

BUCKAROO



*** 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: Buckaroo: A Tale of the Texas Rangers

Date of first publication: 1933

Author: Eugene Cunningham

Date first posted: Aug. 6, 2021

Date last updated: Aug. 6, 2021

Faded Page eBook #20210817

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

BUCKAROO

A Tale of the Texas Rangers

BY
EUGENE CUNNINGHAM



GROSSET & DUNLAP
Publishers ~ New York

COPYRIGHT, 1933, BY EUGENE CUNNINGHAM

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

PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

TO
MARY CAROLYN
*Who didn't get to ride in the Rodeo
Parade that time—this book is
affectionately dedicated, as a
poor substitute for that
ride she missed, by
its and her
author*

THE TEXAS RANGERS

TEXAS THE REPUBLIC saw the beginning of this famous organization, back in the days when Goliad, the Alamo, San Jacinto, were gossip, not history. Lean and bronzed, savage fighting men, horsemen incomparable, they 'ranged' in bands to hunt marauding red men. Under Jack Hays and Walker and Zavala, they went to the Mexican War, and in the storming of Monterey showed the Rangers' fierce fighting quality. In 1874, the Rangers were reorganized in six companies as the Frontier Battalion, intended to keep peace along the vast frontier of the State. These were the roaring days of railroad construction camp, boom town, and trail herd. The rustler, the horsethief, the 'bad man' of many varieties were rampant. Only the Texas Ranger could fully cope with them—and history records that the Ranger did! In Austin, the State capital, the Adjutant-General took the lists of wanted desperadoes sent in by peace officers from the length and breadth of Texas. From hundreds of local 'wanted notices,' he compiled a thick, paper-backed book, the famous, *List of Fugitives from Justice*. The Texas Rangers made this *Fugitive List* their 'Bible Two,' and pored over it as perhaps 'Bible One' was never studied! Once, they had more than a thousand names of desperate, wanted men upon that list. And the companies of McNelly, 'Red' Hall, Dan Roberts, N. O. Reynolds, John R. Hughes, Bill McDonald moved back and forth across the wildest sections of Texas, waging war against entrenched and far-flung outlawry that had mocked and flouted every judge but 'Old Judge Colt.' Never numerous, the Rangers ignored odds. They arrested their men, or killed their men, or saw them 'buy a trunk' and vanish over the Texas line in a high cloud of dust. They saw trouble—much trouble! They saw it through the smoke! Rangers there were, aplenty, who 'never smiled again' after encounter with the enemy; who died boots on in the brushy country, the greasewood flats, the cedar brakes, the tangled *bosque* along the Rio Grande, the bare and savage and sinister Southwestern mountains. But no matter who died, or who lived, the Rangers tamed Texas. They carried Court Law on the heels of Gun Law. It was incidental, only, that in bringing law to lawless regions they established an amazing record and built an imperishable name and created a thrilling and colorful folklore. Some day, a *History of the Texas Rangers* will be written. And any chapter of that history will furnish material for a novel such as this.

E. C.

CONTENTS

I. 'PACHE ORD'S STAMPING-GROUNDS	1
II. LORD OF LAWLESS TOWN	13
III. THE SNAKE STRIKES	26
IV. A RANGER LOOP	36
V. 'I'LL SEE YOU UNDER GRASS!'	50
VI. SIX-SHOOTER LAW	59
VII. HANGING EVIDENCE	69
VIII. 'THEY'RE A-LAYIN' FOR YOU!'	80
IX. GUILTY CONSCIENCE!	87
X. A TRACK AND A HALF	100
XI. THE JUMPING DOG	111
XII. APRON STRINGS	120
XIII. 'ENSON WON VINGIE FROM SNAKE!'	133
XIV. THE HOUSE BY THE SNAKE	141
XV. KILLER DUST	151
XVI. GHOST EVIDENCE	157
XVII. RANGER STYLE	168
XVIII. A PRINT IN THE SAND	177
XIX. WINCHESTER WEDDING	187
XX. ROCKER-O RAWHIDE	196
XXI. GUN ROUND-UP	209
XXII. 'A NICE EVENIN'S WORK!'	217
XXIII. SIGN OF THE SNAKE	225
XXIV. CHANGE OF HEART	235
XXV. 'WHERE DID SNAKE GO?'	244
XXVI. AT THE PITCHFORK HERD	256
XXVII. SHOWDOWN!	268
XXVIII. '—— BUCKAROO!'	277

BUCKAROO

A Novel of the Texas Rangers

BUCKAROO



CHAPTER I

'Pache Ord's Stamping-Grounds

'Oh, I got a gal name' Sue!
Twelve foot high, nine foot th'ough.
Weighed six hund'd—then she grew.
She's the sweetest gal I ever knew.

'I went ramblin' th'ough the land.
Hit Dodge with a cowboy band.
Smelt that dust an' seen that sand.
When I got back I shore felt grand!

'Back home I found my gal Sue——'

VERN DEDERICK'S Sue song stopped abruptly. For the rider hundreds of yards ahead, whom Vern had been watching with that mechanical alertness proper to a Ranger sergeant riding 'under cover' through a new, a strange, and a savage land—that rider had come crashing, suddenly, without reason, without warning, to the dusty trail. The horse had crumpled as though lightning-struck; crumpled like a paper thing.

'Goodness gracious!' Vern drawled gently.

His sandy brows drew together over prominent nose. Violet blue eyes were of color more like that of smoky steel than that of flowers, during his interested contemplation of the scene ahead.

'Ah-h!' he breathed after an instant, with perfect understanding.

For, from a low heap of boulders over to the left of that piled rider, a smoke-puff was drifting upward in the still air. Horse and rider sprawled motionless. No further demonstration came from the 'dry gulcher' hidden behind the rocks.

'Now, this,' Vern Dederick said softly aloud, 'it's one of them problem things—yes, sir! As a Ranger sergeant, I of course have got fullest jurisdiction an' authority from the Great an' Sovereign State of Texas to ramrod right into that li'l' bitsy fracas, as seems best to me. But—what is best?'

He whistled tunelessly, began to frown.

‘That ol’ hairpin who made the salty remark about politics bein’ apt to mix up the bedrooms, he just said it before I got around to speech makin’. That tumblin’ *gunie* in the dust, yonder, spraddled out over the serene an’ lovely face of Nature, he may have needed plenty killin’. That bushwhacker, now—*he* may be a duly elected officer of Paradise or Ord Counties. So *quien sabe, quien sabe?*’

But, if he were puzzled—and also very loath to disclose in this wild section of West Texas his identity—he was also a creature of habit. So, as he meditated aloud, he was moving—going at a running walk neither fast nor slow, pushing his tall chestnut gelding toward the dismounted rider.

Very smoothly, a .44 Winchester carbine had come out of Vern Dederick’s saddle scabbard. It had climbed into his hand, held as easily as if it had been a pistol. Very expertly, Vern divided his attention between the rider pinned under the fallen buckskin and the Winchesterful personage holed up in the boulders. The laxness of his tall body in the saddle was the instinctive looseness of the wolf ready to jump.

So, when suddenly another smoke-puff blossomed there over the bushwhacker’s shelter, he was ready for it.

‘*Aha!*’ said Vern grimly. ‘Now, *that* changes everything!’

If he had been unwilling to mix into an affair that probably concerned him not at all, one of the ‘shooting scrapes’ said to be so common in this lawless neighborhood through which he was no more than a wayfarer, he was not unwilling now!

‘No gent’ of the dry gulchin’ persuasion is goin’ to comb *my* favorite yellow locks with a .45-90 an’ get away with the barberin’. No, sir! Not by a beltful of .44s, he’s not!’

He had whirled the long-legged chestnut as if the flat report of the big rifle were an expected signal. He was racing away to the left, lying all but flat over the saddle horn. The gelding ran like a scared quarter horse. Again and yet again the .45-90 bellowed from the boulders. Vern was followed by those leaden compliments until he reached a point that flanked the boulders—a place from which the ambushed one could be plainly seen.

The well-trained gelding automatically shoved out his forefeet and turned a little sidewise under the sway of his rider’s long body, the pressure of a knee. The .44 carbine came quickly up to Vern’s shoulder. A hail of more and more accurately driven slugs rained around the crouching figure.

Vern Dederick with a Winchester was only a shade less deadly than when he used the long-barreled Colt.

The bushwhacker was smitten with a burning desire to emigrate. He jumped up awkwardly, but fast. He went running toward a near-by bunch of chaparral. A sudden lurch in his gait told of a boot heel knocked off by a bullet. Dust puffed out of the flapping blue vest he wore. Vern ceased firing and leaned forward, grimly eager, to see if that homing slug had taken the cake. But the fellow staggered for a step and another, then ran on. Vern rammed in the hooks and sent the chestnut racing at the boulders.

When he reached the piled rocks, he caught another glimpse of the fugitive. The man was mounted, now. Low along his horse's neck, he was going at the hard gallop away from there. Vern shook his head thoughtfully, then turned in the saddle to stare across at the motionless buckskin and its voiceless rider.

'Back home I found my gal Sue,
In a new dress all of blue.
With a gambler name' of Lou
Weddin' heaps when up I drew.'

'Suppose, just for instance,' a caustic voice suggested from beneath the dead buckskin, 'you stop that tomcat yowling for long enough to make yourself useful—haul my horse off me. If it's not *too* much to ask, you know _____,'

'Dear me an' well-well-well!' Vern cried in a pained voice, kneeling the chestnut over a little. He swung down. 'Looks like there's just no such thing as gratefulness any more, in all the long longness an' the wide wideness, of the land. Here I come foggin' up an' I put a bee into the breeches of yo' Winchesterful friend in the boulders, an' what do I collect? I ask you! I do more: I tell you! I loop a smear of lemonistic language about my singin'. Ah is me! an' also——'

He was going around the buckskin, now, wearing the saddest of sad faces. He stopped, looked down, then slapped the rim of his black Denver Stetson, knocking it back on his head so that it permitted a longer view of the imprisoned one.

'It's a child!' he cried incredulously. 'A girl-child! Well, I'll be dad-burned! Why, sister! How-come you're a——'

'Never mind all the talking!' the girl cried furiously. 'Don't act the natural idiot any more than you have to, to feel normal and right! Put your rope on my horse, will you! Drag him off my legs!'

‘Rope? Rope? Why, that’s not necessary, a bit!’ he assured her cheerfully. ‘I have been ridin’ along just wishin’ that somethin’d come up to give me my mornin’ exercise. But nothin’ showed, so I have been pullin’ up these post-oaks by the roots an’ chunkin’ ’em over my shoulders—one to the right, one to the left—— Why, you can trail me for hund’ds an’ hund’ds of miles, sister, by the post-oak trees along the road——’

He stooped gravely and caught the forelegs of the dead horse. The girl’s wide, dark eyes were steady, contemptuous, staring at his angular, tanned face. But they narrowed slightly, the red mouth tightened a trifle, as under blue flannel shirt great muscles tautened and the eight hundred pounds of dead buckskin were deftly dragged over.

‘Hurt any, sister?’ he inquired genially.

She looked up at him, made a disgusted sound, then began chafing slim and very shapely legs, ignoring him. He squatted beside her and took the makings from shirt pocket. He rolled a cigarette, put it in his mouth and fumbled in hatband for a match. Quite openly, he studied her. Some rancher’s daughter, of course; seventeen, eighteen, nineteen—he was not strong at guessing girls’ ages, and her neat breeches, mannish shirt, made her age rather indeterminate.

‘My legs were just about paralyzed!’ she condescended, presently. ‘Thanks for yanking Colorado off me. I suppose you are wondering about that man? Oh! Did you hit him? I couldn’t see. I could only hear your shots.’

‘Dusted his vest some. But likely I just burned him. He rode off well enough. Is he a prominent citizen around here?’

‘Prominent enough! If he’s the man I think—I only had a quick look at him before he knocked Colorado on top of me. It’s Frio Jack. I told Dad yesterday that Frio’d be up to something. You see, Dad kicked him off the place and booted him up the road to Ord for about a mile.’

‘So that’s where you get that disposition! Goodness, gracious, but this sounds like a fe-ro-cious kind of country! I don’t recollect when I have heard about a savager. A poor shorthorn like me, now—he’ll have a hard time with you-all!’

He rolled blue eyes most innocently upon her. But the girl, sitting there with neatly booted legs extended, rubbing them mechanically, studied his wide-shouldered, almost lean, six feet, from Stetson’d yellow head to fancy stitched Fort Worth shopmade boots. Detail by detail she ticketed him—crimson neckerchief knotted carelessly at the open throat of blue flannel

shirt; buttonless vest and new blue woolen trousers; bone-handled Colt of seven-inch barrel hung cannily, butt to front on left thigh...

‘Shorthorn...’ she said. ‘Shorthorn... Well—you’re not so much to see, of course... and your singing’s terrible... but you’ll pass as a Texas man... or do until a real puncher comes along.’

She got up, looked carelessly at Pico the tall chestnut, then back at Vern:

‘Well, I have to get along. I’ll borrow your horse and send one of the boys back with him, or with a fresh horse.’

‘Oh, don’t bother,’ Vern grinned dryly. ‘Pico’ll carry double. He’s done it lots of times, before. He’s a good-natured fella, Pico is. You have got no idee!’

‘Probably not. But I have enough ideas to do me through the day. One of them is—I never ride double. I’m not riding double, now. It’s only fifteen or sixteen miles to where I’ll go. You can wait until a horse comes.’

