘There’s liable to be ructions before we’re through.’

Cole did not ride straight for the Circle 3 T. He did not want to meet the party sent from the ranch to get him. The group followed a wide circle among the hills. It swung through defiles, up steep slopes, across sunbaked mesas. Whether the men were in heavy chaparral or on shale ridges Cole knew exactly where he was going. This country was as familiar to him as a spelling-book is to a teacher.

Though they traveled fast, Cole could not outride his apprehensions. There hung heavy over him a premonition of trouble brewing. The other day at Big Pine Point he had outguessed and outgenerated Radbourne. But the old scoundrel was a wily fox. He had got where he was by the shrewd, unscrupulous way in which he had duped others; by that, plus the ruthlessness which had never hesitated to destroy anyone interfering with his plans. It was not likely that he would be caught napping a second time.

In single file the riders emerged from a gorge to the plateau above. Dave and Slim moved forward to ride beside Cole.

‘We’re going to be in time, wouldn’t you say?’ Dave said, voicing the fear in his heart. ‘The old toad wouldn’t do the boys a meanness right off. He’d play his hand more careful than that, I’d figure.’

‘We don’t know what he would do,’ Cole said gloomily. ‘All we can do is guess.’

‘I’d hate for anything to happen to that old donker Rusty. Or the kid either for that matter.’ Dave essayed a manner entirely casual, to cover his feeling. ‘It’s kinda fun having the old gazabo around and listening to his windys. I run on him just to get him started on new ones.’

Cole turned abruptly to Slim. ‘Am I making a mistake? I don’t want to butt into a nest of guns waiting for us. Have I got this worked out right? The way it looks to me, there are two big *ifs* in this problem, assuming that Haskell took our boys to the ranch and didn’t hang them when he came to the first tree. The first is this: Would Morse weaken? I’ll leave Rusty out of it. I doubt if Chet could get a word from him. But Morse is another proposition. He hasn’t been long in this country. Could he go through what Chet would put him up against?’

‘Don’t think so,’ Slim answered. ‘Chet is one devil spewed out of hell. When young Morse feels a redhot branding-iron against his bare feet, he will break down. I have watched that boy. Not meaning to knock him or anything, my opinion is he couldn’t stand the gaff. He’ll come through with the information Chet wants.’

‘That is what I think,’ Cole said.

‘Me too,’ Dave corroborated.

‘All right. If Haskell took the boys to the ranch—and it looks like he did—Radbourne would make them sweat blood until he got what he wanted.’

‘What he would want would be the spot where we were camping,’ Dave said.

‘Right. When he got it, what would he do?’ Cole threw up a hand to forestall a possible comment. ‘Yes, I know we’ve been all over that. But I don’t want to overlook any sleeper. Put yourself in his place. What would you do?’

‘I’d tell Haskell to burn the wind getting to our camp,’ Dave replied promptly. ‘And I’d made it stick out like a sore thumb that I wanted our whole outfit wiped out.’

Cole looked at Slim.

Calhoun nodded. 'Dave has about said it. That's what I would do, too, if I was as black-hearted a villain as Chet. Only there's one more thing I would do. I'd make sure enough men stayed at the ranch with me to protect me against another surprise attack.'

'How many would he keep there?' Cole asked.

'Not so many. He couldn't. Chet can't keep all his riders around the ranch eating their heads off. He has to have the cattle looked after. I've never known him to have more than a dozen or so there. Of course there's a chance he has called back the lads from the Lazy B. Say he can get hold of fifteen right off. He might send ten of them off to get us. The other five he would have sit tight where they are at, with their guns handy, to look after Mr. Chet Radbourne's hide. He made a mistake once about that. He won't do it again. Where you are concerned, he's gun-shy. You've got him buffaloed. He will play safe.'

'So we can figure we're going up against as big a crowd as we are, if we are lucky; if not, about three times as many. That's a sweet outlook. You know the lay of the ranch, Slim. How would you approach?'

'I would come through the live oaks back of the house, cut the wire fence, and take the last hundred yards on the jump.'

'We'll try it that way,' Cole decided.

The black-haired Texan grinned. 'I don't give any written guaranty with my advice, Cole. They may empty our saddles before we reach the house. If anyone has a better idea, it will be all right with me.'

Art Simmons rode forward and joined them. 'I'll be leaving you here,' he said. 'Luck, and lots of it.'

'Wait a minute.' Cole wrote in a notebook with the stub of an old pencil, tore out the sheet, and handed it to Simmons. 'Give that to my wife, Art, if anything happens to me. Otherwise, hold it till I see you.'

The nester nodded. 'I'll be pulling for you, Cole. Most everyone but the rascals in Boone County are for you now. This looks like a crazy business to me, but if anyone can make it stick it will be you.'

Simmons turned and rode off. He had a wife and three children. Once he looked back at the five men dropping over the hill. He was glad he was not one of them. His opinion was that most of Cole's men would be wiped out before sunset and the rest of them would be flying into the hills for their lives. Cole was a good man all right, but this time he had bit off more than he could chew.

CHAPTER XXXII

RADBOURNE WAVES A WHITE FLAG

RADBOURNE sat in front of his desk, the great body of the man slumped together like that of some huge invertebrate. The beady eyes had a staring, glassy look. His mind was spinning one of the webs that meant destruction for his enemies.

The owner of the Circle 3 T realized he was in danger. The rebellion against his rule was spreading fast. Unless he quelled it, evidence could be found that might put him in the penitentiary. Peters had raked up a lot of scandal connected with various political deals he had maneuvered. For one thing there was the courthouse building contract. Radbourne had made a fifteen-thousand-dollar rake-off on that. Some fool had failed to destroy a memorandum which showed it. There were road pacts and bond issues put over contrary to law. It would never do to let these go to a grand jury investigation. Judge Fairley was weakening. He was afraid of prison himself and could not be depended upon to go through against the rising tide of resentment showing itself everywhere.

Sanborn was the spear-point of the revolt. His exploits lent courage to all those who would like to see the big boss defeated. With him out of the way, rubbed out by the man they feared and hated, the opposition would melt like snow in warm sunshine and wind.

This time Jerry Haskell would wipe out the Sanborn gang. He would probably surprise them in their camp and mow them down before they had a chance to fight back. At the worst he would defeat them, kill two or three, and scatter the rest in the brush. What Radbourne hoped for was that Sanborn, trying to rally his men, would be riddled with bullets.

If not, the thing to do would be to have the Peters house watched. Some night Sanborn would try to steal in to see his wife. He could be shot down by any man with a little nerve. Curt Jordan would have been the fellow to do it if he had not got drunk and played the fool. But there were others ready to take a chance for a thousand bucks or . . .

The crack of a rifle lifted him to his feet. He heard the blast of guns, swift as the popping of firecrackers. Through the window he caught sight of horsemen charging the house from the live oaks. One saddle was empty. A man had been shot from it. He saw a rider drag his mount to a halt, leap to

the ground, pick up the body of his fallen comrade, and stagger forward with it.

Radbourne reached into a desk. As the door of the room burst open he fired. The man in the doorway stared at him, blank surprise in his shocked eyes, then staggered forward to fall heavily upon the desk. The owner of the Circle 3 T cursed. He had shot too soon and killed one of the men set to guard him.

It seemed to him that the room filled instantly. Sanborn he saw, and Slim Calhoun. Also Dunc McCoy. His heart went down like a plummet into icy water. All of them were enemies, men marked for death by him at one time or another. Hurriedly he tossed his revolver upon the desk.

‘I’m unarmed!’ he cried. ‘Don’t kill me, boys.’

‘Where are our friends, Rusty Hunter and young Morse?’ Cole asked.

‘Rusty is in the bunkhouse, Cole. We haven’t hurt him a mite. Morse is riding with the boys.’

Cole did not ask where they were riding. ‘How many of your men with Haskell?’ he demanded.

‘Eight. I sent ’em out to——’

‘How many here at the ranch?’

‘Six. Now, looky here, Cole. I ain’t and never have been looking for trouble. You’re such an all-fired trouble-hunter yourself you can’t understand a peaceable man like me. I sent Jerry to have a conference with you because he caught two of your boys skinning a Circle 3 T beef. I figured that you would want to know so you could——’

Through the open door Slim saw Daggett carrying the body of Dave Pope.

‘Dave dead?’ he asked.

‘N-not when I p-picked him up. He’s done f-fainted now. Where is there a b-bed?’

‘I’ll show you,’ Slim said, and led the way down the hall.

Pete followed, the feet of the lank puncher dragging on the ground.

Cole spoke to McCoy. ‘I’m going to have a look at Dave’s wound, Dunc. Watch this rat. If he tries to get away, shoot him down as he did his own man. I’ll send one of the boys back to keep an eye on those in the bunkhouse.’

‘What is the idea of you boys jumping me this way, McCoy?’ Radbourne asked when they were alone. ‘I’m trying to ’tend to my own business and you pester me all the time.’

McCoy looked at him with disgust and scorn. ‘Man, I never saw your like as a liar. What’s the sense in talking that way to me? Was I pestering you when you ran me from my homestead? Was I pestering you when you set Gildea on to murder me?’

‘You’re wrong about that, McCoy. I offered to buy your claim, and whatever Gildea did was on his own. I hadn’t anything to do with it.’

Slim came into the room. He looked at the body of the dead man lying across the desk.

‘Makes two for our side,’ he said coolly. In explanation to Radbourne, he added: ‘There’s another lying on the porch, the man they call Hank. He shot down Dave, so it is even steven as far as he is concerned.’

‘Any chance for Dave?’ asked McCoy.

‘Don’t know. He got it in the right lung. Cole is trying to fix him up.’

Radbourne shook his head mournfully. ‘All this gunplay is bad medicine. I don’t like it.’

‘Except when your side does it,’ Slim replied.

Calhoun walked to the window and looked cautiously at the bunkhouse. ‘The boys over there seem to have got over their fogging. Quiet as a prayer-meeting now,’ he continued. ‘It will be too bad for you, Chet, if they pull any trouble.’

After a time Cole returned. He found Radbourne explaining what a good citizen he was and how much he wished his captors well.

‘I can’t understand what I’ve ever done for you fellows to run on me so,’ he complained. ‘I have enemies who go around black-naming me, and you boys believe everything you hear.’

‘I’ll give you a chance to show how well-meaning you are,’ Cole told him grimly. He passed a white handkerchief to the prisoner. ‘You are going out to be a messenger of peace. Order the boys in the bunkhouse to turn over Rusty to you. Every second you will be under three rifles. If you make a break—if you don’t bring back Rusty with you, that will be good-bye for you. Understand! You will go halfway to the bunkhouse, and then you will stop.’

‘Can I go on to the bunkhouse if the boys send Rusty out?’

‘No. You’re coming back with him. Maybe you have forgotten that you are our ace in the hole, Chet. For a while I’m going to stick closer to you than any brother.’

‘You got no right to act this way, Cole,’ Radbourne protested. ‘You ought to know that you are getting in bad with the law when you pull high-handed stuff like this. By rights, I ought to refuse to do what you are asking me.’

‘I’m not asking you,’ corrected Cole. ‘I’m telling you.’

‘Better waddle along,’ Slim suggested cheerfully. ‘Take a chance. Maybe we won’t plug you in the back after you have delivered the message, Chet. You can’t ever tell. All you know is that you’re going to turn up yore toes to the daisies if you don’t do like Cole tells you.’

Radbourne moistened his lips with his tongue. He slid an oblique look from Slim to Sanborn.

‘You aren’t aiming to kill me while I carry a white flag, Cole,’ he whined.

‘Not if you come through and don’t try any shenanigan. You’re worth more to me alive. Get going.’