‘Aw, I’m sorry! You really don’t know how sorry I am! Nobody will ever know how sorry you make me. Nobody ever dreamed how sorry I can get. But—waitin’ just happens to be one of the forty-nine things I can’t abide. I just don’t like waitin’. If there’s anything that plumb gives me the unwillin’ willies, it’s waitin’. An’, much as I lay stress an’ set store on helpin’ out a girl, I just don’t know how I’d look, walkin’ in these boots. Besides, it’d likely bust the guarantee: you see, I bought ’em for ridin’-boots an’ if I was to start out walkin’ in ’em, without the makers’ permission——’

‘That’s terribly funny. I’ll laugh about it on the way home. Your Pico billy goat may be broken to packing your lady friends around, but I’m not that kind, you see. Men sometimes ride alongside my horse. But the *tonto hombre* who tried any of that double business on me—well! He would never try it again, without my permission in writing. So—as I said—I’ll borrow the billy goat and send him back——’

‘Now, I’m mighty sorry—as *I* said! But I just looked up on the shelf an’ I find that I’m all out of horses to loan...’

The girl’s dark brows drew together. She glared at him:

‘Do you know who I am?’ she demanded, in a tone harsh, domineering, that was out of all keeping with her years.

‘If we’re goin’ to play games, let’s try Drop-the-Handkerchief—or Postoffice—I always liked ’em a lot better than guessin’ games,’ he answered plaintively. ‘Specially Postoffice!’

‘*I’m Priscilla Ord!*’ she cried—and added: ‘You fool!’

Vern Dederick regarded her very thoughtfully, from the shelter of that whimsical mask he wore often. He knew little enough about kings and queens and princes and—princesses. His schooling had included not much of tales of royalty. But that was what she reminded him of—royalty. ‘I’m Priscilla Ord!’ she cried at him. Just as if she had cried: ‘I’m the Princess _____’,

But he ‘was Texas’—in the old phrase. And Texas may salute the king respectfully, for in Texas the king has battled up to the throne and rides there ‘slick’ and scorns the bucking roll and the hobbled stirrups. But prince or princess is ‘the king’s kid’ or ‘the king’s gal’—and nothing more. So, now _____

‘Priscilla Ord,’ Vern Dederick said deliberately, in the tone of one turning the name over and over for inspection by the inner eye. ‘Priscilla... Why, sure! *Prissy!* I ought’ve known that. *Prissy...* it fits you! Fits you like Hackberry Slim fitted the bear after the said bear had swallowed the aforesaid Hackberry Slim!’

The effect upon Priscilla Ord was explosive. The smooth oval of her face—normally clearest ivory—was instantly flooded with scarlet. She glared at him like an enraged tiger kitten. It amused him and he grinned at her.

Then she took three quick steps. She got to Pico’s stirrup. Vern Dederick moved only a shade more slowly. But he stopped before the muzzle of the pistol which she had jerked from some hide-out. Facing him, keeping the Colt unwaveringly leveled on him, she found a stirrup with her foot. She swung up—and the muzzle had never shifted from him.

Leaning a little, to recover the split reins, she seemed to lose her anger as quickly as she had found it. She smiled down at him—a triumphant, rather tolerantly malicious sort of smile. Vern watched her curiously.

‘Just think of all the funniness you can be storing up, while you’re waiting!’ she said sweetly. ‘Between now and the time the goat comes back to you, you should have a large—and maybe a better!—collection of smart remarks, figured out. You might spend some time thinking, too, that when you cross the line into Paradise County, or Ord County, you’re in the middle of ‘Pache Ord’s stamping grounds. Bright strangers sing Low A in this country. They sing it the second time, if not the first.’

‘I—have heard,’ he nodded gravely, ‘that out this way ‘most anything is apt to happen—an’ frequently does. All the way from bushwhackin’ style murders to—to horse-stealin’!’

‘Can happen!’ she replied flippantly. ‘But this isn’t a case of horse-stealing. Why, it’s just a loan—a friendly loan! And nobody will bother you in this neighborhood, since you lent a hand when Frio Jack was trying his come back at Dad. I wouldn’t have thrown down on you, brother—even after that “Prissy,” which is a name I never tolerate from anyone—if you hadn’t just forced my hand. Well... *adiós!*’

‘*Hasta la vista!*’ he said very solemnly. Then, as she put the rowels to Pico, he shook his head. ‘That li’l’ ol’ half-pint of Nerve—an’ Conceit—an’ Hell Fire!’ he drawled, watching her put Pico into his swinging lope. His eyes twinkled. Again he shook his head and put a big hand up to shirt pocket. From it he got a silver whistle. She was fifty yards away, now. She turned in the saddle to wave. Vern put the whistle to his lips...

Pico, old Lum Adams of the Open A had told Vern, when selling him the gelding, was ‘just a natural-born cuttin’ hawse. Give him a dime to turn on and Pico’ll hand you back seven cents change.’ Now, turning about with the whistle’s blast as if spun by a pivot, he lengthened the lope into the hard, pounding gallop, to come tearing back to his master. Priscilla Ord, however, was not with him. She had been waving, twisted about. As Pico spun she had snatched desperately at the saddle horn, but missed it.

She went head first out of the swellfork, to land with a thud that—Vern decided placidly—must have rattled her teeth. She rolled over and lay moveless.

Vern caught the trailing reins, passed them up over Pico’s neck, went into the saddle without touching stirrups. He rammed feet into the brass-bound hoops and whirled Pico. He thundered down upon her, to rein in, wary of that .38 Colt. Then he saw it, glinting in the dust two yards beyond her. She sat up and stared vaguely about.

‘So I says to this gal Sue:
“What’s all this here rankaboo?
You promised me your true love true.
How-come this splicin’ long of Lou?”’

‘Pico,’ he broke off to say gravely, staring at the far and dim horizon, ‘he really carries double plumb nice. An’ I am not ex-act-ly what you’d call a lady-wrangler. I broke him to the double business when I was doin’ somethin’—well, a lot different from gal-totin’. Anyhow, it’s ride the hull while I hang on behind, or wait till I send somebody out to *you*. Suit yo’self, sister!’

She glared up at him, red under lip caught between her teeth. Without warning, she came to her feet and forward, to slash up at him with the heavy

quirt looped on her wrist. But Pico moved twistingly under knee pressure. Vern shot a big hand downward. He caught the quirt, jerked it to him and she—held by the wrist loop—cannoned jarringly into his knee. He reached down, caught her about the waist and lifted her. She was dropped on the saddle seat. He slipped back over the cantle.

‘Now, you sit up here nice an’ pretty!’ he admonished her. ‘I’ve had about enough of this monkey business! You can maybe scare all the natives of Paradise an’ Ord, but I’m a poor shorthorn that don’t know enough to *be* scared. What you have been needin’ for a long, long time is a downright good spankin’. Mess with me some more an’ that’s what you’ll collect. Well? Goin’ to be a sweet child?’

She stiffened against the thick arms that penned her in. He tightened them slightly and she relaxed. Vern touched Pico gently and they jogged forward. For a mile or so they rode silently—except for Vern’s untroubled humming of his Sue song’s tune. Then she spoke without turning.

‘There’s a Rocker-O line camp a couple of miles over yonder,’ she volunteered in a tone the more deadly for its very flatness. ‘You can drop me there. I’ll have one of the boys catch me up a horse.’

‘Fine!’ he cried cheerfully. ‘An’ how far do you call it, to that God-forsaken nest of prairie dogs name’ Paradise?’

‘Not so very far—for strangers foolish enough to call it that, and with tickets reading one way only. Say, twenty miles.’

‘More ferociousness!’ he sighed. ‘This is an awful country for a shorthorn like me.’

She sniffed and remained silent while he drew widely upon an untrammelled imagination for tales of his prowess in Sunday Schools, the prizes his virtue had won, the wickedness he had seen in his travels.

CHAPTER II

Lord of Lawless Town

‘WELL, sir!’ Vern cried enthusiastically, ‘as soon as the Missionary Society heard about my convertin’ that hard-case crew of Walkin’ M cowboys—at the risk of my life, too!—an’ realized none of ’em would ever go drinkin’ whiskey or dancin’ or carousin’ around again, they all got together in a big meetin’ an’ they says’—he spoke nasally and there was a suspicious squirming of the slender shoulders before him—‘they have got to do somethin’ for this noble man who’s carryin’ the banner to the godless. So they sent me a lovely set of pink knitted anklets an’—— Well! I reckon that’s the line camp. I get so wrapped up in my edifyin’ talk when I meet a sinner——’

It was a dugout in a hill’s slope. A swarthy man, sitting at the door plaiting horsehair, lifted his head. Then he put down the bridle he was making and came with a marked limp toward them. Vern thought that, if that copy of *The List of Fugitives from Justice* in his saddle pocket could have only one picture between its blue-gray covers, to show young Rangers what a born criminal should look like, this hatchet-faced and sinister fellow of the close-set eyes could pose for that typical portrait. The cowboy looked at them without saying anything. From Vern his shifty eyes went to Priscilla.

‘Catch up your horse,’ the girl ordered him curtly. ‘Follow this billy goat’s trail till you come to my buckskin. He’s dead. Pull my saddle and bridle off him and bring it here. And get back—*pronto!*’

The cowboy nodded and limped off around the dugout. Priscilla slipped quickly to the ground. She looked up at Vern—stared at him very calculatingly:

‘You’re sure you want to go on—toward Paradise?’

‘Oh, abs’lutely!’ Vern nodded energetically. ‘Sure!’

‘Then I advise you not to stay very long... Do you ever—think of—*snakes?*’

‘Can’t say I do, no,’ Vern shrugged carelessly, but watching her carefully, notwithstanding. ‘I—*do* step on ’em sometimes... Or pop their heads off with a slug.’

‘Well, whether or not you do, ordinarily, this will be a very good time to begin—right now,’ she said blandly. ‘It’s pretty sure that one’s going to

figure in your future—your very near future—in a very active way.’

‘Do tell?’ he inquired politely. ‘You almost scare me plumb to death, you almost do! It’d be terrible if a snake hopped up an’ bit me before I could step on it. Well... g’bye, Sis! See you some more, maybe, sometime. But I reckon when you get to be a grown-up young lady, you’ll forget yo’ old friends. But, anyhow—*adiós!*’

To himself, as he jogged quietly along the trail which led to that ‘forsaken nest of prairie dogs named Paradise,’ he said with meditative head-shake:

‘If she’s not just the blue sky limit! Like a man—so far in her life. She hits right straight out when somethin’ don’t please her. But she’s pretty as any li’l’ ol’ red wagon you’d ever find. She is that! I—could wish I was stickin’—in this country. I’ll bet it’d be an interestin’ session!’

Then he forgot her. For he began to think of Ord and Paradise, these counties across which he was riding. They were in the center of the wildest, most lawless section of Texas. Desperadoes thronged there, particularly in Paradise County. For Paradise was not yet organized. For purposes of administration it was attached to Ord County.

‘An’ that makes it easy for such a bunch as runs things around here,’ Vern reflected, out of the fullness of much experience on the frontier. ‘It’s a case of controllin’ one county an’ they control two. They’ve got Ord, so they’ve got Paradise. An’ the way things are said to be goin’, they’re goin’ to come to the place where the Rangers’ll *have* to step in an’ sort of tidy things up an’ fumigate with powder smoke. Well! This trip she’s no never mind to me. An’ I reckon, if I stop to mix into the mess——’

He grinned without humor. He thought that, if he stopped now to try a lone wolf crusade against the embattled office-holders of Ord, his stop was very apt to be permanent!

He knew that, in *The List of Fugitives from Justice* compiled by the Adjutant-General at Austin from the reports of Texas sheriffs, there were now more than three thousand names. More than half of these names—as listed in the copy of ‘Ranger Bible Number Two’ now in Vern’s saddle pocket—were those of men wanted for major crimes. A thousand and upward were wanted for murder; rewards ranging from a hundred to ten thousand dollars had been posted for their capture.

‘An’ just plenty of those sheriffs’ notices are followed in the book by a mightily interestin’ note: *Believed to be goin’ under another name an’ now somewhere around Ord or Paradise Counties...*’ Vern thought grimly.

It was in the shank of the afternoon that Vern saw ahead of him, across the rolling Chaparral country, an untidy collection of frame buildings. They seemed to have been dropped carelessly by someone tired of them. But he found nothing unusual about the irregular lines, the shabbiness, of Paradise's unofficial county seat. Most cow-towns looked pretty much the same. Anyway, it was no more than a way-point for him. He was due at Tituston two hundred miles beyond. There, a small chore had been assigned by the Governor to the Rangers, by the Adjutant-General to Captain Tandy, by Tandy to Sergeant Dederick:

He would look carefully into conditions in Tituston and, if he thought it wise, arrange for removal of the local sheriff and temporarily take charge of law enforcement.

Nobody knew how far the friends of the Tituston clans might be scattered. Some sharp-eyed and suspicious and quick-triggered gentleman right here in Paradise might take it upon himself to whang away at the Ranger who was headed for Tituston, to worry the quick-shooting one's good friends or relatives. So Vern wished nothing but lack of attention as he rode.

But this he did not find, in Paradise! The surprisingly thick groups of idlers here on Paradise streets turned upon him the coldest, hardest, most searching stares, as he rode up toward the center of town. It was no new experience to him. He had been a Ranger for five years—since his twenty-third birthday. He had been a cowboy all his life before then. So he knew these men instinctively; understood their ways and habits.

He pushed Pico in between two of the horses at the Boston Eating House hitch rack. As he swung down, he noted mechanically that all of Pico's neighbors were good horses—very good horses, indeed! And their brands were many and various... He told himself again that this was a salty country; a land of the Long Rope, the Wide Loop, the Sticky Loop!

'About time the Rangers drove up—an' hitched—an' stayed a spell—an' fetched in a new, stiff broom ...' he said to himself.

Then he was ducking under the hitch rack; nodding colorlessly to those brown-faced and steady-eyed riding men on the plank porch of the Boston restaurant.