‘We ought to fix up any difficulty there is between us, Cole, and not get into all this killing,’ Radbourne said virtuously. ‘Here you come jumping my ranch for no reason at all. Consequence is two of my boys have been killed already and one of yours wounded. That’s bad. If we don’t come to an understanding there will be more bloodshed. What I say is, let’s drop this helling around and show we’re decent citizens in a law-abiding country. It’s not right to slaughter human beings like you are doing.’

Slim spoke, drawling out his words: ‘And this same mangy son-of-a-gun offered me fifteen hundred dollars to bushwhack you, Cole, and when I told him where to get off at pumped lead at me till I was out of range.’

‘You’re mistaken, Slim,’ the ranchman explained in an oily voice. ‘I said there was a reward of fifteen hundred dollars for the fellow who led the express robbers, and my notion was it would be a good thing for you to find out who did it and arrest him, so we could have it all cleared up and Cole wouldn’t be suspected. Now wasn’t that what I said?’

‘Can you beat that?’ Slim asked, turning to Cole. ‘And I reckon after I turned down yore generous offer, Chet, you was just practicing when you whanged away at me.’

‘I was trying to scare you because you had been impudent to me. That was all.’ Radbourne appealed to Cole. ‘I want peace, boy, all the time.’

‘Too much talk, Chet. Step along. Carry out with you the body of the man you killed. You can tell your boys they can come and get the two bodies. We won’t hurt them while they are doing it if they don’t bring rifles with them. One thing more. Have them pass the word to Haskell when he arrives that if he hurts Morse we shall certainly get him if it is the last thing we ever do. Might as well explain, too, that we shall be sticking around a while, and if they did happen to storm the house and take it, they would have to order a large-size coffin for their late lamented master.’

‘I don’t believe that for a minute, Cole,’ Radbourne replied. ‘You’re too square a man to make me pay for something these crazy gunmen did against my wishes. But I’ll take your messages.’

Radbourne waved the handkerchief vigorously before exposing his great bulk on the porch. He did not want a second man on his side to be killed by mistake, not if the man was Chet Radbourne. Presently he sidled out, dragging with him the inert body of the man he had shot. Almost at once he began to shout to his men not to shoot, that he wanted to have a talk with them. Two or three times he stopped, panting, to rest. He looked back nervously at the house. With three rifles in the hands of the enemy trained on him, he felt far from comfortable. One of these men he had injured might decide impulsively to even the score.

In the no man’s land between the two houses, Radbourne halted and waved his flag again. At a corner of an opened window in the bunkhouse a head appeared cautiously.

‘We’re listening, Chet,’ a voice called.

‘First off, boys, Cole says you can pick up the bodies of the two men he has killed. You won’t be shot at while you’re doing it if you don’t carry rifles with you.’

‘He wouldn’t fool us?’

‘No, I don’t think he would. Then I want you to turn over Rusty to me.’

‘A swap of prisoners. That the idea?’

‘No. I have to go back to the house. I hate to do it, but he has me covered.’

‘What kind of a trade would that be?’ Bill demanded. ‘Sanborn sure has a gall. He’s the one in a hole, not us. I’ve done sent a man after Jerry. Why, dad-gum it, soon as the boys get here we’ll rush the ranch-house and finish this job pronto.’

‘Don’t you do it!’ Radbourne screamed. ‘They would kill me sure, soon as you started. Nothing like that, Bill. No matter what happens. Fix up a deal

to get me away from them first. Well, I got to be going now,' he said ruefully. 'I've got to take Rusty back with me. No two ways about that.'

'If they shoot you we'll hang every last one of 'em soon as we rush the house,' Bill answered. 'He can't get away with any such thing.'

'What good would that do me if I was dead?' Radbourne demanded irritably. 'Get Rusty out to me quick. This isn't my say-so or yours. Sanborn has got hell in the neck, and we've got to do like he says.'

Bill withdrew his head for consultation with his fellows. After a time it reappeared.

'All right, Chet. You're the doctor. If I was doing this, I would give Cole a battle before I turned over our prisoner free gratis. But since you say it's to be thataway, we got no option.'

The door opened and Rusty walked out from the bunkhouse. He joined Radbourne. The oldtimer walked jauntily, chewing tobacco as he strutted forward.

'I could of told you to lay off Cole,' Rusty said jubilantly to Radbourne. 'Some folks are like a watermelon. You can't tell how good they are till you thump them. But Cole—say, after one look in his eye you'd ought to have known his comeback would have a kick like a mule. If you had had a lick of sense, you would have sent me and Morse back with yore compliments and said the war was over. Instead of which you went crazy in the head. Don't say I didn't warn you. I said Cole would round you up inside of a week, and, by jacks, he did it in two hours.'

Radbourne said nothing. He clumped back to the house, his head sullenly down between his heavy rounded shoulders. This fellow Sanborn had all the luck. It was all very well for Bill to talk about rushing the house when Haskell got back. Chet was of opinion that if they did, his riders would find their boss no longer alive.

CHAPTER XXXIII

SMOKED OUT

RUSTY said nonchalantly to Cole: 'Hello, old socks! It's sure been a hundred years since I saw you this morning. This old scalawag here got notions of a necktie party for me and the kid. He made the mistake of postponing it. I just been telling the old diamond-back that opportunity is like a bald-headed man with a beard; you can grab it for a hair holt coming but not going. I'll say this for you, Cole. You certainly came on the jump and all spraddled out. None of you boys hurt?'

'Dave Pope. Shot in the chest. A bad wound. Wish we had a doctor here.' Cole spoke crisply. He had just now no time to waste words.

'Lemme look at him,' Rusty suggested. 'I been doctoring busted buckaroos all my life, even if I ain't any licensed M.D. I would hate to lose that boy. I've took a smile to him, even if he does run on me something scandalous.'

'Hop to it, Rusty, and take care of him,' Cole said.

'The boys in the bunkhouse got a messenger off to Jerry Haskell to tell him to burn the wind back here,' Rusty mentioned. 'If you're aiming to hit the trail, I would say the quicker the sooner.'

'We're staying here,' Cole replied. 'Dave can't be moved, and Morse is still in their hands. I wouldn't put it beyond Haskell to fix it so that Dave would die of his wound if we left him here. No, we've got to hole up here.'

'Suits me,' Rusty said, and departed to look after his patient.

Cole ordered the prisoner tied hard and fast. He did not want him making trouble when the pinch came. Slim superintended the barring of all the doors and windows after several buckets of water had been carried in from the well just back of the house. He reported to Cole that with the meat and vegetables brought in from the root house there was food enough for two or three days.

'By that time,' Calhoun concluded, with his intrepid grin, 'we either won't be needing food or we'll be where we can get it.'

'Right you are,' McCoy agreed. 'Though I wouldn't give three cheers about it.'

‘My dad was in the siege of Vicksburg,’ Slim explained. ‘I’ve stood at his knee and heard him tell about it, so I reckon it’s in my blood to want to have a siege of my own to brag about to my kids.’

‘If you live to have any,’ McCoy added dryly.

‘I’ve never been bumped off yet, and I’m betting my luck will stand up,’ the Texan answered cheerfully. ‘I aim to have six boys and four girls, the same as my parents did.’ He added, to forestall what McCoy might be about to retort: ‘Sure, you hope I’ll have better luck than they did, if the ornery offspring you’ve seen is a fair sample. The answer to that is, I’m the black sheep of the bunch.’

Cole went over the house, studying it from the point of view of defense. ‘We’ll have tough sledding,’ he told his men. ‘Haskell will call in every rider on the Circle 3 T payroll. There will be five of us and over thirty of them. But we’ll have two advantages. One of them is that we hold Radbourne a prisoner. The other is that we are under cover, and to get us they will have to come out into the open. They can wipe us out, if they want to pay the price. But it will come high for them. When they find out how high, they may give up and quit.’

‘You figure they will attack us, anyhow, even with Chet in our hands?’ McCoy asked.

‘Haskell will certainly try to collect us now he has us trapped. If he didn’t he would lose face in this country. He will take a chance on us injuring Radbourne. There is no love lost between him and his boss anyhow.’

‘W-what’s the m-matter with you fellows lighting out?’ Pete Daggett wanted to know. ‘Dave and I been side-kicks ever since we were kids. I’ll stay with him. Haskell has got nothing particular against me. I don’t reckon he would do me a meanness, anyhow not when you have Radbourne a prisoner.’

‘That is just what we don’t know, Pete,’ replied Cole. ‘I would hate to guess what goes on in that sulky mean mind of Haskell. If I took you up on that proposition, we would be leaving three of our friends in his hands. Too big a risk. Maybe he wouldn’t ask any better than to have us finish off his boss. No, boys. As we stand we’re a pretty strong combination. If we split up, we’re only a bunch of hunted men on the dodge in the scrub.’

‘And what about our horses?’ McCoy asked. ‘Soon as Haskell gets here he will send men back into the live oaks to shoot our mounts so that we can’t get away on them if we make a break.’

‘We shall have to unsaddle and turn the horses loose,’ Cole said. ‘I don’t like to do it. We’ll be burning our bridges. But we can’t let the animals be shot down.’

Slim and Pete walked out to the back porch where the horses were tied. They unsaddled the geldings and freed them. The saddles they carried into the house.

After that the hours dragged. The men tightened the defenses. McCoy cooked dinner. Potatoes, ham, eggs, biscuits, and coffee disappeared down the throats of the diners with amazing rapidity. They lived outdoors, and their appetites were voracious.

‘The c-condemned man ate a h-hearty breakfast of burned p-potatoes and s-soggy biscuits,’ Pete said, scooping two more eggs to his plate.

McCoy eyed him malevolently. ‘You don’t like this grub, young fellow?’ he asked.

Daggett knew the old camp rule. If anyone complained about the food, he did the cooking. Hastily he offered an amendment to his previous remark.

‘S-sure I l-like it, Dunc. I never could stand p-potatoes that aren’t burned nor b-biscuits cooked clear through.’

Someone outside gave a triumphant yell. Cole was lookout man at the moment and he conveyed information to the others.

‘Arrival of Mr. Jerry Haskell and his bunch of warriors. The kid is still with them. Things will begin to happen right soon, boys. If you have that dinner tucked under your belts you had better get to your posts, don’t you reckon?’

Slim walked to the window. Haskell was swinging from the saddle. They could hear his raucous curse as he dragged Morse to the ground.

‘There he is, big and ugly as life,’ Slim commented viciously. ‘I’d like to plug him right now. I could do it, too, while that bird in the door is telling him we’re here in his little rat trap. You’re too dog-goned lawful, Cole. If I was to bump him off, that would throw the fear into their hearts, especially when Radbourne is in our midst. You know he’ll start in to collect us. Me, I’d start the collecting.’

‘We have to give him his chance, Slim. He won’t take it, but we can’t assume that. If there is to be a war, he will have to start it.’

‘How can he start what is already started? Two of their men are dead, and Dave is a mighty sick Missourian.’

‘Haskell wasn’t in on that. He might be willing to talk turkey.’

‘When he has us bottled here, with the cork drove in!’ Slim laughed derisively. ‘Not little Jerry.’

The riders dismounted and scattered. Some of them vanished into the bunkhouse. Others took cover in the stable.

After a time a man with a white towel emerged from the bunkhouse. He waved it. Cole opened the front door slightly and waved one in return.

The man was Bill. He bowlegged forward, his body looking slender above the wide chaps. In front of the house he stopped.

‘We got you fellows sure,’ he announced. ‘No two ways about that. Fifteen of us here already, and more coming in lickety-split. Jerry says he will give you the best of it. Turn over to us Radbourne and Sanborn and he will let the rest of you go. That is more than you have got any right to expect.’