They returned him nods just as non-committal as his own. He went into the hash house and sat down at a long, rough counter. He sat close to the door end of the counter. So, as he waited for his meal, his eyes twinkled. For Pico was drawing a good deal of attention—more than even his unmistakable quality deserved, among so many good horses. Men kept

drifting up, to cock an eye at the Open A (A) on the chestnut's near hip; to look then at one another and pass on; to be replaced by others. Vern Dederick devoted himself to the tough steak, the greasy fried potatoes, the saleratus streaked biscuit and inky coffee of the Boston's *menu*.

'That makes about forty interested hairpins I've counted,' he said to himself. 'By God! These folks'd take a circus clown plumb serious, if he was to ride into Paradise a stranger!'

But outwardly he gave no sign that he had noted this interest in himself, after he had paid his score and drifted out to the sidewalk. He crossed the dusty Main Stem, heading for the general merchandise store he saw, thinking of tobacco. He walked always pretty much like a cat, with short, soft-falling steps. So he was unheard as he came into the store's gloomy interior and halted just inside the door to let his eyes refocus.

The murmur of voices came to him, as he stared down the store's length. Two men became clear to him—one, a squat and very wide figure, in shirt sleeves and dark trousers, bareheaded; the other, a tall, slender man who seemed to be dressed as a cowman. As Vern stared, a voice was suddenly lifted. It was a husky voice and indignant of tone; it seemed by nature to belong to that thick bodied bareheaded man:

'No! I'm tellin' ye ag'in, an' for the domned-if-I-know which time, no! It cannot be done! What use—if I might be askin' ye—would it be to stand in the best possible light with 'em, if standin' so will bust me flat? No! Ye come in, a-buyin' big bills o' stuff, the lot o' ye! But niver a cint o' money do I see. An' now—now, ye're wantin' the wee bit I make out o' the five-six honest folks in the country! I'm tellin' ye, an' I'm tellin' ye plain: *No!*'

'But—my dear O'Hara!' the other man drawled silkily. 'You shock me! You pain me! Surely, conditions *can't* be as bad as you picture them! Why _____,

'No! Ye're quite right! They're not as bad as thot! *They're a domned sight worse!*' O'Hara snarled. 'I'd be money in me pocket the day, if I'd pull up stakes an' git to hell out o' Paradise! Git to some place where the little a storekeeper's after makin' can stick in his pocket, begad!'

'I'm sorry to see you take this attitude—really, I am!' the tall, slender man protested. 'For you know how—well, how the boys will take what you've said... As for moving out—you wouldn't do that. You mustn't think of doing it! For we can't hope to become a great, progressive community, the center of a wide and prosperous region, cradle of happy homes filled with prattling children, sturdy families, unless we have a loyal, prosperous, public-spirited merchant class!'

‘*Agggghh!* I do be sick to the very death o’ thot soapy tongue o’ yours!’ O’Hara snarled furiously. ‘I’m tellin’ ye: I do be at the bitter end o’ my rope! Ye have, among ye, worked the willin’ horse to death! So—no! Once more an’ for the last time—no!’

‘Of course, it’s your funeral,’ said the tall man carelessly. ‘Oh! By the way—have you any—*preference* to express? About the funeral, I mean. Any small suggestions you’d like to have followed, concerning—flowers, mourners, number of hacks, and all? I hope you won’t want too much display. For you must realize that in a young community such as ours, it’s hard to arrange the sort of funeral so common in the more settled, older, regions...’

‘Yes! by God!’ O’Hara cried huskily, leaning forward to bang a heavy fist on the counter and glare up at his tormentor.

Vern’s eyes twinkled as inwardly he made salute to this ugly, cross-grained, but none the less heroic figure, as belligerently the squat Irishman faced the tall man.

‘I have a domned good suggestion: Put me into the same hole wi’ thim thot goes before me! Thim thot will find out—an’ by no hearsay, I promise ye!—what it is I do be keepin’ in thot special-made Winchester riot gun o’ mine! Just hole the lot o’ us up together. Thin ye can be sure thot, if in the bunch o’ us anyone’s not satisfied, ’twill not be Shamus O’Hara!’

‘You poor fool! Oh, you poor, block-headed fool! Do you think for a minute that you can buck us? Buck—*me?*’

Vern’s hand crept closer to the white butt of the .45 on his thigh. For long experience and observation had told him what that twitching of elbows—as seen here, now, in the tall man—prophesied. But Shamus O’Hara, quite obviously, had not flung his defi without consideration of possibilities. *His* hand moved, now.

‘Be keepin’ thim hands from your plowhandles!’ he invited the other, very grimly. ‘*Yup! Yup!* Lift ’em! Else ye’ll be deader’n Pontius Pilate! *Yup!* This derringer shoots twice!’

‘I suppose it may have occurred to you that this is the very last straw?’

There was a note of deadliness that Vern Dederick, the experienced, had never heard more plainly than now, as it sounded in the voice of this tall man.

‘You have just asked for it. No man can throw down on me, O’Hara, and live to tell of it!’

‘Good-bye!’ O’Hara grunted contemptuously. ‘Good—bye!’

Vern lounged easily against the counter as the slender man whirled and came toward the front door. His face was blank—Vern's. His blue eyes held a faraway expression of sweet meditation, even when the man stopped short before him and stared.

He was one of the most perfect specimens of the frontier dandy that Vern had ever seen. Tall, slender, but with a suggestion of great strength and endurance, even in his high-heeled alligator hide boots he moved with a gliding, almost noiseless, step. His face was oddly shaped. The skin of it was olive-hued. The brow was of good height and very broad. The nose was a trifle flat of nostrils. The mouth was hardly more than a thin, pink line. The chin was short, square. Suddenly, it made Vern think of a great snake's head. The illusion was strengthened by the steady, almost lidless, stare of opaque black eyes.

He wore a broad-rimmed Mexican *sombrero* of white felt, a magnificent hat, profusely ornamented with gold and silver lace and with a gold snake—ruby-eyed—for its band.

His *charro* jacket of waist length was of soft tanned buckskin, heavily embroidered with silken flowers and designs in gold thread.

His shirt was snowy white, of the finest, thinnest linen. It was open at the sinewy throat, with a blue silk neckerchief knotted loosely about the wide collar. A scarlet sash, with ends gold-fringed, was about his slim waist. His legs were hidden by the most wonderful pair of leggings—*chaparejos*, or 'chaps,' they were called in this region—that Vern had ever dreamed of: They were made from the hide of a royal Bengal tiger and ornamented along the wings with colored buckskin fringe and more gold embroidery.

As he stopped before the silent, inscrutable Vern, he kept long, slender brown hands hooked by the thumbs in crossed cartridge belts of carven leather—very near to twin gold-and-silver-plated .45 double-actions. Vern's swift glance at the guns told him that these were the most expensive weapons he had ever set eyes upon. Their ivory butts were carved in the semblance of jumping fish, with along the backbones so many notches that the handles were almost saw-edged.

'And who are *you*?' he asked Vern. His voice was under control and both low and very level. But a pulse hammered in his muscular throat. His black eyes were smokily murderous.

'Cowboy,' Vern shrugged. 'Driftin' through.'

Steadily, without show of emotion, he met the opaque eyes. But he was ready to go into flaming action at first faint warning that this dandy intended

to loose the killing rage that seethed behind the smooth face. He knew that the fury was double: The man had not only backed down before O'Hara; he had been *seen* to back down. So Vern watched narrowly, if with indifferent face.

But the dandy turned without more words. He went out at his snaky gait, the only sounds a faint creaking of shell belts, the mellow tinkling of golden bells that hung upon his spurs. Vern watched him through the door until he had crossed Main Stem. Then he turned to face O'Hara, who had waddled forward.

'Duke's Mixture,' said Vern drawlingly.

O'Hara made a little hop-step and sat upon the counter. He leaned to a shelf and pulled down the sack of tobacco. He handed it to Vern and sat there, staring, while Vern made a cigarette with steady hands.

Vern was quite conscious of those small, ice-gray eyes trained upon his blank face. He reached up to hatband for a match. O'Hara scratched one upon the counter and held it out. His big hand was also steady. Vern leaned to the little flame and as he drew in smoke, he looked the Irishman in the eyes.

'Well!' O'Hara grunted explosively. 'I do be free to confess it—I'd hopes ye might kill him!'

'I know you had,' Vern nodded. His mouth lifted faintly at the corners. 'An' you'd have *got yo'* wish, if he'd started his wolf at me. Oh! maybe he would've collected me, too. But not without my openin' up some holes in him. Not this spring! That reminds me: Who is he?'

'What?' O'Hara cried incredulously. 'Ye don't be knowin' him? Not knowin' the Boy wit' the Brass Collar, o' ivery cowthief, an' horsethief, an' stage-robber, an' bank-robber, an' train-robber, in all the whole o' the Culebra River country? Not knowin' the Big Boss o' the tightest three hundred o' mingled an' assorted desperaydoes in the West? Not knowin'—Snake Stett? *Goddlemighty!*'

'Snake Stett,' Vern repeated thoughtfully, then shook his head and shrugged big shoulders. 'No... I've heard of him, but that's all. He wasn't interestin' me an'—a lot of other things did interest me. So——'

'Didn't inter-est ye,' O'Hara grunted. His red face was very grave. 'Well—do ye be dreamin' much, m' friend? If ye do, m' notion is, ye'll soon be dreamin' o' snakes! But, a deal better than *dreamin'* would be gittin' aboard your nag an' tryin' to ride clear o' Paradise an' Ord. Aye! *Try* is the word!'

‘Because I was watchin’ when you backed him down,’ Vern said. He grinned, nodding slightly. ‘When he was the circus...’

‘Ex-act-ly! I’m marked for a bullet, now. An’ so are *you*—before I collect mine, it’s very like. It’s not Shamus O’Hara’s considered as anyone’s soft spot upon which to land! But *you* are a stranger to him. An’, since ye were witness to the time o’ the most hurt Snake’s feelin’s have took in a-many’s the day, why——’

The snap of the thick, hard fingers was a sound like a pistol shot as significantly he made the gesture. Vern hardly noticed hand motion or sound. There had jumped suddenly to his mind what the girl, Priscilla Ord, had said. Something about a ‘snake’ figuring prominently in his immediate future.

He wondered if this swaggering dandy were a particular friend of hers. Was he, perhaps, so particularly close to her that she expected him to take up the quarrel she had conceived with a wandering stranger? Her—lover, even? Vern shook his head mechanically. Somehow, he could not think of that boyish youngster ‘sweethearting.’ As he had sized her, she would regard men as figures in the country’s play, not as *beaux*.

‘Well!’ he reminded himself whimsically, aloud, ‘I said it, this very day: I said that I wanted to stay in this Culebra River country!’

‘Huh?’ O’Hara cried, square fighter’s face puzzled, now. ‘Ye wanted to stick in the country, did ye? Well—I would say ye had a domned good chance o’ doin’ thot very thing!’

‘Think so? Well, I’ll see you some more,’ Vern grinned.

‘I do be hopin’ so...’

Vern looked hard at him, then grinned more widely. For the Irishman’s answer had somehow both dubiety and a sinister implication. Vern understood him very easily.

He loafed up to the door and looked across the Main Stem. He stared at the door of the Coney Island. O’Hara moved up to stand beside him and look alternately at Vern’s face and at the far side of the street. Vern hummed softly, the tune of his Sue song. Then he looked down at the hang of the Colt on left thigh. He went across O’Hara’s porch, rounded the end of the hitch rack, stopped in the street to let two cowboys lope their horses past, then went on. As he ducked under the Coney Island’s hitch rack he saw O’Hara, still leaning moveless in his doorway. Vern straightened and stepped upon the planks of the saloon’s porch.

He crossed to the swing doors and pushed them; went in.

CHAPTER III

The Snake Strikes

THE CONEY ISLAND was jammed for all its long length when Vern strolled in. If he came like a man with never a care in all the world; if his manner were indifferent; that carelessness was all in seeming. It masked alertness like a wolf's—or a veteran Ranger's. When he pushed into a vacant place at the bar to order, he had taken a comprehensive look at the bar-room's occupants. He filled the glass that came flashing down the bar beside a quart bottle. He lifted the glass and turned.

From somewhere in the rear, Snake Stett appeared. He did not come to the bar. He stopped to half sit, half lean, upon a table that was one of several standing along the opposite wall. If he saw Vern—standing sideway to the bar—he gave no sign. He talked to a small, dark, cat-graceful man whose eyes were as restless as his small hands were moveless over the black butts of Colts in tied-down holsters.

Into the 'aisle' between bar and tables came now a shabby, nervous little man, very strained of weathered face. He was somewhere around middle age, Vern thought. He had the look of a one-cow rancher before whom Life stretched as a rocky trail. As he came—almost he staggered with the rolling gait of the lifelong rider—shaky hand hovered at the wispy, grizzled mustache.

Breasting Snake, he bowed almost double. Apparently, he was trying to go unobserved—or unchecked—past the two there; to get to the door; through it. Snake's smoky eyes were steady on him. Snake's thin, tight red mouth lifted faintly at the corners.

'What's all the hurry, Barnesy?'' he called.

'No hurry! No hurry 'tall, Mister Snake!' cried the little man, bobbing his head the more violently. 'But—but the ol' woman, she—she'll raise hell, I ain't back to her quick.'

'Oh, don't rush off,' Snake said softly. 'I want to talk to you, Barnesy, old-timer. I've been—thinking about you lately. A good deal. I've been wanting to—oh, discuss things with you. This and—also that. Come on! Have a drink and yarn some.'

'Like to!' the little Barnes said, with a sort of desperate imitation of careless heartiness. But his voice shook. 'I—I'll shore see you right soon, Mister Snake. Yes, sir! I will. But, right now, the ol' woman, she——'

‘Why, Barnesy! You’ll be saying, next, that you’re afraid of the old woman. Come on over and have a drink—I said. How’s everything? Over at Ord, for instance. You’ve spent a good deal of time at Ord, lately, I hear. See anybody—in particular?’