‘What guaranty have we that he won’t wipe us all out soon as we get out from cover?’ Slim asked.

‘You have his word—and ours.’

‘I don’t reckon anyone could ask for more than that,’ Slim jeered.

‘Say, young fellow, if I was Jerry, you wouldn’t be included in this peace pact after turning traitor the way you did,’ Bill flung back at him angrily. ‘Well, fellows, what is it to be? One way or the other. Make up yore minds.’

‘Get back to Jerry and tell him to turn his wolf loose if he feels like it,’ McCoy cried to the man.

‘And tell him we’ll get a whole passel of you before we’re through, including him,’ Rusty added.

Bill made one more try before leaving. ‘If any one of you wants to quit a bunch of outlaws before the massacree begins, now is the last chance.’

‘S-sashay back to that bunkhouse!’ Daggett shouted. ‘We d-done heard enough. Wouldn’t one of us trust any of you farther than he could sling a bull by the tail.’

Cole himself had not spoken until now, since he had not been included in the offer of amnesty. But he had a last word.

‘Tell Haskell if he injures that boy Morse I’ll never rest till I have his scalp.’

The envoy had had no more than time to turn in his report when there came a blast of guns from the bunkhouse and the stable. Windows in the big house crashed. From the front door splinters flew. A spatter of bullets

against the walls continued. Those inside the ranch-house did not answer the fire.

‘Trying to scare us,’ Rusty said. He patted the sawed-off shotgun in his hand. ‘This old scatter-gun won’t do any talking till she has got something to talk at.’

‘My guess is that Haskell is trying to distract our attention.’ Cole called to Slim, who was guarding the rear, ‘Watch out they don’t charge from the live oaks.’

‘That is what they’re aiming to do,’ Slim answered. ‘Four or five on horseback. Maybe more. Here they come!’ He raised his rifle, took steady aim, and fired. ‘Hi yi yippy yi! Got one.’ His yell had risen in triumphant crescendo.

Cole sent Daggett and McCoy to support Calhoun. Rusty remained to help him defend the front of the house. Smoke began to fill the rooms. All three of those at the rear were firing.

From the bunkhouse there came a yell. Out of that building and out of the stable men poured. They scattered, running toward the house. Cole blazed away at them. Rusty waited till they were nearer before he sent a load of buckshot at them. One of the running men stumbled and went down. The others wavered. Rapidly Cole fired twice more. The attack broke. Like frightened rabbits the Circle 3 T men scuttled back for their warren.

The roar of guns outside had been heavy. Now it died away.

Daggett called excitedly to Cole: ‘They’re s-skedaddling for the l-live oaks.’

Cole walked into the kitchen. Through a peep-hole he saw the last of the horsemen disappearing in the grove. One man, on foot, limping heavily, was dragging himself toward the live oaks. He stopped every few yards to rest, looking back apprehensively at the boarded windows. Out of the woods a man rode swiftly, leaped to the ground, and helped his wounded comrade to the saddle. None of those in the kitchen fired at the rescuer as he ran for cover.

‘That was Bud Calloway,’ Slim said. ‘Bully for Bud. The fellow he picked up was Mex.’

‘Mex is luckier than the one Rusty’s old scatter-gun got,’ Cole told them. ‘He will never ride again.’

Rusty went to the bedroom where his patient lay.

‘You fellows are making a lot of Fourth of July,’ Dave said feebly, with a faint grin. ‘Did you stand ’em off?’

‘Y’betcha! The fireworks won’t be lively again for quite some time. Altogether to date we’ve got four.’ Rusty frowned at Dave. ‘You keep yore mouth shut, fellow. If you stay quiet an’ behave, you’ll make the grade.’

‘That ain’t no ways news to me,’ Dave managed to answer. ‘ ’Course I’ll make it.’ He ended with a fit of coughing.

‘You crazy buckaroo!’ Rusty reproached. ‘Didn’t I warn you?’

The defenders were jubilant.

‘We’ll learn ’em to h-hello the house before they come cavortin’ around,’ Daggett said.

‘Don’t get the idea they are through,’ Cole said. ‘Likely they will lay off us till dark. Then we’ll hear from them again.’

His prediction was true in part at least. The firing died away, flared up intermittently in a listless fashion, became once or twice animated. But none of the attackers showed themselves in the open. They had had their lesson.

The hours wore away. The sun in the copper sky slid down behind the hills. A soft violet glow tinted the range. Dusk fell, and after dusk a night of painted moonlight.

‘Soon now,’ Slim said. ‘Can’t come too quick for me. This waiting makes me goosey.’

He had not long to wait now. In the distance the Circle 3 T men could be seen busying themselves about something which looked like a haystack.

‘I’m going out to find what they are doing,’ Cole announced. ‘If my guess is right, they are fixing to fire the house.’

‘I know the lay of the land better,’ Slim protested. ‘Lemme go.’

Cole shook his head. ‘No. It’s my job. I may come back on the jump. Be ready to let me in.’

He slipped out of a back window where the shadow of the woodshed offered convenient darkness. From here he cut across to the root house. Stretching out his head, he reconnoitered. There did not seem to be anybody in sight. A horse corral built of posts lashed with rawhide ran down one side of the yard toward the stable. Cole dodged to the fence and crept forward along it. He moved very carefully, crouched low to avoid attracting attention. Not far from him was a live oak, under which was the outdoor blacksmith shop. Keeping the trunk of the tree between him and the moving figures, he worked his way to the live oak.

From its cover he could make out more clearly what the Circle 3 T men were doing. They were slowly rolling forward a wagonload of hay. Evidently their intention was to push it to the crest of the slope and send it the last fifty or seventy-five feet of its own momentum. The hay, of course, would be fired before it started down the descent toward the porch.

Someone called for an axe. A man volunteered to get it and moved toward the live oak. The trunk of the tree split, two or three feet from the ground, into two great spreading branches. Cole squatted low, hoping not to be seen.

The man reached the live oak and glanced round, his eyes searching for an axe. Cole saw his body stiffen suddenly. His gaze had fallen on the crouched figure.

The Circle 3 T rider let out a yell, and at the same instant Cole leaped. Too startled to draw a weapon, the fellow fell back a step or two, flinging up an arm to protect himself. Sanborn's revolver moved up and down. The force of the blow broke the defense, and the barrel of the long six-shooter came down heavily on the head of the victim. Helplessly, the man staggered against the forge and sank to the ground.

But his cry had warned those around the hay-wagon. Cole ran for the corral fence. Someone caught sight of him and yelled. A shot rang out. Sanborn raced along the corral. Bullets struck the posts in front of and behind him. The guns of the enemy poured a fusillade in his direction. As he scudded across the open to the root house, he felt a shock in the left shoulder. He knew he had been hit, but he was not thrown out of his stride. From the root house he dashed to the shelter of the woodshed. Through the back window he clambered into the house.

'Didn't get you?' Slim asked quickly.

'No. We've got to get out of here. By the kitchen. They're going to fire the house. We can't stop it. We'll make for the horse corral.' Cole spoke with crisp decision. He had made up his mind while he was edging back along the fence.

'We'll be trapped there,' McCoy said. 'Like rats. Why not try for that clump of live oaks? From there we might work back into the hills if we could stand them off long enough.'

'No. Haskell must have sharpshooters posted there. They would pick off two or three of us before we ever reached the woods. Dunc, you guard Radbourne. Pete and I will carry Dave on a mattress. We'll pile food on top of it. There's a windmill in the corral, so we won't have to take water. Rusty,

you and Slim will have to carry food-packs and guard us if we're rushed. It's not far. If we're lucky, we'll make it.'

Pushed by willing hands back of it, the hay-wagon reached the crest before the defenders were ready to evacuate. It stood there for a few moments while those back of it got the wheels pointed in the direction of the house. The Circle 3 T men were careful not to expose themselves, but Cole stood at the window and fired several times toward the wagon. He knew that those maneuvering the wagon into position would scatter back to safety as soon as it started down the slope. At that precise moment Cole intended that his party should decamp.

The hay flamed up and the wagon gathered momentum. Those back of it scattered like a covey of young quails. Out of the kitchen door the Sanborn group moved. Rusty and Slim went first. Those bearing the wounded man followed. Duncan McCoy and Radbourne came out last.

They had to move slowly, and they were careful not to let themselves get bunched. Slim had dropped back to guard the rear. Cole and Pete had almost reached the root house with their burden before those in the live oaks discovered what was taking place.

A bullet sank into a log of the root-house wall. The crash of guns filled the night. Someone in the escaping party gave a groan. Rusty led the way into the last open stretch, the two with the wounded man at his heels. Momentarily the moon was under a cloud, so that the fire directed at them was loosely aimed.

'Another t-twenty yards,' Daggett said, between his teeth. 'We're gonna m-make it.'

'From the fire into the frying-pan,' Dave told him. 'I wish I wasn't holding back you boys.'

They reached the corral gate and passed inside. Slim dragged it shut and made fast the heavy bolts.

Radbourne slumped down to the ground and groaned.

'Look out for a rush, boys,' Cole ordered. 'I don't reckon they will try it yet, but they might.'

From his post Slim made a comment and asked a question. 'That trip was a hundred miles to me. Anybody hurt?'

'I got plugged in the foot,' Rusty mentioned. 'Lucky for me we didn't have far to go.'

‘I’m shot,’ Radbourne said. ‘In the leg. We’ve got to stop this wickedness and get me a doctor.’

‘Fine,’ Slim said derisively. ‘Only you better tell that to Haskell. This is his battle, not ours.’

‘I’ll bleed to death,’ the owner of the ranch wailed. ‘I’ll let all you boys go if you will quit now. We can’t go on with this. I want a doctor.’

‘So do Dave and Rusty, you yellow coyote,’ McCoy retorted. ‘But you don’t hear them yelping. Get those pants off and let me have a look at yore wound.’

‘I tell you I’ll give orders to my men not to interfere with you,’ Chet insisted.

‘Yes, and a fat lot of attention they would give to yore orders,’ Slim told him. ‘We would be put out of business before we had got twenty yards. Peel down those pants if you want a doc so dog-goned bad. We’ll patch you up after we’ve took care of Rusty and made Dave comfortable.’

Daggett brought hay from the feed-rack and scattered it on the ground close to the fence. Upon this they put the mattress where Dave Pope lay.

‘We gave you a jolty trip, old hoss,’ Daggett said. ‘D-did we s-start your wound to bleeding again?’

Dave grinned at him, cheerfully but feebly. ‘I’m all right. Look after Rusty, or he’ll start a windy on us. I ain’t in any condition to listen to one of the old donker’s stories.’

Already Cole was pulling the boot from the wounded foot of Hunter. Sweat beads stood out on the forehead of the oldtimer, but no sound came from his clenched lips. Cole washed and bound the wound, with the help of Daggett. This finished, they looked after Radbourne’s leg.

McCoy and Caldwell kept guard at the stockade. The posts had been buried in the ground, set very close, and woven together with rawhide thongs. The fence had been modeled from the primitive ones of the early days in the Texas brush country and had been built very strongly to withstand the plunges of wild horses. Against the solid timbers bullets thudded, for the attackers kept up a sporadic bombardment. Occasionally Slim or Dunc answered the challenge through their loopholes.

The porch of the house was crackling and long flames shooting skyward, for the hay-wagon had rolled straight to its destination. The Circle 3 T men were making no effort to put out the fire they had started, since they dared not expose themselves in the bright light to the marksmanship of those within the stockade.

Cole finished with Radbourne and turned to Daggett.

‘Skin this coat off kinda gently, Pete,’ he said.

‘You been hurt?’ Daggett asked.

‘In the left shoulder. That’s the idea. Ease her off.’

‘When were you hit?’

‘While I was out scouting. Nothing to make a fuss about. But since we are running a hospital, I’ll ask for a little service myself.’

It was a flesh wound, not dangerous unless infection set in. Pete washed the blood away and tied up the hurt as best he could.

‘They’re p-pickin’ us off one by one,’ he said.

‘We’re all alive and kicking yet,’ his chief replied. ‘Three of them have handed in their checks, and at least one more is wounded.’

From McCoy’s corner of the stockade a rifle sounded.

‘Make it two wounded,’ McCoy corrected. ‘I been watching that bird for several minutes. He leaned out to take a crack at us and I got him in the arm.’

Rusty limped to his post. ‘Dawged if I don’t get into this myself,’ he said.

Cole looked up at the starlit sky. The moon was shining down on a land touched to silvery magic. Peacefully the windmill clicked away. It should have been, he thought with a sardonic grin, a night for lovers and not for warfare. He recalled the lines of a hymn he used to hear when as a boy he had gone to church. How did it go?

‘. . . every prospect pleases,
And only man is vile.’

CHAPTER XXXIV

MARY URGES HASTE

INTO PETE CASEY'S HAVEN of Rest walked a little brown man in chaps whose bristly face had not seen a razor in a week. Within three minutes Art Simmons was the center of a group which hung on every word he said. For the nester was telling a story of amazing interest. Rusty Hunter and young Morse had been captured by Jerry Haskell, and with four men at his side Cole Sanborn was marching on the bailiwick of the enemy to rescue his friends. That he could succeed in doing so seemed scarcely a possibility.

'I knew Chet would get him in the end,' Lutz exclaimed. 'Sanborn never had a chance with that wily old bird.'

A man sat at a table on the edge of the group. He was playing solitaire. Before he spoke he moved a queen.

'Has Chet got him yet?' he asked evenly, skepticism in his voice, eyes still on the cards.

The man who asked the question was Gray Shirt, by name Jim Faust.

'I'll bet he has,' Lutz replied triumphantly. 'Did you ever know anything so crazy as for Sanborn to walk right in to where Chet is waiting for him?'

'He rode in there twice before, I seem to recollect,' Gray Shirt mentioned. 'And the only luck Chet had either time was that Cole didn't bump him off like he ought to have done.'

'He missed his chance,' someone said. 'I reckon Cole was afraid to start something he couldn't finish.'

Gray Shirt found he could get the jack of spades on the heart queen by careful manipulation. 'I was there both times. If he was afraid, he certainly fooled me. He could have wiped out the whole outfit, including Haskell and Radbourne. No, sir, he wasn't scared. Not none. He was putting it up to Chet that if trouble came he wasn't going to be to blame for it. I had a little run-in with him, and I made up my mind about that young fellow. He's a white man, and he'll do to take along any time, any place.'

Faust rose from the solitaire game and drew Simmons to one side.

'Do you know where Mrs. Sanborn is staying?'

‘With Mrs. Peters. I’m going round there. Got a letter to deliver to her.’ Simmons had been told to deliver the note if anything happened. He considered that the condition was fulfilled. Cole was in a fight.

‘I’ll trail along,’ Gray Shirt said.

They found Mary watering a box of geraniums on the porch.

Simmons explained who he was and gave her the note from her husband. Mary opened and read it. The color ebbed from her cheeks and lips.

‘Is—is he—dead?’ she gasped.

‘No, ma’am. I don’t reckon so.’

‘But he says I won’t receive the note unless—unless——’

‘He told me to give it to you if anything happened to him,’ Simmons said. ‘I would say if a fellow walked into a nest of wasps something would happen to him.’

‘Or to them,’ Gray Shirt added.

‘Who are you?’ Mary asked Faust. ‘A friend of his?’ Her eyes dilated. ‘You’re the man my husband helped to leave the Circle 3 T.’

‘Correct. And I owe him one for that. So I’m here.’ Swiftly he outlined the situation. ‘This is what we’ve got to do,’ he told her, after he had made clear the danger Cole was facing. ‘Get a posse up to the Circle 3 T soon as we can. Magruder won’t lift a hand for me. He won’t trust me. But if you go to him yoreself, he will stir his stumps. Tell him he has got to hustle together a posse and rock along fast as he can to the Circle 3 T. He may be in time. We don’t know how things stand up there, but there is no use fooling ourselves. Your husband may be in desperate need of help.’

Mary did not go into the house. She put down the watering-can and walked to the gate. ‘Let us hurry. Please.’

‘Got to see a fellow,’ Simmons said, and gave his disreputable hat a slight tilt upward in lieu of a bow.

Curious eyes followed Mary and her hard-faced companion as they moved along Main Street toward the office of the sheriff. The girl had already outraged public opinion by marrying Cole Sanborn, recognized as a gambler and a ‘bad man.’ The frontier town had its social dividing line. Such men as Gray Shirt was and Cole had been might move with friendliness and a sense of equality among those of their own sex, but they were not expected to know the good women of the place. A bow at passing was permissible if they had met, but that was the limit of acquaintanceship. An accepted rule was that tough citizens like Faust must confine their

attentions to the women who lived below the cottonwood grove and were *déclassées*.

Faust was conscious of public disapproval, but went his poker-faced way regardless of it. He was not a man to overstep the line, but just now lives were at stake. Mary did not even know she was violating the proprieties. The panic in her bosom had swept away minor considerations. Her eyes were haggard with anxiety. Fear tortured her soul. Cole was in peril. She must save him.

Two men were in the office with Magruder. Both of them were tall and rangy, strangers in town. They were deputy United States marshals.

Mary did not even take time to apologize for intruding.

‘My husband!’ she cried. ‘He is in danger, sheriff.’

This was not news to Magruder. It had been true for many months. He had risen at her entrance and stood frowning. What was this sweet and lovely but reckless girl doing on the street with one beyond the pale like Faust?

‘Two of his men have been captured and taken to the Circle 3 T,’ she explained swiftly. ‘He has gone there to rescue them. With only three or four men. Against more than thirty. We want you to send up a posse at once. Every moment may count. Will you hurry, please?’

‘We,’ repeated the sheriff, looking at Faust. ‘You mean you and——’

The sentence tailed away unfinished. What he had in his mind was clear.

Gray Shirt smiled, a hard dry smile. ‘I’m not in this, sheriff. It’s up to you and her. I told Mrs. Sanborn to see you because I know what her husband is against. He can’t cut it this time. Unless you want his men massacred you’ll have to send them help—and damn soon.’

‘Who brought word that Sanborn had gone to the Circle 3 T?’ Magruder asked.

‘Art Simmons. They were headed there when Art left them.’

‘Where is Art? Bring him here.’

From a fold in her dress Mary pulled the note Cole had written. She passed it to Magruder.

‘He would never have written this if he had not known he was—in great danger. Mr. Simmons wasn’t to give it to me unless he knew my husband was—dead. But he did. Mr. Magruder, you aren’t going to stand there and not try to save Cole, are you?’ The voice of the girl was choked with fear.

All that was worth while in her life hung in the balance. They might be killing Cole now—this very moment.

Magruder read the note. It was a cry of love from one who longed passionately to comfort the girl left to mourn his loss.

‘All right,’ the little sheriff said. ‘We’ll start right off.’ He introduced the strangers to Mary. ‘These gentlemen are United States marshals. Mr. Clement—Mr. Brand, meet Mrs. Sanborn. They are here about the robbery of the K. & J. We have found new evidence.’

At another time this would have greatly interested Mary. Now there was nothing in her mind but the immediate jeopardy in which her husband stood.

‘How soon can you start?’ she begged.

‘Now.’ Magruder turned to Faust. ‘I’ll look after the men and guns. Round up for me a bunch of horses. About a dozen. Have them brought here. Try the Longhorn and the Alamo corrals. You’ll have to jump.’

Faust turned without a word and walked swiftly from the office.

The sheriff passed back to Mary the note from her husband. He spoke to the officers. ‘This fits in with what we had in mind. Might as well start now. It gives us an excuse to take more men with us.’

He led the way to the street. The deputy marshals followed. Mary had done her part and was for the moment forgotten.

But she could not stay out of the picture. She could not fold her hands and sit quietly while all her future was at stake. This day had brought the decisive hour of her life. That certainty filled her being.

That Magruder would not let her ride with his posse to the Circle 3 T she knew. Yet she longed desperately to be near her husband. What Radbourne wanted was her property. Perhaps she could make a bargain with him to let Cole and his men go if they had fallen victims to their eagerness to rescue their friends and were his prisoners.

Every day Mary went riding on a little sorrel cow-pony which she kept in a stable half a block from the Peters house. She walked back down Main Street and along the road to the stable. Some boys were playing marbles. One of them saddled the sorrel for her.

Following a little traveled hill road, she left town at a gallop.

The posse of the sheriff took the main road ten minutes later. In the posse were Preston, Gray Shirt, a doctor, and the deputy United States marshals.

CHAPTER XXXV

A CHALLENGE

COLE raised above the stockade a pole from the end of which a white rag fluttered.

‘Looks to me sometimes like you don’t know sic’ ’em, Cole,’ grumbled Rusty. ‘We lose on yore proposition any way you take it. If Haskell agrees to fight you, it will be because he has the deck rigged to win high, low, jack, and the game. That *hombre* isn’t going to shoot it out with you on the square. Sure as hell’s hot he will have it fixed to stop yore clock. We’re doing fine the way things are. Let’s rock along for a while.’

Sanborn did not answer. He moved the pole back and forth to attract attention.

‘Rusty has the right of it,’ Slim said, picking up the protest where the old man had dropped it. ‘Jerry won’t agree to meet you unless he has about six of his sharpshooters posted to blast you off the map soon as you show up. There isn’t a straight hair in that bird’s head.’

‘I’ll agree to what you say about Haskell,’ Cole replied. ‘Some of his men might be willing to dry-gulch me, but if he takes me up to fight a duel, they will make him stick it out on the level. He couldn’t rue back on a bargain without losing face. No use loading ourselves, boys. We are in a trap, and we can’t fight our way out of it. But if I could put Haskell out of business his men would quit and let us go. They would figure it too expensive to dig us out of our hole.’

‘What you mean *us*, Cole?’ Slim asked. ‘You know blamed well you wouldn’t be here. Maybe we’re not sitting wide and handsome, but they haven’t got our hides nailed to a fence yet. Betcha they are getting pretty sick of their job. Soon they will begin to figure this ain’t their war anyhow.’

Cole glanced at the stained handkerchief tied around the head of the black-haired Texan. A bullet had creased Slim’s forehead a few minutes since.

‘They are wearing us down,’ Cole answered. ‘Presently one of us will be killed, then another. I don’t say we can’t hold out through the night, but when morning comes some of them will climb the hill back of the stable and

pick us off from there. . . . Someone with a white flag. Will you meet him and have him take my offer to Haskell, Slim?’

‘Don’t like it a bit,’ Rusty disapproved, scowling. ‘They’re not crowding us now, but if Haskell gets you they will sure rush the corral.’

Slim walked out to meet the envoy of the enemy. He strolled forward jauntily, a figure of debonair ease. The man who met him was Bud Calloway.

‘You fellows ready to surrender?’ Bud asked.

‘Surrender?’ Slim echoed, apparently much surprised. ‘Hell’s bells, no! We ain’t started yet. What ever put that into yore nut? We’ve got all the water and the food, and you fellows are stranded in the desert, as you might say. The trouble is that Cole is too dog-goned tender-hearted. He’s plumb sorry for you misguided ducks who are getting shot up to pull Jerry’s chestnuts out of the fire. You can’t win, and if you did what would you get out of it but a kick in the pants, the few of you that were left? Already you have shot up old man Radbourne, after he gave you orders to lay off us. Do you reckon he is going to forget that when pay-day comes? Not that old wolf.’