He was like a cornered rabbit, now—that little rancher. His watery blue eyes jumped desperately, this way—that way. He ‘swallowed his Adam’s apple,’ as Vern put it to himself. The man standing at Vern’s elbow evidently took him for one of the brotherhood. He leaned to Vern and spoke with a cat-like grin:

‘Barnesy never figger his blabbin’ an’ complainin’ to Judge Mingo Adams’d git back to Snake. He knows better, now!’

Very much like a snake-scared bird, Barnes’s unwilling feet carried him over to Snake’s table. And then, with a cruel lip curling, the little dark man beside Snake slid from the table and crossed to the swing doors. Reaching them, he turned. He stood there, framed in the rectangle of the doorway, while looking around the bar-room. Vern could not see that his eyes rested on any particular faces. But two men detached themselves from the crowd and moved his way. He turned, pushing the doors back; vanished. The two men followed him out.

Vern was wondering. What lay behind this? Snake he could hear speaking idly of one man and another, over in Ord. Barnes was answering him with stuttering eagerness, almost fawning on his tormentor. Presently, Snake yawned; smiled at his prisoner.

‘Well, I just wondered how everybody was, over there,’ he drawled. ‘See you some more, Barnesy. So long!’

The relief in the little man’s face was pitiful—for what it showed of the fear that had gripped him. He could hardly speak. He backed off, nodding like an epileptic. He did not take face away from Snake until the doors bumped his back.

After his going, the bar-room took on the usual atmosphere. But—not exactly, either, it seemed to Vern. There was somehow a sense of waiting. And when from the street came a sudden staccato rattle of pistol shots, men looked slowly at each other. They looked toward the doors, too. But nobody moved that way. Snake seemed not to have heard the splatter of pistol-fire. He sat at the table with changeless face. When he took out tobacco sack and papers, his hand was steady as a rock.

Two minutes passed; perhaps a little more. Then the swing doors flapped. Into the bar-room came the dark little man. He crossed to Snake,

shaking his head, whistling tunelessly:

‘Tarantula juice got into Barnesy, Snake! He come down the sidewalk an’ shoved Squinty McBrett an’ Nep Till plumb into the street, an’ when they ask’ him what for, damned if he never jerked out his hawglaig an’ would’ve shot ’em—if Squinty hadn’t downed him!’

‘Odd!’ said Snake Stett, lifting dark brows. ‘But he acted queerly when he was talking with me, before going out. Seemed sort of—oh, peculiar. What did they do with him?’

‘Josephus Tennon come out o’ his place, an’ I reckon by now the inquest is plumb finished. Nothin’ to decide, anyhow.’

Entered at this juncture, a hat. Or so it seemed to Vern, who appeared to be looking at nothing whatever, and was, in consequence, the more entirely alert to every movement; every tonal shade and quality; every flicker of facial expression; everything within range of his very good eyes.

The hat was comparable only to a wagon umbrella. Beneath it was a thin face of the distinction and individuality of a turnip. A wishy-washy face, leather-brown, with dull and faded blue eyes and a loose mouth that, just now, worked nervously under a ragged mustache.

For the rest of him, this fellow who wore on his suspender a nickeled deputy sheriff’s star, he was a shabby and ordinary seeming man; cowpuncher by the bow in his legs and his riders’ walk. He came back to join the dark little man beside Snake Stett.

Next to the luckless Barnes, he was the most cringing specimen Vern had seen in a good many miles of riding.

‘Tennon decided Barnes come to his end through his own natural dam’ foolishness an’ a bullet inflicted on him by Squinty McBrett,’ the newcomer said, in a husky, apologetic voice. ‘Tennon turned over the body to the Barnes kid. That’s all right, huh?’

‘I think, as an individual, that it was the right and proper and—kindly thing to do,’ nodded Snake, solemn as a paid mourner. ‘I’m sorry old Barnesy got so lifted out of himself by Coney Island liquor that he mistook himself for a gunman. He wasn’t a bad sort. He’—consciously or unconsciously, his silky drawl climbed a couple of notes, so that it cut through every other sound in the bar-room and rang in every man’s ears ‘—just talked too damned much, some times, some places.’

It was nothing but a plain warning. Vern, playing his part of a disinterested spectator of Paradise’s family affairs, saw how men looked furtively sidelong at Snake Stett. If he had needed any further testimony, to

establish in his own mind the fact that Barnes's death had been a premeditated, coolly accomplished assassination, Snake Stett's epitaph for Barnes supplied it.

He wondered what Snake Stett thought of him. Was he, as O'Hara undoubtedly believed, marked for killing? He was a peculiarly constituted person—Vern. It was like a drink of liquor to him, to look about at the hard faces around him and wonder which had been elected to the job of sending him to ask Barnes what he thought of things.

Amusing, too, in a sardonic sort of fashion, to speculate concerning the yellow deputy sheriff's emotions and actions, if he were to walk up to him and place himself under the officer's protection!

'*Yeeeoow!*' someone howled, just outside the front door. '*Yeeeoow!* Gi' me room! Gi' me fresh air to breathe; I take lots of it! One side or git yo' laigs tromped off, people! I'm Harrigan! I'm Bull Harrigan! I'm the Harrigan that went up the ol' Chisholm Trail an' roped the badger! *Yeeeoow!*'

He burst inside, as if the wide doorway cramped him. He was a big man—six feet two or three; over two hundred pounds of him. His face was heavily bearded and his eyes were black and bloodshot. He wore a flannel shirt of vivid red and two pistols. Between his teeth was a ten-inch bowie knife. He jerked it out and let go that ferocious wolf howl again:

'I'm a wild wolf from Boilin' Water Crick! I'm nineteen foot high an' I heft an even ton. I——'

It had a mechanical sort of sound. Vern, feeling his position keenly, was sensitive to atmospheres. And Snake Stett, it seemed to him, was trying to look impressed. Watching through slitted lids, he saw Snake's eye flicker toward someone at the bar. Instantly, that someone appeared; a man smaller only than the Wild Bull. And this fellow had the air, somehow, of stepping forward to play a part. Vern had a flashing idea. It might be correct. That, of course, he would probably never know, but——

Men were sliding to right and left; moving softly away from him. It occurred to Vern the Experienced that, if this man who had been jerked from the other drinkers by Snake's one glance were to engage in an argument with that noisy one, and if bullets were loosed, they might go in any direction... Suppose one came *his* way? Why——

'Josephus Tennon' would 'come out o' his place' and in a couple of minutes 'the inquest would be plumb finished!'

So, moving on impulse, but moving, also, on the good, tested Ranger theory that the best, and the most discouraging, defense is two-fisted attack,

Vern slid out from the bar. He was out on the floor before that man summoned by Snake Stett could reach the wolf-howling individual. Out of the corner of his eye, Vern saw flashingly that not only the man beyond him, but Snake Stett and the dark little fellow were taken aback. But he stared—he had to look up a little, to do it—into the noisy one’s bloodshot eyes.

‘Excuse me, stranger,’ he said very apologetically. ‘I’m a passenger, just goin’ through Paradise. I wouldn’t have said a word to you, but I couldn’t help hearin’ what you was sayin’ before you come in, you know, an’—well, I’d like to ask you to say it over again, plain, so I can see if you said what I *think* you said...’

‘Huh?’ grunted the ‘Wild Wolf from Boiling Water Creek.’ He looked as much surprised as Snake Stett and the others. ‘Huh? Said? Said what? Outside o’ what door?’

‘That door yonder! The front door. You said somethin’ about goin’ up the ol’ Chisholm Trail, you know? That was the part I mean. Would you mind sayin’ it all over again?’

‘What you tryin’ to hand me?’ the Wolf roared suddenly, with return of ferocity. ‘Why—why, usual, I eat a dozen like you for a snack—just a li’l’ bitsy snack! You—— Why, I——’

‘Nah, you got me wrong!’ Vern persisted, in that same unnaturally meek voice he had used from the beginning. ‘I’m just tryin’ to figure out what it was you said, about goin’ up the ol’ Chisholm Trail an’ ropin’ the badger, you know. That was it. I was wonderin’ if I’d heard you right.’

He fairly beamed upon the Wolf, in his part of pleasant, damned-foolish question-asker. If everyone in the bar-room could not see him as a qualified imbecile, it was not his fault.

The Wolf seemed thoroughly puzzled. Ferocity was replaced in his not-too-bright face by downright bewilderment.

‘You see,’ Vern took up his humble apologies again, ‘you couldn’t be the fella that roped the badger. You *couldn’t* be! So I wanted to set you straight on that. You couldn’t be the one that roped the badger, because ’twas Eph Pinnegar—he’s a kind of tenth cousin of my sister-in-law’s first husband; don’t amount to much an’ we ain’t braggin’ about him—that went up the Trail that time an’ put his twine on the badger. I’ve heard him tell about it—oh! heaps of times, an’ show the scars, an’——’

Boiling Water Creek’s Wild Wolf was not mentally quick on the trigger. Vern had sized him as slow-thinking, a practical sort of brain which functioned best when most thoroughly coached beforehand. In his days of

Rangering—and there was no more experienced sergeant in the Frontier Battalion's several companies—Vern Dederick had come upon many a coyote strutting in a wolfskin. He had many times slapped aside that pretense and struck through at the real wolf.

So it was, now. He watched Snake Stett rather more closely than he had been watching this loud-mouthed puppet. But Snake made no move that Vern could see. Instead, interruption came from the Wolf. For up and down the long bar men quicker-minded than the Wolf were snickering. They saw, at last, that the tall, humble-seeming stranger was 'hoorahing' the bigger man.

The Wolf saw it, too, for all that Vern's meek seriousness of face was in no way altered by the audience's laughing. It seemed to come to the Wolf, if dimly, that his dignity was somehow being outraged. So, with a snarling noise, he jerked a hand toward a Colt butt.

But Vern had anticipated that by minutes, almost. He had set his feet to suit him, ready for the move he had planned. Now, he slapped with left hand at the Wolf's moving wrist, knocking it away from the gun. He jolted the big man in the mouth with a fist that landed like a mule's hoof. In a twinkling there was a noble battle for the benefit of the bar-room's customers. The two big figures rocked and reeled back and forth, now locked, now free, with the not-so-wild Wolf trying desperately to grapple, and Vern smashing him savagely loose and away.

Vern thought that it was Snake Stett's voice that rose in a sudden, snarling command. But, whoever gave the word, it was quickly acted upon. Men surged forward. Vern stooped very swiftly. He caught the Wolf by the ankles and heaved tremendously upward. Over his bowed back, head first, the Wolf was catapulted into the mass of crowding men.

Vern took two long steps and banged through the swing doors, lurching out into the gathering dusk. Men attracted by the uproar were already crowding toward the doorway.

'Tennon!' Vern cried quickly. 'Where's Josephus Tennon? For God's sake—don't you-all go inside!'

Which was perfect assurance that ropes could not have held those fellows out. They jammed the doorway, trying to get inside to see. They met the men trying to come out after Vern. The result was a furious milling, in which none could see plainly, or hear the yells of the pursuers. Blows were struck. In a twinkling, there was a lovely brawl in and about the swing doors. Vern grinned to himself as, all uninterfered with, he ducked under the hitch rack and went across the street to O'Hara's.

But the grin died very swiftly, as mentally he recounted the events of the past hour.

‘I’ll certainly shove through a li’l’ report to the Cap’n!’ he said between his teeth. ‘It’s high time the Rangers landed in this den of side-winders! Man, but I would love to have the job of sweepin’ up the counties...’

CHAPTER IV

A Ranger Loop

‘WELL! I do be admittin’ thot ye fooled me plinty!’ said O’Hara, breaking their silence of minutes. ‘I was not expectin’ more’n one last glimpse o’ ye. Thot, I was makin’ sure, would be as ye lay like poor little Barnesy, on the sidewalk over the way.’

‘Why’d Snake have it in for Barnes? I know that Barnes had been complainin’ to Judge Adams, at Ord. But what’d he say?’

‘I’d not be surprised if he was askin’ the Judge to git the Governor to do somethin’. Ye see, m’ son: Between the Culebra an’ the headwaters o’ Pecan River, thot’s country where no judge but Judge Colt has jurisdiction! In thot scope o’ country is up’ard o’ three hundred first class desperaydoes engaged cheerful an’ very free in the stealin’ o’ fine harses an’ the rustlin’ o’ cattle. Whin the spirit moves ’em, they slip over into other counties, gather up a bank, a stage, or a train, thin hightail it back home.’

‘An’ Snake Stett, he’s Big Boss of the Spread...’

‘Boss o’ the Spread he is!’ cried O’Hara, nodding emphatically. ‘So far—an’ because nobody’s come our way, big enough, an’ hard enough, wi’ chilled steel guts, to buck Snake! Thot’s what we’re needin’! Thot’s what we’ve hoped to be sint from Austin, m’ son. An’ it’s what we have got to git!’

In the dim light of the oil lamp, in the curtained rear of the store, he looked thoughtfully across at Vern’s preoccupied and grim brown face. He spoke again, more slowly:

‘Ye—have not said what name ye might—go by...’

‘Jack Jeffords,’ Vern said easily enough. But he was conscious of the Irishman’s keen, unwinking stare. ‘Why?’

‘Oh—nawthin’,’ O’Hara shrugged. ‘Antonio! *Diablito!*’

From somewhere in the rear of the now barred store came a small Mexican boy. O’Hara lifted a thick forefinger:

‘Antonio! Do ye be slippin’ down the street to the store o’ Comanche Smith. When ye can be speakin’ private with *el señor* Comanche, say to him that I can now deliver the letter he spoke about to me—the letter to one Jack Jeffords. An’ shake a leg, Antonio! If ye do be sittin’ down to smoke

cigareets *ongrowt*, I will remember to warm the south end o' ye with a quilt. *Andarle!*'

Two faces were with Vern, as silently he smoked, and O'Hara scowled across the room at nothing:

The reptilian, yet handsome, powerful, face of Snake Stett, leader of this outlaw 'association' was with him. So was the winsome oval face of Priscilla Ord, with its haughty, fearless dark eyes and its girlish attractiveness that even haughtiness could not destroy. She was a creature strange to him, yet the natural product of a country, a position, such as hers.

Since obviously 'Pache Ord of the great Rocker-O (O) was a power in the Culebra River country, and she had been the crown princess, her word was law for those hard men who—doubtless!—rode crooked trails for her father.

'Yes, sir! I would certainly like to stick around!' Vern thought irritably, for the severalth time. 'How I'd like to smack Mister Stett just about midway between his mind an' his mouth! He's been the Big Frog of this puddle so long he thinks nobody else comes higher'n his waist. I'd like to show him different—an' prove the fact on his front teeth with my fist! An' I'd certainly like to see lots more of the Rocker-O scenery; lots more an' very often.'

Antonio slid inside with flash of white teeth. He extended a grimy envelope to O'Hara, who nodded him across to Vern. As he turned it over, Vern recognized Captain Tandy's handwriting, painstakingly as Tandy had scrawled the superscription in lead pencil, exactly like the effort of an uneducated puncher addressing a friend. He ripped it open with forefinger, took out the sheet of paper and stared. Then he frowned, wondering if he had been the victim of an amazing coincidence.

For this seemed merely a meaningless scrawl. Certainly, it had no meaning for him. It might have been written by one Long Rider to another gentleman of mask and six-shooter:

Deer jack am now at san Tone havein hell of goode time but monnie runs short an soone will leeve can maik canyun deeablo bye 22 if yu mete me yu will be mutch pleesd for hen is on an a reel fatt hen too hope yu see beter now jack do yu stil reed by lamp lite jack yu olde frend pecos Charly

'Well!' Vern thought helplessly. 'What it *don't* mean to me would take some paper an' ink to set down!'

He studied it narrowly, wondering if Tandy could be using some sort of code on him. But if it were code, the key was not detectable in it. Could Tandy really want to meet him at Cañon Diablo—four hundred miles away; half that far from Tituston, to which he had been ordered?

‘By Gemini! I think he’s put too much strain on a cowboy’s head, this time! Unless it’s a letter that looks like his hand, but isn’t, an’ is meant for a real Jack Jeffords. “Do you still read by lamplight, Jack?” How the devil could that mean something to me? He wouldn’t send me a fool letter——’

He frowned at the paper, muttering to himself, while O’Hara watched curiously. The question about lamplight he found the prize puzzler of the whole mystifying business. Mechanically, he stared at the oil lamp on the table. Could there be something about the writing, which would be visible only by lamplight? But he happened to be reading it by lamplight!

Suddenly, he stood up, to hold the paper against the lamp chimney. No result. Only the penciled words shone through—— Then, abruptly, he saw black letters writhing, like insects crawling out of nothingness onto the sheet. He held the paper steady until he saw it filled with neat lines of inked writing.

‘Ahhh!’ O’Hara breathed. ‘Like magic!’

It was a formal order to Sergeant Vernon H. Dederick, Company X, Frontier Battalion, Texas Rangers:

This is your authority to remain Ord and Paradise Counties, for the purpose of checking reign of terror which, Judge Mingo Adams complains to Governor, has existed for several years past. Judge Adams states no assistance can be expected from local authorities; considered doubtful if juries of these or adjoining counties will convict members Snake Stett gang of outlaws. He also states that it is useless to send less than dozen Rangers.

However, I am sending you Corporal Blaze and Private Gardineer. These are the only men I can spare at present. But I am confident that with this force at your disposal you will at least be able to hold the Stett organization in check. Later, I hope to be ordered with the entire company to this section, to make a complete clean-up and permanently settle such leaders as Stett. Temporarily, though, you will make such arrests and lay such charges as you deem best. Judge Adams will co-operate with you to extent that his office permits.

Vern, staring thoughtfully at O’Hara, whistled tunelessly:

‘You said, a while back when I was tellin’ you about the trouble in the Coney Island, that what this country needed was vigilantes an’ a bale o’ rope. Well... you had it wrong: What it needs is Rangers! An’ right now, from now on, you *got* Rangers!’

‘Oh! Thin it’ll be safe, huh, to be callin’ ye—Sergeant Dederick?’

His icy gray eyes were twinkling.

‘Ah, well enough I knew it! When ye come back from the Coney Island, after ye’d tumbled Big Tawm Eddelmann tail over tincup, I’d been thinkin’. Rememberin’...

‘I was very sure ye were no common, driftin’ puncher—nawthin’ about ye rung *thot* bell! An’ it come to me! The size o’ ye, the color o’ hair an’ eyes, the way ye’re foriver hummin’ a song... Too, there was the way ye left here, walkin’ in Snake Stett’s tracks to the Coney Island—like ’twas to a picnic ye wint... An’—the name o’ the man who trailed Ghost La Rue the width o’ Texas—an’ flapped a sheaf o’ warrants in his face—an’ let him draw first—*thin* captured him—it’s a name well known to many in Texas. From Santone across, it’s a name very well known. Ye didn’t think to stay in Ord an’ Paradise?’

‘I didn’t. But I do, now. The Cap’n sent me on another detail. It was one that promised to be right hot. So I wanted to hit the place without any brass bands announcin’ me.’

‘Ah,’ O’Hara nodded understandingly. ‘Tituston. Ye were headin’ for Tituston to ride herd on the boys there. An’ now ye’ve had other orders?’

‘To stick here!’ Vern said with tight grin. ‘Yes, sir! To stick here an’ do ex-act-ly what I’d have picked out to do! Cap’n Tandy can’t come to Ord an’ Paradise. It’d be the kind of job he’d like—he’s cleaned up the brier-breakers in a good many counties, you know. But he is tied up with a feud back over, so I draw the detail. With a couple of good men to back the play.’

He looked down at the paper. But Priscilla Ord’s face came between his eyes and the order, somehow. He grinned faintly. It was going to be funny, he thought, to appear before her in his real capacity. It was going to be interesting to have authority to knock the props from under some of her idols.

‘Who’s sheriff at Ord?’ he grunted, bringing his mind back to the present. ‘I’m told he’s not to be trusted.’

‘Thuel Drake is not to be trusted by anyone, anyhow! Nor is Rogan, the district attorney. Mingo Adams—he do be a man! Wit’ no power, now, for thot he has no backin’. Ery Tricker is dep’ty sheriff here in Paradise. We’d a town marshal an’ rules an’ reg’lations about the wearin’ o’ pistols more’n thirty minutes after comin’ into town. But whin we were buryin’ the marshal—Lute Cane killed him—the rules wint into the hole wi’ him.’

‘Tricker’s standin’ in with Snake Stett, of course... Well, I am in charge, O’Hara—an’ damned glad of the job! There’s just somethin’ about Stett that makes me fairly hone to be around, with a hand on the rope, when his neck finds out how heavy his feet are... What part does ’Pache Ord play in affairs?’

‘Oh, nawthin’ much,’ shrugged O’Hara, with elaborate sarcasm. ‘He do be nawthin’ at all, at all, jist the Big Boss o’ the two counties. If it come to a showdown, between ’Pache an’ Snake, domned if I know how I’d be placin’ an uncoppered bet. But whilst Snake is wishful to marry ’Cilla Ord, they do agree as two thieves should.’

Vern got up and crossed to a curtained window. Cautiously, he pulled back the calico curtain a trifle. It was cloudy outside, and the window glass was misted with fine rain. Vern whistled to himself and debated his situation. He wondered when those two cheerful fire-eaters, Dud Blaze and Ody Gardineer, would arrive.

‘You happen to know a hairpin name’ Frio Jack?’ he asked abruptly.

‘Well,’ said O’Hara judicially, ‘in a land so *plintifully* salted wi’ rapscaillions, ye will admit ’tis but the gifted an’ hard-workin’ thot stand out. Frio Jack is one thot stands out. Next only to Lute Cane, a black little killer, Frio Jack is Snake Stett’s closest man. Usual, Frio sticks to the Rocker-O headquarters an’ comes to town but for a spree.’

‘ ’Pache Ord fired him, though—kicked him off the place an’ down the Big Road a piece. Then I plugged him on the trail—dusted him on both sides. Thought for a minute it’d killed him, but he got off.’

‘*Tchk! Tchk!* I do be wonderin’!’ cried O’Hara. ‘Thot would mean bad blood between ’Pache an’ Snake. I—do be wonderin’...’

‘Lend me that riot gun a spell, will you? Man, but I like that artillery! Lever-action an’ twelve gauge... I’ll bet she slings the Blue Whistlers. Now, lend me a slicker an’ I’m Graveyard-Bound! Yes, sir! I’m goin’ to hightail out an’ do some grave-robbin’...’

‘Grave-robbin’ O’Hara’s sandy brows went climbing bewilderedly.

‘Why,’ said Vern innocently, ‘I have got to go open that dead marshal’s grave. You said you-all buried yo’ rules an’ regulations with him... Well, sir! I just feel a hankerin’ to dig ’em up an’ start ’em rollin’ again! Right now, an’ tonight. Who’s justice of the peace?’

‘Josephus Tennon—a boozin’, sneakin’, bootlickin’ excuse for a human bein’ thot’s a domned nuisance by nature an’ a snide lawyer by profession! If ye’re expectin’ help from him——’

‘I’m afraid I am,’ Vern confessed mournfully. ‘Even after yo’ readin’ his brand an’ earmarks for me thisaway. I’m afraid I have got to kind of count on him—there bein’ nobody else, official, I can call on...’

So he went out through the side door shown him by the discreet—and belligerent—and altogether kindly—Mr. O’Hara.

Once outside, he leaned against the side wall of the store. Whimsically, he stared through the fine, steady rain at the blurred lights of the Coney Island Saloon across the street. The rain slanted down on his hatrim with a tiny drumming sound; it came under to wet his face; it ran down the yellow Fish slicker. Under the oilskin Vern’s hand caressed the smooth stock of that twelve-gauge, lever-action Winchester riot gun, the contents of which O’Hara had promised Snake Stett.

‘Some folks might think this was a kind of disagreeable night,’ Vern told himself, grinning. ‘But it looks to me quite a pleasin’—yes, sir! a kind of soul-satisfyin’ evenin’! In fact, I do’no’ when I’ve been better pleased with weather.’

He drifted up the store’s wall to the street, to move along the line of buildings on O’Hara’s side. There was Comanche Smith’s big trading store, with its log walls—reminiscent of the days when Comanche traded in fear of Indians sneaking from the reservations. Vern considered Comanche Smith. It seemed to him that the storekeeper, like O’Hara, might be counted upon to some extent, in a Ranger’s work. As a friend of O’Hara, regardless of their business rivalry, he must be a right man. And Vern remembered that it was Comanche’s remark to the Irishman, about the uncalled-for letter to ‘Jack Jeffords,’ which was responsible for his presence here, now. Vern was deeply grateful for that.

‘If I’d gone on to Tituston,’ he thought, ‘Dud Blaze an’ Ody would have got to open this ball. An’ since I happen to know more about the situation, I can do it a lot better than those two harum-scarum eat ’em alive-o boys. *Dios!* I’m glad I connected with that letter! I——’

He was moving on past building after building. He had come to a section of the street that was fairly dark, intending to cross over and come back to the Coney Island’s door without any man having opportunity to herald his return to the saloon by more than thirty seconds.

His pleasant thoughts, now, were interrupted. For he saw a lurching pair of figures approaching, coming from the edge of Paradise, moving on his side of the street. They came on until they were abreast him, where he had stopped and leaned both shoulders against a darkened building’s front. They stopped, too, peering at his moveless shape.

‘Who’s it?’ demanded the shorter of the pair.

Vern shifted the Winchester under his slicker, moving it from right arm to left. He mumbled something indistinct, hoping that they would go on.

‘What’s that?’ the other, larger, man growled. ‘You come on out o’ that, fella! What you a-backin’ off like that, about? You come on out an’ we’ll take a look at you. Come on out where we can read yo’ brand! Come on out, I said! ’fore I reach in an’ bodaciously haul you out by the nap’ o’ yo’ dam’ neck!’

Big Tom Eddelmann! And evidently the pounding he had taken had left him in no pleasant humor. Vern shrugged the shoulders of his spirit. Most sincerely, he wished that this would-be bad man had chosen the other side of the street for his walk in the rain. He wanted only to get to the Coney Island without attracting attention. Now——

He stepped out as commanded, for there seemed nothing else to do. He whined something about being a drifting puncher, newcomer, just hired by the Rocker-O. He said that he was a stranger in Paradise. But before he could add artistic frills to the tale, Big Tom Eddelmann’s hand jerked suddenly. A match flicked on Eddelmann’s thumbnail. With its light in his eyes, dazzling him, Vern had in his ears the beginning of Big Tom’s furious roar of recognition.

He was not in the least unprepared—Vern. He had foreseen the possibility that trouble came with these two up the street. So it was almost mechanically that he snapped his right hand—Colt-bearing—from under the slicker. Almost blindly, too, he leaned forward and lashed out with it. He felt, rather than heard, the crunch of the long barrel upon bone.

He struck a second flashing blow. Now, with the match out as Big Tom dropped it, he was beginning to see again. The little man with Eddelmann was making motions very plainly hostile, not to say homicidal. Vern felt that he could waste no time, take no chances, in hitting out at him. So, as he saw Big Tom crashing down, he twisted sideways. He rammed Colt muzzle into the little man’s body. He flipped back the hammer; let it go.

The little man came down, coughing spasmodically. He lay still. Vern looked flashingly around. No sign of any interested audience, anywhere. But then, he thought that the Colt’s bellow had been muffled beyond the hearing of anyone more than forty or fifty feet away. And the rain had driven almost everybody indoors. That was his good fortune, now.