‘Was the old man hit, Slim?’ Bud inquired, plainly disturbed.

‘In the leg. He was bleeding like a stuck pig when we bandaged him up. Of course, if you ever should get the stockade, which isn’t likely, Radbourne won’t be alive. But what I’m here for is to send a message from Sanborn to Haskell. We have had orders from Cole not to kill any more of you fellows than we could help. I had a bead drawn on you when you picked up Mex. So did two more of us. We could have dropped you in yore tracks. Well, no more of that. If this fight goes on, we aim to kill from now on. Here is Cole’s proposition. To save the lives of a lot of you boys who don’t stand to get anything but trouble out of this, Cole will meet Haskell in a duel and settle this difficulty man to man.’

‘Fair enough,’ Bud said. ‘If Haskell will fight him.’

‘I warned Cole he was a treacherous devil, but Cole says you boys wouldn’t stand for any bushwhacking if Haskell agrees to his proposition.’

‘We wouldn’t, either,’ Bud spoke up quickly.

‘Tell Haskell he can have his choice of six-shooters or rifles. Cole doesn’t care what kind of a gun he kills Jerry with.’

‘You talk big, Slim. Jerry is some fighter himself.’

‘That so?’ Slim asked, with an impudent grin. ‘Cole has made him take to the tall timber two-three times that I know of. I was among those present when he bluffed Jerry off the map in Pete’s place. I’ll lay a little bet, Bud. Give you odds of a dollar to four bits Mr. Haskell crawls out of the fight unless he thinks he has got it fixed for him to win, and a dollar to two bits that if they ever face each other, yore bully-puss boss will go down.’

‘Take you on both of the bets,’ Bud retorted. ‘Cole has had luck so far. He’s about due for a run of bad cards. . . . All right. I’ll take yore message to Jerry and be back with his answer.’

Slim returned to the stockade and made his report. The talk with Bud Calloway had encouraged him. He had gathered an impression that there was considerable dissatisfaction in the camp of the enemy, less from what Bud had said than from his manner. There had been a complete absence of the aggressiveness one displays who feels he is a victor. Bud knew that three Circle 3 T men were dead and four others wounded, and he had no knowledge of any serious losses among the defenders. Plainly he was ready to discuss an armistice. Very likely he represented a majority opinion.

After he had told what had been said by himself and Calloway, Slim summed up his feeling.

‘We’re not in as bad a jam as I thought, Cole, unless I’m fooling myself. A lot of those lads would like to turn loose of the bear if they get a good excuse. It’s up to Haskell now. Looks to me as if he has got to take up yore offer. You have called for a showdown. He will have to let us see his hand or throw it in the discard.’

Cole cleaned his revolver. He knew that if Haskell decided to accept the challenge, he would not choose rifles. With a six-shooter the foreman of the Circle 3 T could hit a playing-card four times out of five at twenty paces.

CHAPTER XXXVI

HASKELL GETS THE ACID TEST

As soon as Bud Calloway came into the bunkhouse, Haskell flung a question at him.

‘Did you tell them my terms—that they would have to turn Sanborn over to me before I would even talk turkey?’

‘We didn’t get that far,’ Bud answered. ‘They haven’t got any notion of surrendering.’

‘Then whyfor the white flag?’ Haskell demanded angrily. ‘Can’t fool me if they did you. They want to quit. We’ve got them where they can’t do a thing.’

‘Except kill us,’ a red-headed cowpuncher grumbled.

‘There won’t be any more of that either,’ the foreman promised irritably. ‘We’ll wait till morning and pick ’em off from the hill.’

‘Maybe we better find out what the white flag was about if you’re not too busy,’ a dark, sullen-faced man suggested satirically.

‘Sanborn says he doesn’t want to shoot up any more of us if he can help it,’ Bud explained. ‘The old man has been wounded and wants to call it off. Slim says they had orders from Cole to go easy on us, but from now on it will be different. Something in what he says, too. They sure could have finished me when I went out to get Mex and they didn’t even take a crack at me.’

‘Is this all you’ve got to say?’ Haskell asked, his face dark with rage.

‘Not all.’ Bud looked straight at the foreman. ‘Cole claims we hired hands haven’t got any interest in this fight, and he is blamed near right. Thirty dollars a month doesn’t cover getting shot up and bumped off the way so many of us have been. So he offers to fight a duel with you, Jerry, to settle the thing without any more of us getting hurt. He says rifles or sixguns, take yore pick.’

Haskell thumped a heavy fist down on a table. ‘He’s squawking. Knows we’ve got him and is trying to crawl out.’

There was a moment of heavy silence. The foreman was not sensitive to atmospheres, but even he felt something ominous in that lull of suspended

judgment.

‘Sanborn is through—bucked out,’ he went on hastily. ‘Making a bluff to bull through a busted flush against a full house.’

‘I dunno, Jerry,’ a bald-headed, heavy-set man said slowly. ‘Let’s talk that over. The way I look at it, plenty of us have been killed already. Sense in what Sanborn says. You’ve been wanting a crack at this fellow, Jerry. Rub him out, and the war is over. Nothing more to it.’

The sullen-faced man showed a set of ragged teeth in an ironic grin. ‘That’s all. One crack with a gun. After that, peace along the Potomac.’

‘You talk like a fool, Arkansaw,’ Haskell ripped out with an oath. ‘Don’t you get the point, you lunkhead? I’ve got him. He is at the end of his trail and making a last play. Like I said, he’s trying to crawl out. You aren’t so dumb you can’t see that, are you?’

Hard-eyed, Arkansaw met his angry gaze steadily. ‘Someone is trying to crawl out. I’m not so sure it is Sanborn. You claim you have got him. He’s in the wild-horse corral, waiting for you with a gun in his hands, but I don’t notice you going out there and roping him. I’d say you haven’t got him by a jugful.’

Bud Calloway went a step farther. ‘We’ve all heard you make yore brags, Jerry. Now you get a chance to demonstrate. You wouldn’t want better than an even break, would you?’

‘Sure he wouldn’t,’ a wounded man put in savagely. ‘Jerry has been honing to get him a man, and here’s his chance for the one he wants. I say, let him hop to it.’

Tiny sweat beads broke out on Haskell’s forehead. He looked round on cold, harsh faces, not one of them in sympathy with him. Whenever he had dared he had bullied these men. Now he could see a cruel jubilation at his predicament. Angry at the situation into which he had led them, they had risen against him. Victory they no longer cared for, since it must be bought at a high price. Already they had paid too much in dead and wounded. They were gloating at the chance to shift the danger to the foreman by driving him into personal combat with the man who had always outmaneuvered and outfought them. Jerry had started this battle, had promised them a cheap success. All right. Let him finish it himself.

Hardy ruffian though he was, Haskell felt a cold pressure round his heart. They had decided ruthlessly to drive him to this duel. It satisfied their anger, perhaps too a crude sense of justice. He was a gunman, and he had a

reputation for nerve. Why shouldn't he face Sanborn and settle this trouble once for all? That was what they were thinking.

It came to Haskell, clear as the ringing of a bell, that if he stood up against Sanborn he was lost. The question was not as to who was the better shot. The foreman would back himself as a marksman against any man alive. But this fellow had the Indian sign on him. Cole Sanborn was his Nemesis. It would be like standing against a wall before a firing squad.

'You boys aren't looking at this right,' he said, his voice dead and heavy. 'All we have to do is wait till morning and pick them off from the corral hill. They won't have a chance.'

'That's what you told us when we started this thing.' Bill spoke up, an edge to his contradiction. 'So far I've got a busted leg out of it. That's enough. You claim we oughtn't ever to have let Sanborn's crowd out of the house. Now you show us.'

'Unless you are just a windbag, Jerry,' added Arkansaw. 'I'm beginning to wonder about that. We're buzzard heads. You've told us that plenty often. And you're there every way from the ace. By yore own say-so. Make good yore brags.'

'It has got to be one way or the other, Jerry,' Calloway said stonily. 'Either Jordan's way or Lauret's. Take yore choice.'

Looking round on the cold, expectant faces that seemed to hem him in like a ring of waiting wolves, Haskell knew Calloway had told him the truth. He could not dodge. He had to make a choice.

'I never saw the day I was afraid of this fellow or anyone else,' he said, with a bold front, and the sound of his own words heartened him. 'Tell him it will be sixguns, at twenty yards, and that I'll kill him sure as he's a foot high.'

'That's the way to talk,' Calloway said cheerfully. 'Cole is human, and can be got just like any of the rest of us.'

The others began to talk. There were smiles and laughter, the sudden relaxation prior to exciting tragedy which did not involve them. Haskell hated them all, black rage in his heart struggling with the chill of fear. Their lives were not at stake. They could jest and chatter, after having driven him to a declaration from which there was no retreat. Not one of them cared a jackstraw whether he lived or died, except the ones who were hoping Sanborn might get him.

Haskell waited while the messenger carried back to Sanborn word of the acceptance of his challenge. His eyes darted here and there, seeking help.

The muscles in his face twitched. He had to fight for self-control in order not to betray his desperation.

Mechanically he joined in the talk, listened to advice. He wondered if they knew how shaken he was.

‘You’ll get him all right, Jerry,’ someone predicted. ‘Any day in the week you’re as good a shot as he is.’

‘Y’betcha!’ Haskell heard himself answer.

‘Take yore time. Don’t hurry. He’s liable to miss his first shot. Be nervous, maybe.’

‘Yes,’ the foreman agreed.

How many shots would it take? Would he have to stand up and feel bullet after bullet tearing through his vitals? A chill drenched him at the thought that within a few minutes he might be lying with the life stricken out of him.

Calloway returned, full of pleased importance. ‘Everything all set, Jerry. Just the way you want it. Six-shooters at twenty yards. After the first shot you move toward each other firing as you please.’

Just the way he wanted it. Haskell could have wept with self-pity. He had come to the most terrible hour of his life, and he was alone—absolutely alone. Not a soul to wish him well except with lip cheer. There had been a woman once. She had loved him passionately and devotedly, and after he had squeezed all the joy and hope out of her young life he had flung her aside and let her go to destruction. If he had her here, to comfort him, to pray for him . . .

Better not think of her now. The thing to do was buck up and go through.

‘Someone give me a drink,’ he said hoarsely.

A man handed him a bottle. He saw them watching him, gravely, appraisingly. Jerry tilted the bottle and drank, the raw liquor scorching its way down his throat.

‘Better go a little slow on that stuff,’ the bald-headed man suggested. ‘You want yore nerves steady.’

The whiskey left Haskell cold. The leaden lump inside of him did not dissolve from warmth.

‘I reckon we better be moving,’ he heard Calloway say.

The foreman did not answer. His legs carried him automatically to the door and into the night. The sky was now clear of clouds and the stars shone down. A silvery light flooded the land.

‘Moon’s out again,’ a man said. ‘Plenty of light to see.’

Haskell felt a sickness run through him. He almost mentioned it, but stopped himself just in time. Already they were wondering if he was game.

His gaze fell on a saddled horse tied to a hitch-rack. If he could swing to the saddle and gallop into the desert! But never again. He had been caught in a trap from which he could not escape.

How long had it been since he had fastened the chestnut there with a slip-knot? A few hours only. Then he had been riding on the top of the world. Now . . .

He had to go through. No other way to it. And suddenly, in an instant, while he was flogging his courage to face the ordeal, panic swept over him and submerged his self-respect. By God, he wouldn’t be the goat. He wouldn’t let them drive him to death.

Through his slack limbs warm blood poured. He had made up his mind.