So he stooped quickly. He caught hold of the senseless figure of Eddelmann. He dragged the big man into the narrow space between two

buildings. With Eddelmann's own belt, he tied his wrists. Big Tom's shirt, ripped from his back, made a gag effective enough. His trousers, pulled halfway off, the legs twisted about Eddelmann's ankles, then tied, insured that Big Tom would not walk without help.

Vern went back and recovered the Winchester, where he had let it fall in the mud. He wiped it dry and stood for a moment looking grimly down at the moveless shape of a man whom he did not even know. But the sight of the still figure had no power to worry him. This was enemy country; and that one had come at him with a gun in his hand. Vern had served too long in the Rangers on the wildest battle-front not to have seen a good many dead men. Blood—whether his own or another's—troubled him very little. He had no illusions that this dead man would be an example by which Snake Stett's wolves would profit. They were not easily impressed. There would be others to die here. And the next one might easily be—Vern Dederick.

He went grimly across the street with the Winchester cuddled in the crook of his arm. He came back down the line of buildings. Most of them had wooden awnings shading the sidewalk before them; making of the plank walk a series of roofed porches. It was very dark under the awnings, except where a building had large windows in the street wall and lamplight shone through. Vern passed a man or two lounging on the sidewalk. None paid him any particular attention before he reached the Coney Island.

Beyond the saloon the row of shabby houses that made 'The Line' showed many yellow windows. Somewhere down there a piano sounded tinnily. Shrill talk, laughter, an occasional yell, came faintly to Vern as he looked over the swing doors.

There were not so many drinkers as in the afternoon. Competition or other affairs seemed to have lured away some of the customers. But for all that, there was a full bar-front and, conspicuous by his tall-crowned white *sombrero*, Snake Stett stood five or six down the bar from the street doors. Vern stared at him. Stett's face was set, hard. And sight of that expression curved Vern's lips in a small, tight smile.

He pushed the doors quietly inward. As he stepped inside, he slid over to the right, so that the saloon's wall was comfortably at his back. Nobody could approach him, there, without being seen. His slicker, now, was unsnapped. He leaned against the wall and waited for someone to observe him. His hatrim was pushed back. With wide mouth lifting sardonically at the corners, with blue eyes smokily dark, and with the Winchester cuddled under right arm, he looked at these hard men, and wondered about them.

Snake Stett, it was, who seemed to grow uneasy under Vern's eyes and first turned. His dark eyes narrowed suddenly. To Vern, it seemed that the pupils disappeared. But the still face was changeless. He merely stared, then nodded.

'So you came back. You actually came back!'

'I—I thought so,' Vern nodded in his turn, hesitantly. 'But—how long have you been in town, this evenin', Snake? All the afternoon? Well, then—— Same for the rest of these fellas?'

Snake nodded for answer to each question. He seemed puzzled at the drift of the queries.

'Well, then!' Vern beamed upon them all, 'I reckon after I introduce myself, you'll know why I'm askin'. Gentlemen—an' the many others in my audience! Let me make you used to the looks of Rangers! Of course, some of you have seen a Ranger before. But maybe you couldn't get in position to have a good look at him without kinkin' yo' necks... I hope we're all goin' to get along fine. I do that! My name's Dederick. I happen to be First Sergeant o' Cap'n Tandy's X Company.

'Well, it's like this: I'm goin' to be around a spell an' plenty more Rangers are hither-bound right now, to keep me from bein' lonesome. We aim to pick up some of the slack that seems to have got into the legal ropes of Ord an' Paradise, lately. I'm commencin', tonight. All of you know that there's an ordinance against packin' a six-shooter more'n thirty minutes after hittin' town. An' you-all have been here longer. So, beginnin' at this end, *kindly* turn the flat of yo' backs to the bar.

'Then, bein' careful to wiggle yo' fingers slo-o-ow an' understandable, unbuckle yo' gun-belts an' let the ol' artillery drop to the floor. Gentlemen that own thoughts of hide-outs may be interested to know I'm the seventh son of a seventh son an' I can see right through a tin can. An'——

'*Stett!*' into his mocking voice, had come a flat, deadly tone, 'you make a move to pull those plowhandles an'—by the Body of Pontius Pilate! I'll fix you so's you couldn't float in a tin washpan!'

CHAPTER V

'I'll see you under grass!'

VERN thought grimly that it was fortunate looks were not of the potency of .45 slugs! Else he would have resembled a sieve, now, standing there with back to the saloon's front wall and keeping that Winchester repeater trained upon the Coney Island's uncurried customers. He smiled grimly:

'Speed, gentlemen! Speed's the world!' he told them cheerfully. 'For I'm a nervous man from a long line of nervous folk. Impatient—that's me! C'm'on, now! Unbuckle the hardware careful. It'd be terrible if my nervousness slipped down into my trigger finger. Yes, sir! I'd be awful sorry about it—but nothin' a-tall, at all, to what all of you'd be...'

The sullen men along the bar began to paw at shell belts' buckles. Sidelong, some of them glanced up at Vern's smiling face. He managed always to meet their furtive eyes, to look steadily at them with sardonic grin that indicated—and truthfully!—perfect understanding of their sinister thoughts. So they unbuckled their belts most carefully, to let their holstered weapons slide down to the floor. When the last gun was dropped——

'Over against the wall, all of you!' Vern directed. 'Now—before we go into it thor'ly, any gent that remembers that he forgot what he had on under his shirt, he can save himself heaps of trouble, by unloadin' an' puttin' the extra hoglegs with the rest. Trouble? did I say? Goodness me! Must be six or eight shells in this Peace an' Trouble Maker here—an' *everee* shell loadin' about six buckshot... Trouble... Goodness, yes! Step up, gents!'

Four men took hide-outs from various sections of their anatomy. Vern's eyes twinkled as he watched them return to their place in line against the wall. Then he regarded Snake Stett, who was watching him with unwinking gaze.

'Derringers count just the same as .45s, Snake!' he explained gently to the outlaw leader. 'Get 'em out of yo' pants pockets an'—let yo' conscience be yo' guide, son!'

With air of deadliness, no whit lessened by the rock-like immobility of his face, Snake Stett drew twin gold-plated, pearl-handled Remington .41s from trousers pockets and went with faint jingle of gold spur bells to the bar. He stooped slowly and Vern laughed—a disturbing sound in that quiet room.

'They do say a man can get bonded out, in Ord an' Paradise, no matter what he's done... But, Snake—you ever stop to think that you can't get

bonded out of Hell? C'm'on back where yo' friends are waitin'...'

From outside came the clumping of booted and hurrying feet, loud on the boards of the porch floor. Vern's face showed no indication that he heard. But when the gigantic hat of Ery Tricker, Paradise's deputy sheriff, bobbed into the door, he watched from the corner of smoky blue eyes.

'Whut's this? Whut's this?' cried Ery Tricker, as if unbelieving. 'A hold-up! I——'

His thin, wishy-washy face was set in lines desperately determined; the dull blue eyes were shining like a madman's. His loose mouth worked epileptically under straggling mustache.

He had come in with a pistol in his hand. Vern wondered flashingly how Ery Tricker had known of this happening in the Coney Island. He thought that it was tribute to Snake Stett's personality and influence that so obvious a coward as the deputy should drive himself in here. For there was no doubting that he was frightened almost out of his wits; but fear of Snake Stett was combating in him fear of violent action.

For Vern himself, he held the shotgun steadily trained upon his row of prisoners. But his left hand dropped and twisted to jerk out the long-barreled Colt at his side, hanging butt-front on the left. It whipped out and roared almost in Tricker's face. He cried out thinly—a shrill animal-like scream. The pistol dropped from his hand; he sat down on the floor with twisted face and nursed a wrist from which blood began to drip.

'Get up!' Vern snapped at him. 'Over with yo' friends an' be thankful I'm a tender-hearted man. Most folks'd have killed you—an' good riddance, too!'

He reholstered the Colt and with the toe of his boot signified to the whining deputy his determination to be obeyed. At the second vigorous kick, Tricker yapped in anguish and went scrambling on all-fours over to the wall, where he was received with contemptuous grins by the others.

Vern looked them over thoughtfully. He selected a stupid-looking youngster and addressed him sharply:

'You with the ears! C'm'out here. Don't look slaunchways like that. You know there's not another pair of ears in Texas like yo's. C'm'on!'

Sulkily, the 'eared' one stepped out and scowled at Vern, who eyed him thoughtfully.

'Grab yo' foot in yo' hand! Hightail down to Josephus Tennon, an' tell him to float this way—an' to make it quicker'n that. Tell him who's sendin' for him, an' that I want him to come on up an' hold court!'

The messenger shrugged and went slouching with defiant slowness toward the door. Vern's left hand twinkled under the yellow slicker again and with the roar of his shot and the thud of the bullet in the floor at his very heels, the messenger squawked and fled. Vern regarded his captives humorously:

'Awful thing to have a guilty conscience an' ears like his—both. Shows you what not livin' a ni-ice, pure life'll do for a fella. Now, if he'd been a good, kind character, like—like me, for instance, that .45 dustin' the planks south of him wouldn't have worried him a-tall. Why? Well, he'd have just *known* 'twasn't meant for a high-minded boy, an' he wouldn't have even looked behind him. I tell you, this business of goin' up an' down the land bustin' laws, it's sorry business. It'll get you up or down, one: up in the air with yo' boots helpin' to choke you to death, or down on the ground an' then in it!'

He grinned sardonically:

'Quit feelin' yo' neck that way, you with the peculiar face! I'm not wavin' a rope at you. No tellin', you might beat the cottonwood-prance. But if you want to live long an' be happy, you better keep yo' twine on yo' tree, fella! Don't be wavin' that rope of yo's at other folks' stock. Because if you do——'

'Judge Tennon, he says he ain't comin' a step!' a triumphant voice announced, outside the swing doors. 'He says he's got his times an' places for holdin' court an' this-here ain't one o' the times! He says, furthermore _____,

'Shut up!' Vern bellowed. 'You go back an' tell that slinkin' excuse for an imitation justice o' the peace that the Rangers have taken charge of this layout—by Governor's orders! You tell Tennon that if he's not here inside three minutes, I'll be up there to drag him out by the scruff of his neck! One thing I will not stand—havin' a crooked justice of the peace sendin' impudent messages to me! Light a shuck out of this, Ears!'

Josephus Tennon appeared well within the time limit, a weasel of a man, wearing a battered green-black frock coat, faded waist overalls and Mexican sandals of untanned cowhide. He was shabby. He was dirty. He was generally repulsive. He came inside the bar-room and his tiny dark eyes shuttled from Snake Stett to Vern—who was regarding him with an eye coldly baleful, and who addressed him instantly:

'You!' Vern snarled. 'Don't you ever make the same mistake twice! For it'll be deadly! Don't you ever send me a message like that again! You're

supposed to be a county official. So, when a peace officer collects a bunch of lawbreakers, *you* will hold court when an' where it's convenient!

'I don't care if you are a Ranger!' yapped Josephus Tennon. 'I'm the duly elected justice o' the peace an' it's for *me* to say when an' how——'

He stopped—stopped short; swallowed. His sockless toes wriggled eloquently in the cowhide sandals. For he had suddenly found Vern's face no more than six inches from his weasel eyes. And Vern's expression was utterly murderous.

Partly, Vern donned the savagery for effect. In such a community as this, of hard-case men, he intended to appear at least as hard case as anyone. But the repulsion he felt for this 'snide lawyer by profession,' as O'Hara had described Tennon, was instinctive; was that of the Ranger for the crooked official or peace officer. It was the Rangers' sincere belief that killing was far too good for the breed.

'You monkey with me even an inch,' he said very softly, 'an' you'll find out that you'd a god-dam' sight better be in hell with yo' back broke! An' that goes for the rest of you! I'm servin' notice, right here, right now, that the Rangers are in charge, in Paradise an' Ord. I expect a lot of permanent residents, for one result; an' a thorough job of hightailin' on the parts of plenty others. Now, we'll open court:

'*Oyez! Oyez! Oyez!* I hereby declare this justice court wide open as a ten-gauge shotgun's muzzle! The judge has a li'l' stint of finin' to do. The charge is carryin' deadly weapons inside the town limits of Paradise. Me—I'm prosecutor an' the chief witness an' also circle-rider on the prisoners.

'Judge Tennon, this bein' the first offense of the boys—at least, the first I've had anything to do with—I think it'll be all right to let 'em off easy: Say—a hundred dollars apiece, for a fine. Of course, we'll confiscate the aforesaid deadly weapons, too, an'—— Shut up!' he ended in full-chested bellow, as from the prisoners came indignant yells.

'Well, I do think——' Tennon began conciliatingly.

'You do? That, by itself, proves somethin'! An' I'm glad we see eye to eye, here. A hundred dollars seems to me a fair enough fine for a first offense. Of course, you'll tell 'em that the next time we'll slap it to 'em so's they'll think they've got bees in their breeches. Now, I'll take charge of the artillery. The deputy sher'f, he's not in what you'd call first class shape. But then, of course, he never was or will be!'

'All right, Tennon!' Snake Stett said suddenly. 'We'll swallow this—for the time being. Consider me responsible for the fines. I'll see you about

them, tomorrow.'

'Oh—no!' Vern cried, in outraged voice. 'That won't be satisfactory to the court—or to me. Not at all, at all! It's pay the fine right here, right now, or I'll have to slam the bunch of you into the *calabozo*. An' it's bound to be lousy, with Ery Tricker bunkin' in it regular. An' you'll have to work out the fines, too: hundred dollars or two hundred days.'

'I suppose that I can send a man out for the money?' Snake inquired politely—addressing Tennon, ignoring Vern.

'No use sendin' him to O'Hara!' Vern grinned. 'After the way he threw down on you, today, Snake, an' run you so, out of his place, no hope of gettin' money from him.'

'I'll get the money,' Snake Stett said evenly. He looked thoughtfully at Vern. His black eyes seemed filmed, as a reptile's are filmed with transparent skin; they were opaque. His olive face was pale and there were tiny beads of perspiration on the forehead.