‘They’re waiting for us,’ Calloway said. ‘Slim is with him, I reckon. It will be even steven, Jerry. We’ll have Sanborn covered all the time. If he fires too soon, or doesn’t play square in any way, he’s a dead coon.’

‘Yes,’ Haskell said.

His gaze was on the chestnut gelding. In a moment they would pass close to it. He fell back a pace, to get on the other side of Calloway.

Now was the time. A hand went out to the bridle and pulled the slip-knot. Haskell swung the animal round and vaulted into the saddle. A spur touched the flank. The horse leaped to a gallop.

While the Circle 3 T men stood motionless in their tracks, frozen by surprise, Haskell vanished down the road.

CHAPTER XXXVII

‘TWO IS COMPANY, MY DEAR’

MARY struck the main road half a mile from town. Already darkness was dropping down over the hills. The moon was up, and the first stars were in the sky. In the cottonwood tops, as she crossed a dry wash, was a murmur of wind. The night was peaceful as old age.

Its peace did not bring her any assurance. Fear rode her, as she pushed the sorrel up the dusty ribbon of a road. This was a mad thing Cole had done, to ride into the stronghold of the enemy. He was a fighting man, and he would have the advantage of surprise, perhaps, but it would not be possible for him to overpower so great a force. Radbourne was wily as a fox. One of these days he would trap Cole. The heavy weight on her heart told her that this was the time.

When she married Cole she had not bargained for this. Love had been the farthest thing from her mind. All she had wanted to do was to save herself. From the time of her arrival in Boone County, she had begun to hear about this super-bad man Sanborn. His audacity was a legend. She had listened to incredible stories of his exploits. He was a killer, an outlaw, yet one who drew to him devoted friends just as he created deadly enemies. Meeting him by chance, at a time when despair was driving her hard, she had entered into her mad compact with him.

And now she loved him. All the happiness that might be in her life depended upon him. To think of him filled her with warmth. Every fiber of her being, it seemed to her, went out to meet him. She was so young. It could not be that Fate would be so cruel as to snatch away the joy she had not yet tasted.

This torture served her right. In asking him to aid her she had been moved wholly by selfishness. Her thought had been to buy his help, regardless of what it might cost him. He had known that, of course, yet he had taken up the burden for her cheerfully and gaily, as if it had been an equitable agreement between them.

Now . . .

Though she rode fast, she could not outride her dread. Her imagination saw his splendid body lying lax and inert, with Radbourne's shapeless shadow hovering over him.

She came to the fences of the Circle 3 T. They lined the road down which she galloped. Soon she would know the worst.

A horse was racing up the lane toward her. She drew up, her heart drumming, to meet the rider.

The man dragged his horse to a halt. 'Who's there?' he demanded hoarsely.

'Mary Sanborn,' she answered. 'Is—is everything all right at the ranch?'

A violent oath exploded from him.

'Is my husband there?' she asked tremulously. 'Cole Sanborn. I heard _____'

He broke out in savage, furious profanity.

Mary had recognized the man by this time. He was Jerry Haskell, foreman of the Circle 3 T. There was in him a malignant rage that appalled her.

'He's there—the damned killer.'

'Is he . . . a captive?'

Through the anger and shame that possessed him reason was pushing its way. By means of this woman he could strike at Sanborn, the man he hated, the man who had made him lose face forever among the ruffians he had led. This part of the country was closed to him for the rest of his life. He had to sneak away, as quickly as he could, for the news of what he had done would travel fast. Idaho would not be too near. Or Oregon. He would have to take another name. The first thing would be to strike for the railroad.

But not alone. A sweet revenge had offered itself. He could reach Sanborn through his wife. Afterward, he would be lost in some obscure corner of the cow country a thousand miles from here.

'You're going with me,' he told the girl hoarsely.

'With you? What do you mean? Where?'

'Never mind where.' He caught the bridle rein of her horse and turned the animal.

In his distorted face was something so demoniac that panic swept her. She lifted her quirt and lashed it across his mouth, then gave the sorrel the spur and dashed up the road in the direction from which she had come. For an instant he sat there, his mouth a streak of fire, before he took up the pursuit.

The horses pounded through the dust. Mary was wild with fear. She did not know exactly of what she had to be afraid, but the evil passion in his face had been something dreadful to see.

Presently she knew he was gaining on her. Though she used the quirt, she could get no more speed out of the little sorrel. The big chestnut came closer at every stride. Its head overlapped the flanks of the pony. Haskell drew even with her. He reached over and caught the reins. The two horses slackened their pace, came to a jarring halt.

They were on the desert now, beyond the last fence. Haskell guided from the road.

‘Two is company, my dear. Three would be a crowd,’ he told the girl, with a jeering laugh.

‘I’m not going with you,’ Mary cried. ‘Where are you taking me? Have you gone mad?’

She tried to turn her horse, and when she found she could not do that, slipped from the saddle and started to run through the brush back to the road. At once he was after her. The chestnut was a cowhorse, and it turned and twisted after her as she dodged. She was driven deeper into the brush.

From his saddle Haskell swung when at last she stood at bay.

‘So, you little vixen, you can bite, eh?’ he cried. ‘So can I.’ He snatched the quirt from her wrist and lashed the rawhide three times around her supple body.

The tortured flesh of the girl quivered. She gave an agonized cry for help, and the one to whom she called was her husband.

Unexpectedly, out of the night there came an answer, a faint far shout.

Haskell stopped, quirt in hand, mouth open, to listen. Again Mary lifted her voice in a scream, and once more, almost like an echo, there came back a reply.

With an oath, the foreman dropped the quirt. He turned, caught his horse, swung to the saddle, and galloped into the chaparral.

CHAPTER XXXVIII
'THE WAR IS OFF'

SLIM came back from his second meeting with Calloway and reported to Cole.

'You've picked you a fight,' he said. 'Bud says Haskell dodged every which way to duck it, but his men wouldn't let him crawl out. It will be on the level. You don't need to worry about that. 'Far as I can make out, the Circle 3 T riders are a heap more sore at Jerry than they are at you. They are ready to call off this battle with us. If they win, it won't buy them a thing. I hammered it into their coconuts that Radbourne isn't liable to hand out any Christmas presents to the fellows who shot him.'

'With rifles or revolvers?' Cole asked quietly.

'Revolvers, at twenty yards, to start with,' Slim answered. 'After the first shot it is to be go-as-you-please. All bars down.'

'Good. It's the way it should be. However this thing goes, things will be better afterward. Radbourne is whipped. You can see that by looking at him. We had better move on out, don't you reckon, and be ready?'

'Yes, you don't want to act backward. Be out there waiting for Haskell. Show him you mean business.'

Rusty limped forward. 'We're all pulling for you, Cole,' he said. 'Every last one of us. We hate to have it this way, though we know you've got it on Haskell every jump of the road. You're in the right, too. That counts. Boy, I feel it in my bones you're going to win.'

The others chimed in, one after another.

The harsh face of Sanborn was immobile as a piece of granite. 'Much obliged, boys,' he said. 'See you later.'

He walked out with Slim through the gate of the stockade.

In the moonlight they waited for Haskell to appear. Out of the bunkhouse a jet of men poured. Slim talked, as casually as he could, to prevent a heavy silence while Cole waited.

The Circle 3 T men were moving toward them.

'Jerry has talked big, but he never did want a showdown with you,' said Slim. 'Twice I know of he threw in his hand rather than call. It's been forced

on him now. He's nowadays happy now, I'll bet.'

Cole did not answer, but his friend found no weakness in that grim silence. Sanborn stood at ease, giving no sign that the delay affected his nerves.

There came a sudden commotion, the sound of clattering hoofs, voices raised in excited surprise.

'By crikes, he's done lit out,' someone cried.

Slim peered into the semi-darkness of the starry night. A horseman was disappearing in the gloom. The pounding of galloping feet came fainter.

From the Circle 3 T men came curses and yells of derision.

Slim slapped his chaps, letting out a whoop. 'Jerry has taken to the tall timber!' he cried. 'Couldn't stand the gaff, the big four-flusher.'

Some of the men from the bunkhouse joined Calhoun and Sanborn.

'Drinks on us, boys,' Calloway said sheepishly. 'Jerry had a date, anywheres but here. No sand in his craw. He hit the saddle on the jump. 'Far as we're concerned the war is off. We've had a-plenty. You lads are free to go or stay, whichever you like. What we need more than anything else is two-three doctors.'

'We could use one ourselves,' Slim admitted. 'A couple of us are stove-up considerable, not to mention yore old man.'

'We'd better move all the seriously wounded into the bunkhouse,' Cole said. 'Send someone to Jonesboro for doctors, Calloway. Until they come we'll make the boys that are hurt as comfortable as possible. We'll need four or five of you fellows to carry Radbourne and Dave Pope from the corral.'

The Circle 3 T men brought the door of the bunkhouse, and on it carried first Radbourne and then Pope to the temporary hospital. Daggett and Slim held each other's wrist to make a seat, and upon this transported Rusty, the old man protesting irritably that he could walk as well as not.

Magruder and his posse arrived while this was being done. The little sheriff listened to the news. He turned to the deputy United States marshals.

'Our bird has flown,' he said. 'We're about ten minutes too late.' To Sanborn he explained that witnesses had been found with strong evidence linking up Haskell with the train-robbery.

Slim had drifted back in time to hear this. 'I told you he was guilty quite some time ago,' he drawled.

There was something else on Magruder's mind. 'Down the road a way we heard a cry. Sounded like a woman's voice. Some of the boys stopped to

investigate. What would a woman be doing out in the brush away up here?’

‘Sure it wasn’t a coyote,’ Calloway suggested.

‘No coyote,’ the sheriff negated. ‘There hasn’t been any woman around the ranch, has there?’

Calloway shook his head. ‘Couldn’t have been a woman.’

Within ten minutes four riders reached the ranch. Gray Shirt was one of them. From a sorrel pony a woman dismounted.

She stood beside her horse, a slender, girlish figure, her gaze searching for someone in the huddles of shifting men.

A tall figure strode toward her.

‘Cole!’ she cried, with a sob.

Her hands went out, as might those of a little child who has been lost and frightened and at last has found safety. Sanborn took them in his, looked into her haggard eyes, and drew his wife close.

Mary clung to him, much as a frightened infant does to its mother, fearful that some evil fate might still tear them apart. She was trembling like an aspen leaf in the breeze.

‘I’ve been so afraid,’ she wailed. ‘Ever since I knew you had come here. I had to ride up. I thought—I didn’t know——’

A well of joy surged up in Cole and for a moment choked him. He was a hard man, brought up in the outdoor frontier school of stoicism where strong men learn to ride their emotions with a tight rein.

Imperturbably he had gone his own way, regardless of the approval of others. But he knew he could never be hard with her. His love for her had made some kind of chemical change in his being. It had affected profoundly his relations with his fellows. He was no longer playing a lone hand.

After the turbulent years he had been swept by strong currents into charted waters peaceful and serene. A verse he had read once sang itself in his mind.

‘. . . port after stormie seas,
Ease after warre . . .’

Fate had been driving him to happiness. This was far better than he had deserved, better than he had dared hope.

‘It’s all right,’ he said. ‘Everything—at last.’

Under the stars they moved to the live oak which sheltered the blacksmith shop where the Circle 3 T did its horseshoeing. The weariness

had fallen from her. She walked with the rhythmic grace of happy youth in a world wonderful. Cole was a lover, and her beauty and vitality stabbed him. It seemed to him that God spoke through her rapturous bloom.