He said something to a man beside him and this one nodded and came swaggering forward. He was for going straight past Vern and out the door, but he found himself confronted by the big figure of the Ranger sergeant.

'It's more polite to ask if you can go,' Vern said gently. 'It's a lot safer, too... Then I wouldn't figure one of my prisoners was attemptin' escape an'—shoot him...'

'Can I go, Teacher?' the fellow whined. He was a broad-shouldered and squinting swaggerer, with devil-may-care face. 'Please!'

'I reckon, Sonny,' nodded Vern.

He watched carefully until the man returned with a jingling canvas bag. Snake motioned him to put the bag on the table. Each man stepped forward—there were twenty-odd of them—and took five twenties from the sack. Up to where Tennon stood uneasily at the bar-head, they came; each set his hundred dollars on the bar and returned to his place. Vern called to a bartender and ordered him to pile the confiscated pistols on the bar.

Snake Stett moved across the room and faced Vern, looking at him steadily:

'It arouses my curiosity to know,' he drawled, 'just how long you think you're going to—continue in our midst? Above the pretty little daisies, of course... Oh, yes! Above the daisies?'

Vern looked levelly across into the murky black eyes. Then, very slowly, he twisted wide, thin mouth into an unpleasant grin, and his own eyes shone

as merest glints of smoky blue, between slitted lids.

‘How long? Why, that depends, of course. I never take a detail like this with preconceived notions. I have been on clean-ups that I was certain couldn’t take a week—an’ had ’em stretch out as much as eight days! But, just offhand, I would say that I’ll be around long enough to finish up the moppin’. An’ plenty long enough to see *you* under the grass, lookin’ at the lovely li’l’ flowers from the wrong ends.’

‘Dear me!’ Snake sighed, shaking his head gravely. ‘Such confidence in himself. Such—misplaced confidence...’

He turned away, his face solemn, with a small motion of the shoulders. As he took his third or fourth step away from Vern, that broad-shouldered man of dare-devil face—he who had gone for the money—lifted himself suddenly above the bar’s top. He had a pistol in his hand. He fired at Vern.

The slug went so close to his cheek that Vern thought he could feel the wind of it passing. He spun on his heel. The riot gun lifted, bellowed, making terrific sound in that closed space. The bar’s end was splintered by the heavy charge of buckshot. The broad-shouldered man’s face disappeared. Vern twitched the lever. As a shell snicked up into the barrel, he menaced the room with that gaping muzzle.

‘An’ who was *that* unjudgmatical *gunie*?’ he inquired metallically.

Nobody answered until Vern’s roving eyes found Josephus Tennon, over against the bar. Tennon made sticky sounds with lips that trembled.

‘Squinty McBrett!’ he mumbled at last. He seemed on the point of collapse. ‘He—he—— It was McBrett that—shot Barnesy!’

Then he ducked like the weasel he resembled, around the bar’s end. There were the unmistakable sounds of his violent sickness from its shelter.

‘Well, well!’ Vern cried incredulously. Then he found Snake Stett and stared viciously at him. ‘Squinty McBrett, who murdered little Barnesy! An’ the Law collects him the very day he did that dirty murder he was put up to do! Just think of that—Snake!’

CHAPTER VI

Six-Shooter Law

VERN came whistling tunelessly out of the jail where he had slept. He looked through the gray morning light at Paradise awakening. Sullen-faced men came past the jail. They glowered at him and he met their ugly stares with level, challenging eyes. None spoke to him. They merely looked his way with a sort of promise in their expressions, then passed on.

He turned a little in the jail's door. Down the street was Josephus Tennon's store. Three men were there who but yesterday had walked these streets, quick, and now were dead... There lay little Barnesy, a sort of monument to futility. There lay Squinty McBrett who had murdered him. And beside the two of them was that unidentified little man who had been with Big Tom Eddelmann in the rain. For he had been found and carried to Tennon's. Nobody admitted knowing him. Big Tom, who might have identified him, had disappeared.

Vern locked the jail door and went to breakfast. He was conscious of being a figure noted everywhere. It worried him not at all. He was used to it. From Tascosa on the far Canadian, to Brownsville at the Rio Grande's mouth, he had walked on the streets of fifty towns with the people staring at him and saying to themselves: '*There's a Ranger...*'

So he had breakfast and, while he ate, an idea came. It pleased him. He stirred his coffee and, while the smoke of his cigarette drifted upward past his weathered face, he smiled shadowily. The one-eyed, horse-twisted puncher who was waiter in this hash house stared curiously at him, looked furtively around, then bent to his shoulder.

'My God!' said the waiter, 'y' ain't figgerin' to turn any more wolves a-loose?'

'Fella,' said Vern, getting up, 'if you want to hear some howlin', come down to the blacksmith shop in about twenty minutes. You'll 'low that somebody poured the turpentine to all the *lobos* in West Texas! An'—you can spread the word, if you're a-mind to. It won't bother *me* a bit!'

He went back to the jail, meeting the same veiled glances, of curiosity, of outright hostility, which had been the gantlet he ran as he went to breakfast. He moved along the awninged sidewalks with the small grin of anticipated enjoyment which had curved hard mouth in the eating-house.

There were two Mexicans in the jail, charged with drunkenness and disturbance of the peace. These Vern haled from the one cell and burdened with the confiscated pistols of the Coney Island's customers. The little procession attracted much attention on its way to the blacksmith shop of Whitey Cassell. There was a Mexican smith here. He made no objection when Vern's little party marched into the reeling shed and stopped by the anvil.

'Begin!' Vern ordered the men in Spanish, as they dropped the pistols on the shop's dirt floor. 'Smash every gun.'

He unloaded them, ignoring the growing crowd about the shop's door—except for watch kept upon them from eye corners. He held up the magnificent weapons of Snake Stett; held them where everyone could see the shimmering gold and silver and pearl of them. Then he stepped to the anvil and took a hammer from the floor. The sledge descended; rose; fell again. And when he was done, of those splendid matched self-cockers nothing was left but smashed and twisted metal.

One Mexican with a hacksaw wrecked other, plainer weapons. The second man swung a hammer. Thirty pistols and derringers they turned into junk, before Vern dusted his hands against his pants and grunted to the workers.

'That will be all, *hombres*,' he told them. 'And that will be your punishment.'

None of the spectators had made any objection to the work of wrecking. They gave back so that Vern and his workers had a narrow lane by which to reach the street. They were unnaturally quiet as he walked through. He whistled softly and moved as if none were there. But his swinging hand was very ready to shift its arc; ready to snap over to Colt butt at the first hostile move. None coming, he went back to the jail without a look behind him. Pico was in the corral back of the jail.

He saddled the chestnut and swung up. He rode down to the store of Shamus O'Hara. The storekeeper came to his door. He grinned dryly at Vern.

'I'm driftin' over to Ord,' Vern said thoughtfully. 'To hunt up *A Man!*'

'May ye find him!' said O'Hara earnestly. 'As—Paradise found one such yesterday! Luck ride wit' ye, Ranger!'

Vern nodded and tickled Pico with a gentle rowel. He rode the length of Paradise's street and out into the chaparral. The gray of rain was gone from the sky. There was a flood of golden sunlight upon the damp countryside.

Mocking birds rocked upon slender branches of the dwarf oaks near the trail. Hunting hawks swooped low over the chaparral, angling abruptly upward and wheeling about almost in Pico's face.

'Not bad! Not bad a-tall,' Vern told himself, thinking of those steady eyes watching the destruction of the pistols. 'But Snake didn't honor us with his presence. Too bad! Too bad! But maybe he was unavoidably detained, yeh. Figurin' a way to put a plaster on me—one that'll be sure to stick... An' he has got three hundred men, accordin' to Shamus O'Hara—or two hundred an' ninety-eight, since I accounted for that squintin' murderer, McBrett, an' Big Tom Eddelmann's friend...'

He grinned faintly; nodded; clucked tongue against back teeth until Pico broke from easy foxtrot to gentle lope.

'All right, *Señor Culebra!* You'll maybe chew a meal off me. But, *por dios!* I'll wrangle me a lunch off you, while you have dinner!'

He turned suddenly toward the south. His hand went creeping down to the smooth, brown stock of the .44 Winchester that rode in the saddle scabbard. For to the south lay the great Rocker-O of 'Pache Ord. The house itself should be almost due south of where he sat Pico here. And—someone was coming; heralded by the *thuddah-thud! thuddah-thud!* of hoofbeats that told of a loping horse. Vern listened, stared, saw nothing.

He reached a long arm down to tap Pico's forelegs with the quirt lash. Obediently, the tall gelding halted, bent his knees, then rolled over on his side. Vern stood up, with the Winchester carbine in his hands. That rider seemed to be coming down a stock trail straight at him. It might be only some puncher of the Rocker-O or other outfit, bound on innocentest of errands. But this was enemy country. He waited alertly, big body moveless, laxed, the .44 ready, staring across the scrubby growth.

Then he had his first glimpse of that oncoming rider. He grinned slightly; went back to where Pico lay patiently. He carried the carbine easily across his arm; even whistled.

'Good mornin'!' he greeted Priscilla Ord when she came up—as if they were the best of friends. 'This is certainly fine, now, seein' you again so soon, so early...'

She reined in the black horse and sat looking down at him. Her dark eyes were narrow and angry. Her smooth, scarlet mouth made a thin line. She ignored the greeting:

'What are you doing on Rocker-O range?'

‘Rocker-O range? Why—blamed if I didn’t think that this was the road to Ord! Honest! How’s tricks? Frio Jack shot you up any more? That was a funny deal, you know it? Frio is Snake’s man, of course. Put on the Rocker-O to keep an eye on yo’ father—for Snake. Then here’s yo’ father, bootin’ him off the place, an’ Frio shootin’ at you! Seems mightily queer, when I figure it over. Yes, sir! It does that!’

For an instant, as he seemed merely to think aloud, the girl’s eyes widened, showed a troubled light. Then she shrugged contemptuously:

‘It’s quite a little schemer, isn’t it!’

‘Aw, shucks! Not really. But maybe I’ll do until one comes along. An’ maybe I’ll be good enough to tie Snake an’ all the other lowdown, sneakin’ thieves an’ bushwhackers in the Culebra River country into some sort of Spanish knot. Well, anyway, we’re kind of driftin’ along, by guess an’ by God; quiet; sort of—workin’ on that idea.’

‘We? What do you mean by “we”?’

‘Rangers an’ honest citizens an’ some straight officials.’

‘You think that you can change the ways of this country?’ she demanded incredulously. ‘If you do—you’re certainly innocent! There’s just one law here—the law of the strongest! It’s like the old feudal times in Germany, when every man defended himself; each castle along the Rhine was a world in itself. I’ve read about that. It’s a kind of—last frontier.’

‘Uh-huh. But the’s one thing you’re overlookin’, ’Cilla. It’s still a part of the State of Texas; it has some folk livin’ in it who kind of like to raise cattle for themselves—an’ bank the money an’ ’low to find it in the bank when they go after it. Folks like these don’t see a bit of the joke, when fifteen-twenty hard cases ride up to their houses an’ insult a helpless woman, maybe, an’ rob the place.

‘Maybe I’m funny, but *I* don’t see anything amusin’—or *brave*—about that kind of devilment, either. You know ol’ Man Barnes? Well?’

‘I’ve known him all my life,’ she said slowly, black eyes steady on his face; a little watchful, a little suspicious. ‘Why?’

‘What d’you think about him?’ Vern drawled guilelessly.

‘He’s harmless,’ she shrugged. ‘Not much iron in his backbone, the boys say. He has a little place on the Culebra, east of Paradise. He’s apt to get drunk more often than is good for him. But I rather like the old man. He’s harmless.’

‘*Uh-uh! Uh-uh!* He must be pretty salty—lots saltier than you give him credit for.’ Vern’s puzzled tone was a work of art as he laid his trap for this savage young product of the lawless Culebra River country. ‘Yeh... Must be...’

‘You’re rather new in this country,’ she reminded him superciliously. It amused him to see that she had apparently forgotten that she was talking freely to him. ‘Old Barnesy wouldn’t hurt a fly. Doubtless, he would have amounted to more, if he’d *been* more on the shoot.’

Vern shook his head; his puzzled frown deepened.

‘Well, I declare, I just do’ no’... I saw him last night in the Coney Island Saloon. It was like this——’

Very skillful, indeed, was his telling of the tale of Barnes’s assassination. So skillful, indeed, that she sat staring at him without seeming to understand why he should recount so unimportant an incident—until he described the coming back into the saloon of that dark little killer, Lute Cane. Then a slim hand came up to finger the shirt over her heart and for ten seconds she stared with horror. He knew that he had made her see and pity that poor, shambling, desperately frightened rabbit of a man, so descriptively titled ‘Barnesy.’

‘I don’t believe it!’ she cried. ‘I don’t believe Snake had anything to do with it! It was just that ugly killer, Squinty McBrett! He doesn’t need any urging, to commit a killing like that!’

‘I hadn’t said Snake had anything to do with it!’ he reminded her. ‘Though I know absolutely that it was his scheme. Else why did he tell that gang in the bar-room that Barnes talked too much in the wrong places? Why did he stall around with Barnes till Lute Cane could sneak outside an’ post the late-lamented Squinty to wait for that poor devil?’

‘Late-lamented Squinty?’ she repeated, seeming to catch at this, in preference to going on with talk of Snake.

‘Yeh. I turned loose a riot gun on him an’ he was killed by the shock,’ Vern said dryly. ‘You see, I was takin’ the boys’ pop-pistols off ’em in the Coney Island—it’s against the law to carry pistols, you know, in town—an’ after they’d paid their fines, Squinty ’lowed to down me from behind the bar. Snake was helpin’ him get me offguard. It almost worked, too!’