‘I didn’t mean it to be this way,’ she said, making proud confession. ‘I was to take everything and give nothing. You ought to despise me.’ She laughed a little, ruefully but happily, wondering at her emotion. Because a man walked by her side the world had been reborn. ‘I thought some day I would marry a nice safe man, and we would do the proper things in the proper way. And instead—I get you. Would you call yourself safe and tame?’

Looking at him, so strong and forceful, an arresting and exciting personality, Mary smiled at her own question. Anything but safe, anything but tame. Life would be a risk if she tried to match her steps with his. But it came to her, with a glowing warmth that swept through her, the certainty that one could not live in any reality except courageously. To decline danger was to reject life.

‘Are you so set on doing the proper things in the proper way?’ he asked, with fond derision. ‘You, who married the boggy man of this part of the country the first hour you met him?’

She answered that with a low, full-throated laugh of happiness. He was kissing her with a keen-edged hunger that stirred within her a clamor of the blood.

It was then she made a discovery.

‘You’re wounded.’

‘Nothing serious. A scratch. Some have been killed, others badly hurt. I have been lucky.’

‘But you must have it dressed by the doctor. Perhaps . . . one never knows about wounds. Infection. You don’t know it isn’t serious. And you must go to bed.’

‘She’s bossing me already,’ he said aloud.

‘But—please. We must be sure.’

‘The doctor will be busy for a while looking after those really hurt bad. He’ll get round to me then. Don’t you worry, honey. Pete Daggett washed this scratch and tied it up for me. Doc Burns couldn’t have done any better. Out in this country so many buckaroos get arms and legs busted we all learn to be doctors.’

None the less, she took him back to the bunkhouse and had Doctor Burns look at the wound and dress it again. Cole submitted, a little sheepishly, with a whimsical smile. For the rest of his life he would be shepherded and mothered. He had given up his freedom and gone into captivity.

‘Happier now?’ Cole asked her after Doctor Burns had finished.

‘Much. You don’t take any care of yourself. You ought to go to bed, but I don’t suppose I can get you to do that.’

‘Got too much to do just now. I’ll get round to that after a while. In an hour or so we can start for Jonesboro.’

He put an arm round her shoulder after they had left the hospital.

Mary winced. The pressure of her dress upon the wheals left by the quilt made the throbbing pain fiercer. In spite of herself she wriggled her body a little to shift the embrace. She dared do no more. Cole must never know what she had endured. Already she had made one mistake and had tried to rectify it. To the men who had found her sobbing in the desert she had let out the truth, but almost at once had asked them not to tell. They would talk about it among themselves, of course. It would be gossiped about at every ranch for fifty miles. But since the parties concerned are the last to hear such stories, she hoped that knowledge of the indignity would never come to her husband.

‘I’ve got to go back now and help Doctor Burns,’ she said.

‘Yes,’ he agreed, smiling warmly at her. ‘And soon as we can we’ll take the trail to—Paradise.’

She nodded, eyes gleaming. ‘That’s a lovely name for an ugly little town like Jonesboro. Maybe Heaven hasn’t any streets of gold. Maybe it is just any place where you and I are together.’

With that she ran back into the bunkhouse and left him.

CHAPTER XXXIX

AN IMPORTANT FOOL BUTTS IN

GRAY SHIRT drew Slim to one side. 'Listen, fellow. There's something yore friend Sanborn doesn't know yet, and when he does know it he will see red. That cuss Haskell met up with Mrs. Sanborn down the road a ways and quirted her.'

'He—what?'

Slim stared at the man incredulously.

Faust nodded. 'Like I said. 'Seems he tried to take her with him. She cut him across the face and lit out. When he caught her, he took the quirt and lashed her. The fool must have been crazy.'

The eyes of the black-haired Texan blazed. 'Crazy or not, Cole will take after him and kill him.'

'I've got another notion,' Faust said. 'Cole is wounded. I don't know how bad. That little girl of his will be worried sick if he takes off after Haskell now. You and I both owe that yellow coyote something. What-say we get Magruder to deputize us to go after him? There seems no manner of doubt but that these United States deputy marshals have got it on him that he bossed that job of train-robbing. If we find Haskell we'll drag him back to be hanged.'

'You've got my company,' Slim said promptly.

'How about that head you've got bandaged? I don't want any invalids with me.'

'A scratch. We'd better see Magruder right off. Before Cole finds out what Haskell did to his wife.'

In every large company there is an important fool who feels it his duty to spread news that will make trouble. One of them went to Cole now to express sympathy. He took it for granted that Mrs. Sanborn had told her husband what Haskell had done to her.

'That wolf ought to be shot—treating a woman the way he did your wife,' the man said.

Cole looked at him, sized him up, and dismissed the fellow with the first casual remark that came to mind.

‘Talk is cheap.’

The man was disconcerted. ‘Sure. All I meant, for a skunk like that to lay hands on a good woman——’

‘Lay hands on her?’

Cole’s body stiffened and his eyes froze.

‘Why, he tried to make her go with him, didn’t he?’

‘Did he?’

The busy-body wished he had kept his mouth shut. Apparently Sanborn did not know the story.

‘I dunno. There was some talk. Probably nothing to it.’

‘What talk?’

‘I kinda gathered——’

At that the gossip stuck. He did not know how much or how little to tell.

‘Who from?’

‘Well, Mrs. Sanborn—she said——’

‘Just what did she say?’

The man tried to back out from responsibility. ‘Why don’t you go ask her, Cole?’

‘I’m asking you.’

The cold, steely eyes of Sanborn would not release his reluctant informant. Having begun, the fellow had to go through.

‘Jerry he started to take Mrs. Sanborn with him. We heard her calling for help and he lit out.’

‘Anything more?’

‘I thought you knew all about it. He—quirted her.’ The words seemed to be dragged out of the man. He knew he had been a well-intentioned fool and interfered with the business of other people. Mary had begged him and the others who had found her not to tell what she had confided in the first shock of relief, but he had not supposed Cole was not to be in the secret.

The face of Sanborn was white and set. ‘Quirted her,’ he repeated. ‘Did Mrs. Sanborn say so?’

‘She was crying, and—she let it out, then asked us not to tell. ’Course I thought——’

What he thought was of no importance to Cole. Abruptly Sanborn turned away and strode into the bunkhouse. He stood above Mary, where she was

assisting Doctor Burns with a bandage.

‘Soon as you’re through I want to see you,’ Cole said, his voice rough and low.

She looked up, surprised. In his manner was something ominous. His stern eyes were like live coals. Not five minutes ago she had left him, a lover gay and cheerful, his strength irradiated and softened, his harshness melted. What had made this change in him? Did he think she had been forward—unwomanly? Perhaps. Men felt that way about women. Her sex must simmer and decoy, deny and allure. She had told him the truth simply. Was that an offense against decorum?

Mary finished with the bandage, then rose and walked beside him from the room. Outside, he flung a question at her.

‘Did Haskell—use a quirt to you?’

He gulped the last words out, as if he found it hard to say them.

‘Oh, Cole, does that matter now?’

She caught one of his hands in hers. It was very important that she get him to see this as she did. ‘That is part of our bad dream that’s past,’ she continued. ‘It goes with all the rest of it—with your wound—with all the bloodshed. You and I have blotted all that out. We have no room for such baggage—on the trail to Paradise.’

He would not meet her pleading little smile. ‘It’s true, then.’

‘If you have got to know about it, I lashed him first with the quirt—across the face.’

‘Why did you do that?’

‘I think he was a little mad,’ she explained. ‘He wanted me to go with him. His eyes glared and his face was distorted. You know what the Bible calls it, possessed of a devil. When he caught hold of my bridle rein and wouldn’t let go, I became panicky and struck him with the quirt. After he caught me he still acted like a madman. Cole, I want you to forget it. After all, I hit him first. He is out of our lives. Forever. We’ll never see him again. There is so much we must forget, and that is just a little part of it.’

‘No,’ he said hoarsely. ‘In this country a man can’t treat a woman in that way and get away with it. What kind of a husband would I be if I sat down and didn’t call him to account?’

‘Something beautiful has come into our lives, Cole,’ she said. ‘I didn’t expect it. You weren’t anything to me except a bad man strong enough to fight my battles. Then I found I was wrong. You weren’t bad at all. You

were brave and strong, and you were generous to those trying to destroy you. Even then I didn't want to love you, but I was swept from my feet. I couldn't help it. And since, when I haven't been afraid for you, I've been the happiest woman in the world. Do you want to wipe all that out, by killing this man who means nothing at all to us?'

'When he did what he did he knew I would have to hunt him down,' he said doggedly.

'No, Cole. No—no—no!' The protest burst vehemently from her. 'We can't start killing all over again. Think of tonight, of all the bloodshed, of those men lying cold and still in the stable. I was thanking God we had come to the end of it. And you say you are going to begin again. If you love me _____,'

Her plea broke down on that sobbing note. Cole did not answer at once. He was distressed and troubled. What she had said was all true. He longed to do as she wished. But all his life training, the code of the frontier, rose up in him protestant against letting Haskell escape punishment for what he had done. With characteristic swiftness he made up his mind.

'I won't kill him,' he promised. 'I'll drag him back with a rope around his neck. Magruder can have him. There is plenty of evidence he led the K. & J. express robbers. He'll hang for that job.'

'You talk as if bullets couldn't kill you!' she cried. 'He is a desperate man, and he will shoot you down. It's the sheriff's business to get him, not yours.'

'It's my business, after what he did to you. But you don't need to be afraid. He won't hurt me.'

'How do you know he won't? Don't go, Cole. Please.'

He took her hands and looked down into her troubled face. 'I have to go, dearest,' he said gently. 'It's my job. I can't shirk it. I'm sorry. I wish I didn't have to do it.'

All the sternness had gone from his face. A few minutes ago he had been hard as iron. What alchemy was there in her presence that so softened and changed him? He could not understand or explain it.

She clung to him passionately. How could she let him go back into danger so soon?

Cole held her in his arms and kissed her. 'It won't be long, sweetheart,' he promised. 'I'll be back—for good this time.'

With that promise she had to be content.

As Cole walked to the stable, he caught sight of Slim Calhoun and Gray Shirt moving down the road. He hailed them.

‘Where you headed for, boys?’

Without stopping, Slim shouted back an answer.

‘We’ve got a hen on, oldtimer. See you at Sunday School.’

‘If you’ll wait I will ride with you,’ Cole called to them. ‘Going that way myself.’

They did not wait. Sanborn was surprised at that.

CHAPTER XL

COLE BLUFFS

AS COLE plodded through the chaparral he put himself for the twentieth time in the place of Jerry Haskell. Given the same circumstances, with the temperament of the ex-foreman of the Circle 3 T, what would he do? The pride of Haskell had been given a terrific blow. Before the men who counted most with him he had shown the white feather. To meet anybody he knew would be a humiliation almost beyond endurance. He would get out of the country as soon as he could. That meant he would make for the nearest railroad point.

There was one possible flaw in this reasoning. Haskell would not leave behind him the money gained from the express car robbery. Did he have the loot on his person in the form of bills? Or was it buried at some convenient place? If the money was cached, he would have to recover it before he crossed the desert and made for Sundown, the nearest railroad station. Knowing Haskell, Cole was of the opinion that the man carried his plunder always in a belt around his waist. For if suspicion should be directed his way, he might have to leave on the jump.

Cole had traveled very steadily all day. He wanted to get to Rabbit Ear Pass before Haskell in order to lie in wait for him. A fight in the open was barred. That would mean he had to kill or be killed, and he had promised Mary to avoid so drastic an issue. He had to trap the man and get the drop on him.

Probably Haskell would not hurry. He could not know that the officers had evidence enough to convict him of the train-robbery. For Magruder had moved with extraordinary secrecy. Nobody knew in what direction he had gone after the desert swallowed him. He could afford to take his time. So he would argue.

Once Cole saw a little dust-cloud far to his right. That would be Haskell, he guessed. Sanborn quickened his pace. He would be in time all right. The man was off a direct line and would have to bear to the left.

A rampart of hills cut across the skyline. They had been sculptured by erosion to strange and fantastic shapes, the softer rock underneath having been washed away by the floods of a million years. To the left was a fortress, with bastions and parapets and openings for disappearing cannon,

the whole so lifelike that one could imagine medieval sentinels pacing the towers flanking the walls. Between this and the rimrock opposite ran Rabbit Ear Pass.

Cole rode into the pass, but drew up at a sandy draw near the entrance to examine the ground for footprints. What he saw surprised him. This was a country of few travelers. The hot and dusty desert deflected traffic, which went by way of Jonesboro and skirted the hills. Only those in a hurry, or those who had reasons for not wanting to be seen, took the short cut through Rabbit Ear. Yet two horses had passed here within an hour or two. The crumbling dirt that had fallen into the tracks was still soft and loose.

Did that mean Haskell had picked up a companion and was still in front of him? In that case, who was the rider to the right whose dust he had seen?

Cole decided to wait for the solitary traveler. He would still have time, by hard going, to reach the railroad as soon as Haskell, if it turned out that the ex-foreman of the Circle 3 T was one of the two ahead of him. Sanborn led his horse up a draw and tethered it among the rocks at the head of the little gulch. Rifle in hand, he walked back and selected a spot from which he could cover the trail.

He waited, with the patience that comes to one who has spent years in the untenanted outdoors. A half an hour passed, three quarters. Cole began to think his calculations had gone wrong. It was possible the traveler had seen the footprints and was doing a little thinking on his own account. If so, and if the man was Haskell, how would he meet the situation?

Cole found out, sooner than he desired. A raucous voice called an order to him.

‘Stick yore hands up!’

Cole’s heart went down like a thermometer plunged into icy water. Instead of trapping his man he had been trapped.

He put his hands up and turned, a cheerful smile on his face. ‘So it’s you, Mr. Haskell,’ he drawled. ‘We’ve been looking for you and you’ve decided to save us trouble. Good enough.’

‘Don’t fool yoreself,’ Haskell jeered, a look of ugly malice on his face. ‘I’m going to bump you off—now. You came here asking for what you’re going to get. I’ll say this. You never saw the day I couldn’t beat you from the chunk. Try to run me down, would you? I’ll show you.’

Cole kept his impudent grin working. ‘Haven’t you forgotten one little thing, Mr. Haskell? There are three of us. If and when you shoot, my friends will close in on you. That wouldn’t be so good—for you.’

‘I don’t believe it. You’re playing a lone hand. Who are yore friends?’

Haskell spoke boldly, but he felt a chill premonition of disaster. Three sets of horses’ hoofs had entered the pass. Where were the other riders? Somewhere among these rocks likely.

Sanborn’s mind worked in flashes. He spoke without hesitation, without haste, choosing the names of men known to be game and with reputations for hard riding and fighting.

‘Slim Calhoun and Faust,’ he said, a touch of derision in his cool voice. ‘It won’t do, Haskell. Better put down that gun before you commit suicide. I’ll make you a proposition that will give you a run for your money. You’ve always claimed you are the best man in Boone County with your dukes. I’m going to find that out, now.’

‘What you mean?’ Haskell demanded suspiciously.

‘We’ll settle this if you have enough sand in your craw in a fist-and-skull fight. You win, and the road is open to the railroad. Neither I nor my friends will molest you. If I win, you go back with me to Jonesboro.’

‘Whyfor would I go back to Jonesboro?’

‘To answer a few questions Magruder wants to ask you about the K. & J. robbery,’ Cole said quietly.

‘I ain’t scared to answer any questions he asks me, and I ain’t scared to put up my dukes with you. I could whop you the best day you ever saw with one hand tied behind me,’ blustered Haskell.

‘That’s what I’m going to find out, as I said before. You can use a quirt on a woman, you cowardly dog. Let us see how you stack up when you face a man.’

‘Ask yore friend Slim about that,’ the ex-foreman boasted. ‘And how do I know you’d stick to yore word and let me go after I’ve whopped you?’

‘You know it because I’m not a liar like you,’ Cole told him curtly. ‘Make up your mind in a hurry. What’s it to be? Do you want a chance for your life? Or don’t you?’

Haskell hesitated. The urgent impulse was on him to pour lead into the body of the man he hated. If he only knew where the other two riders were who had come into the pass! Sanborn could not stand there facing him with that impudent grin unless he was sure of where his friends were. The sound of a gun would probably bring them on the run. On the other hand, he was sure he could beat Sanborn in a fist-fight. He had twenty-five pounds on the

man. Moreover, much as he feared and hated this fellow, he knew Cole was a man of his word. If he said the road was open, the road would be open.

Jerry ripped out a savage oath. 'You've got a licking coming to you, fellow!' he cried, and put down his revolver.

Cole unbuckled his belt, dropped it, and stepped forward. In him was a cold, vindictive joy. Haskell had delivered himself into his hands. He had promised Mary not to kill the man, but he had said nothing about beating him as long as he could stand and take it.

Haskell shuffled forward awkwardly. He was strong as a bear, and his great power had always brought him victory in a hand-to-hand rough-and-tumble. His big fist swept round in a wide swing. Cole beat him to the punch with a hard right to the chin. An uptilted elbow deflected the swing. Before Cole stepped back, he had landed two heavy body punches.

The bigger man grunted and rushed, head down and arms flailing. An uppercut snapped back the head and a straight left reached an eye. Once more Sanborn was out of reach, still untouched except for blows his arms and shoulders had smothered. Cole's muscles were long and rippling, like those of a panther. He moved in and out lightly, easily, and his arms lashed out with precision and perfect timing.

The foreman was already panting heavily. Both eyes were swollen and his cheeks were puffed. What worried him was that he could not land his blows effectively. He did not know he was telegraphing them in time for his foe to sidestep, duck, or drive home counter-punches a fraction of a second before his own were due to arrive. Jerry was never a fast thinker, but it was clear to him now that he was beaten unless he could close with this fellow and throw him down so that his skill would be wasted.

He rushed again and caught a ringing clout on the side of the head. His reaching arms did not close on the elusive enemy. To him it seemed that a dozen flying fists were hammering at his face and body. He stopped to gather breath, his lungs gasping. The noise of hammers and of buzzing saws were singing in his dizzy brain. Sanborn would not let him rest, but swarmed all over him.

Haskell fought back with all he had. A red bruise showed on Cole's cheekbone. His lip was cut. But Jerry did not deceive himself. He knew he was staggering, that legs and arms were heavy with weariness. Nothing could save him if he was not able to throw Sanborn down and beat his head against the ground till he was unconscious. The big man went forward drunkenly, trying to get a grip on his antagonist.

Cole knew his time had come. Out of the corner of an eye he saw a boulder behind him and avoided it. Jerry stumbled into the outcropping rock, and at the same instant Cole's right lashed to the chin.

The foreman crashed down like a log and lay as motionless.

Cole stood panting above him.

From the pass below a voice hailed him. 'Aren't you a good ways off yore range, oldtimer?'

Slim Calhoun and Gray Shirt were looking up at him.

'Come up here,' Cole called down. 'Got something to show you.'

They rode up the draw. What they saw surprised them.

'Not dead, is he?' Faust asked, with a nod toward the unconscious man.

'No. We had a shindig with our fists. I knocked him out.'

Slim took a look at his friend and another at Haskell. 'You certainly worked his face over handsome,' he said. 'It sure warms my gizzard. Not so long ago I was on the receiving end from this *hombre*. I wish you had given me an invite to the party. I'm the dog-gondest guy for getting places just too late.'

'What are you going to do with him?' Faust asked.

'Going to take him back to Magruder.'

'We aimed to save you this job, Cole,' said Slim. 'But I reckon it had to be this way. Better let me bandage up yore shoulder again. I notice it's bleeding. I would say, offhand, that getting into a hand-to-hand rookus with Jerry Haskell was no respectful way to treat a wound.'

Faust took charge of the prisoner while Slim attended to the shoulder. This done, they assembled their horses and headed down the pass for Jonesboro. Haskell kept a sullen and dejected silence. Not only had he been whipped. They were taking him back to pay for his crime. He had a well-grounded fear that the tide had turned. He would be tried for killing the express messenger the night of the train-robbery. Unless he was lucky he would be hanged. They probably had not a great deal of evidence against him, but it would not take a great deal to convict if Chet Radbourne's power was smashed. Everybody would have a knife out for him.

Slim rode beside Haskell and lifted his voice in a ballad more or less plagiarized, more or less unmetrical. Sometimes the inspiration failed, since there were eleven stanzas, at which times he repeated himself unblushingly. The theme of the song was the recent doings of one Cole Sanborn. It

narrated various adventures, in all of which one Jerry Haskell took a humiliating and ignominious part.

It began:

‘Old King Cole was a merry old soul,
A merry old soul was he;
He called for his hoss, and he called for his roll,
And he called for his side-kicks three.’

It ended:

‘Old King Cole was a merry old soul,
A merry old soul was he;
He dragged home this cat, and the cat was a pole,
To be hanged on a cottonwood tree.’

‘If you are quite through, Slim,’ suggested Cole at last.

‘I was only entertaining our guest,’ Slim protested, aggrieved.

CHAPTER XLI

'PORT AFTER STORMIE SEAS'

MRS. PETERS was just leaving the house, a shopping-bag on her arm. 'I'm glad to see you, Mr. Sanborn,' she said. 'Is—everything all right?'

'Couldn't be more right,' he said. 'How about here, at this end?'

She smiled. 'I'll answer in your own words. I think Mary is in her room. You might knock.'

With which Mrs. Peters continued on her way. She judged she was not needed at home just now.

Cole walked into the house, put down his hat, and looked at the closed door of his wife's bedroom. He felt extraordinarily shy. A small cough did not attract attention. He knocked on the door.

'Come in,' a low throaty contralto invited.

He turned the knob and walked into the bedroom.

Mary was doing some kind of embroidery work. She rose, startled, the color washed out of her face.

'You're back,' she said, with a catch of the breath.

'Yes,' he said. 'My job's done.'

'You didn't——?'

The question hung suspended.

'No. We brought him back. He is in jail now.'

She gave a little sob of relief. 'He didn't hurt you?'

'No. One time he thought he would, but he changed his mind. You got back to town all right, not too tired?'

'Yes. Sheriff Magruder brought me back. They searched Haskell's cabin and found the clothes he wore at the hold-up of the train. There is any amount of evidence piled up against him. He was the one who killed the express messenger.'

'I saw Magruder when I turned him over. The sheriff says he hasn't a chance to beat the testimony against him. He'll hang.'

'Mr. Radbourne is in trouble, too,' Mary said. 'His gang is falling away from him. The politicians he ruled are afraid. They see the tide has turned,

Mr. Peters says, and they are all scrambling to make themselves safe by telling what they know.'

Both of them were talking commonplaces to escape the tide of emotion sweeping them into each other's arms.

'He's through,' Cole said. 'He'll go to the penitentiary. Too many of his chickens will come home to roost.'

'Yes,' she agreed.

'And we—we're just beginning.' He moved toward her.

There was color enough in her face now. 'Yes,' she murmured.

He looked at her, soft and dewy and adorable. Love poured through his veins, irradiated him, filled him with keen-edged desire for this girl who was to be his mate. At last. 'Port after stormie seas.'

Closing the door, he strode forward. He put his arms around her. Mary lifted a rapt young face to his kiss.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

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

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Square-Shooter* by William MacLeod Raine]