‘*You* took Snake’s pistols from him? *You’re a liar!* There’s no man alive who could disarm him!’

‘Goodness me! It does beat the Dutch how well a dead man can feel!’ he cried humorously. ‘He didn’t make a bit more fuss than anybody else about

it. I tell *you*, 'Cilla—when an eye as big an' mean as the muzzle of that Winchester shotgun looks at you, you just lay down! He didn't object. Nor he didn't object this mornin', either, when I hauled a couple of Mex' out of the calaboose an' made 'em saw thirty perfectly good Colt pistols in two—those fancy ones of Snake's bein' first.'

Humorously, he eyed her, as he tickled the patient Pico with a boot toe and the chestnut scrambled to his feet.

'Trouble with you, honey, you just need to see other parts of Texas. Yeh... you've been holed up in this country until you don't realize that there's more an' better, elsewhere; an' different ways of doin' things. That there's places where a sneakin' murderer is smacked right between his mind an' his mouth!'

He lifted a big hand to check her violent outburst:

'Hold yo' ponies, sister! I'm doin' the oratin' right now. You've been listenin' to Snake tell it scary—about how big an' fe-ro-cious he is. You *must've* seen some other murders just like little Barnesy's! But you had Snake's slick story about how-come. Now, you're goin' to learn three things that I can think of right now! You are that:

'You're goin' to learn that Snake Stett's not a tenth so big an' savage as he's been makin' out, when he comes up against somebody he can't bluff—a common, ordinary Ranger sergeant, like Yours Truly, even!'

'You're a Ranger sergeant!' she cried incredulously.

'Yes'm. An' a little bit more: I'm the Law in Paradise an' Ord, right now—actin' on orders from the Governor! But we'll go on with what I was sayin' to you:

'You're goin' to learn that court law can take the place o' six-shooter-'em-in-the-back law! Yeh! Even in Paradise an' Ord! An', thirdly, you're goin' to learn——'

He stopped and eyed her with abrupt change of expression. His eyes were narrowed and he smiled gently across at her.

'I'll learn to like you, too, I suppose!' she cried viciously, as if but expressing another claim as absurd as the others.

'Oh, no, darlin'est!' Vern objected, in a shocked voice. 'Not a bit of that! You're not goin' to learn to like me. You're goin' to learn to love me! Yes, indeed! *Love!*'

He swung up on Pico and sat facing her, still smiling. She stared at him. Her expression was an odd jumble of bewilderment and fury and—

uncertainty...

‘*Hasta la vista, darlin’*,’ he said. ‘Until I see you again. That’ll be right soon, of course. But not half soon enough—for my druthers!’

Pico spun on his hindfeet and darted away. His long gallop presented Vern’s straight back to the girl as the chestnut began to eat up the miles of dusty road. A hundred yards away, Vern turned easily in the swellfork. Priscilla was still motionless in the saddle, staring after him. He waved affectionately, then lifted his voice:

‘“You was gone too long!” says Sue.
“What could a pore gal like me do?
It’s too late, now, my darlin’ Hugh;
I got to wed along of Lou!”’

‘I fills my hand. I eyes this Lou.
My smoke-pole looks him th’ough an’ th’ough.
“Judge Colt di-vo’ces us!” says Lou.
“I bids you a com-plete adieu!”’

As his cheerful voice floated back to her, the girl suddenly jerked her head, as if clearing it of haze. She pulled up her horse viciously, whirled him about and went racing away—back toward the Rocker-O. Vern grinned as he listened to the thunder of her hoofbeats; grinned the more widely when she turned. He waved, but she had turned, quirt rising and falling furiously.

CHAPTER VII

Hanging Evidence

ORD was merely Paradise, seen through a magnifying glass. More houses, saloons, stores; more quiet-faced, or grim-faced, men in riders' clothing. These men wore no visible weapons. The country, without doubt, was 'on the shoot,' but here in the virtual county seat of two counties, there seemed to be some etiquette concerning the exhibition of arms.

But, if Ord were like Paradise, some of its residents were like nobody Vern had seen anywhere in the other county. For himself, he rode up the main street with violet eyes very alert indeed; and if there were a smile gently widening his thin mouth, it was not a smile to give the illusion of much kindness. When he came to the courthouse and swung down, two men he saw entering the building drew his gaze automatically.

Both were dressed in manner to give them distinction in this frontier section of Texas. For they wore black frock coats and wide-brimmed 'lawyer's' Stetsons of the same color. Here the general resemblance ended. For one was a portly six-footer with snow-white hair and pink face. The other was jockey-sized and, though his hair was but grizzled, he seemed years the senior of his companion.

'Who'—it was Vern, addressing a man just then passing the courthouse '—might the two gentlemen be?'

'Big'n's Judge Mingo Adams; other's Dr. Brill,' the native replied, looking at Vern, rather than at the objects of the question.

He hesitated a minute, this thoughtful-seeming townsman, then—

'I do'no' o' anything much that seems likely to be done, toward makin' Ord an' Paradise the same as, say, Bexar or Dallas Counties. But—I do think that if I was a Ranger, even figurin' on doin' somethin', them's the two men I would hunt up to talk to...'

Then he seemed surprised at himself for having said so much. He grunted a hurried good-bye and went quickly away from there, with eyes shuttling from right to left. Vern stared after him, narrow-eyed, and slowly he shook his head. It was a lawless region! That fellow seemed to have the earmarks of an honest man. So—he was afraid to talk to a Ranger; afraid even to be seen talking to a Ranger! Vern thought it very typical, indeed, of conditions. He swung down and went in.

He went with typical softness of footfall down the hallway of the two-story stone courthouse, on the trail of the pair he hunted. There was no difficulty in locating the room into which they had turned! For a shrill, petulant voice was being lifted in disgusted plaint:

‘*Yah!*’ was the first word Vern heard. ‘*Yah!*’ it came again, more contemptuously than at first. ‘Grand jury! Grand jury! *Yah!* What’s a dem’ grand jury in Ord County, Mingo Adams? Answer me! Don’t sit there like a dem’ Cheshire Cat! Answer me—if answer me you can! *Ah-ha!* You can’t answer! Dem’ good reason, too; there’s no answer possible! *Yah!*’

‘Now, Doc!’—this was evidently Mingo Adams. It was a deep, deliberate, judicial sort of voice. Vern stopped outside that District Courtroom door, very frankly eavesdropping.

‘Now, Doc, you’re overwrought. I think that this venire will surprise you... We admit, you and I, that former grand juries have been either too corrupt or too—cautious, to return indictments for anything more serious than riding estrayed stock or the like. But this venire—well, it should suit you, for it suits me.’

‘I’ll believe it when I see it!’ Dr. Brill snorted. ‘Dem’ shame! Bunch of thieves running things. Crooked sheriff. Crooked district attorney. Both fraternizing with the very leaders of the thieves and murderers. Fraternizing with ’Pache Ord and Snake Stett. Taking orders from ’Pache. Dem’ outrage! But I’ve an eye on ’em! I’m gathering evidence! I’m keeping my little list!’

‘Will you offer your—evidence to the grand jury, this session?’

‘I will not! Not unless it returns indictments on evidence already available to it. Then I’ll be glad to. Dem’ glad to! But I don’t look for a bit more action this time than before.’

‘You can’t blame them,’ Mingo Adams said reflectively. ‘It’s as much as a man’s life is worth, to give evidence, or return an indictment, against any of Ord’s virtual associates, Snake Stett’s gangsmen. Have you heard of this Ranger who landed in Paradise yesterday? Apparently, he started cleaning up things with a bang! I’m hopeful of this grand jury because the Governor has at last put the policing of these counties into the hands of the Rangers. You don’t monkey with Rangers!’

‘Heard about it. Like to see that hairpin. Hope he lives long enough to do something.’

Vern opened the door softly and stepped into the empty courtroom.

'*He* hopes so, too!' he remarked cheerfully, as the two turned where they sat halfway down the room, on one of the benches of the place.

They stared thoughtfully at him and he returned the stare with a half smile. Dr. Brill was like an aged and irritable fox terrier. But there was every evidence about the judge of that iron fearlessness which O'Hara's remarks had indicated. He looked the lawyer of the old Southern school, with his pink-skinned, square-jawed face, thin mouth, and his rather long white hair. His eyes were like black gimlets, shining steadily under shaggy black brows; they bored—Vern felt—into his very brain, analyzing, weighing...

'You're the Ranger?' he said slowly—and smiled. 'I'm glad to see you. I'm Judge Mingo Adams of the district bench. This is Dr. Brill, our leading physician and a citizen of even more prominence.'

'I'm Sergeant Dederick,' Vern nodded. 'By myself, right now. Got men comin'. Thought I'd better drift over here an' see what's the best thing to do—first.'

'I—we *heard* that you didn't wait to make this call, before finding the first and best thing to do,' the judge smiled.

'Oh, that?' Vern shrugged. 'I didn't really figure 'twas a part of the job—or more'n a small part, anyhow. That just kind of riz up an' showed itself at the end of my nose, like a fella might say. No-o, I'm huntin' the foundation of yo' troubles. Way I look at it's this: There's no use at all my loopin' a fella stealin' a cow, if he's just one of the li'l' understrappers of Snake Stett's gang. If Snake's runnin' this business, what I want is to smack Snake Stett—proper!'

'I have evidence warranting at least forty indictments for murder and stock theft,' the judge said sardonically. 'But neither 'Pache Ord nor Snake Stett is definitely or directly implicated in any. Ord undoubtedly profits by the purchase of rustled cattle. It's the way of the big cowman in a lawless country. He has to buy the other man's stock from the thieves to keep them off his own herds. He has to build himself some sort of political fort if he wants to stay on top.'

'Snake Stett, now, is entirely different. He's not a Texan. He's from a good family back North, somewhere. Just a naturally lawless individual. The West has suffered always from this sort. He is a killer; he is a thief; he would rather have a dishonest dollar he hadn't worked for than five honest dollars which were paid for work. He rides about dressed like a frontier dandy, and boasts of leading this outlaw organization. But we have no evidence, ever, of his actual complicity in any crime.'

'You think buyin' wet stuff is the worst that can be charged to 'Pache Ord's account?' Vern was inwardly surprised at the relief he felt, upon hearing the judge's light arraignment of 'Cilla's father.

'I wouldn't say that! For, in the nature of things, he gets deeper and deeper in things illegal. He has to control the county; so he gets his men into the county offices. And someone becomes troublesome and—whether or not he actually hires a killer to remove that man, he is hand in hand with Stett, who will hire the killer.'

'I said to the judge,' Brill interrupted waspishly, 'that I would furnish to the right sort of grand jury some evidence from my private collection. Dem' glad to! I still say that. I'm not talking, now. But if this is the sort of grand jury which can call its soul its own—I'll give it some evidence against Stett! Hanging evidence! From my little book. But first I must see the grand jury perform. I won't weaken my evidence by having it bandied around the country by crawfish!'

'I'd kind of love to make a li'l' talk to yo' grand jury,' Vern said thoughtfully. 'Before they get down to work. If that's legal.'

'I'll take the responsibility of permitting it,' Mingo Adams smiled. 'I take it you'll make a general sort of statement to them, by way of—encouraging spirited action...'

'Just about. I'll maybe brace up the iron in some weak sisters' backbones. I'm goin' to drift around a spell, now. You just let me know, Judge, when this grand jury's ready to hear me prophesy. Time I draw breath, they'll believe I'm seventh son of some seventh son!'

He went out. He was restless, for so much preliminary ground-breaking was annoying to a forthright man. He preferred direct action to talk, any day. But this elaborately organized and widely influential and strongly entrenched gang, he saw, was not one to be smashed in a day or a week of powder smoke. At least, he could not see that such a day, such a week, was immediately ahead. He had once worked on a similar case and punched cows for six months, hunting evidence, before he could make a single arrest. This job might need even more time.

'Except,' he thought with satisfaction, 'for Snake! If we can yank showdown to us, it'll be speeded because Snake is anxious to smack me an' show everybody how quick a Ranger can be settled.'

As if conjured up by thought of him, Snake Stett appeared now before Vern on the main street, turning into a store. Vern watched him disappear. If only Snake would hit at him now, today! But there was small chance of that.

Vern did not at all believe that the dandified outlaw was a coward. But he was a cautious soul, a most annoyingly cautious soul!

He stopped to look into the store's dingy window. There was a pair of Colt .45s even more elaborate than those of Snake's which Vern had hammered into glittering, twisted junk. Pearl handles were carved into snorting bulls' heads that had blazing rubies for eyes. Swinging gold rings were in the bulls' noses. Gold-plated, all the metal of the pistols was filigreed with silver. As works of art, they were interesting to study.

But any fool knew that one might easily pay with his life for his vanity if he packed guns like these. A sweaty hand, flashing down, might easily slip on slick pearl butts, while the plainly accoutered other man hauled forth gun of rubber or walnut grips with sure hand, to fire the deciding shot.

As Vern admired them without covetousness, a gnarled hand came up to them through the window's back. They were taken down, drawn into the store. Vern nodded shadowily and moved to the store's door to stand unobtrusively and look inside.

There, just as he had expected, stood Snake, twirling the fancy .45s by forefingers in trigger guards. Before him stood a fidgeting little man who reminded Vern most vividly of the luckless 'Barnesy'—the storekeeper, gaunt, sallow, sad of voice:

'—An' four hund'd for the pair is a mighty special price, Mr. Snake,' he was saying. 'Couldn't git 'em today for less than five hund'd.'

Vern thought with much appreciation and pleasure that the recent experiences of Snake had not tended to sweeten the outlaw's disposition. He guessed, too, that what this storekeeper was saying about the pistols was *not* what he would have liked to say; by no means all that he could have said.

'These are the very best you have, Wilkes? You're—sure?'

'Finest pistols I ever had in the store!' cried Wilkes. 'Finest that ever hit West Texas, *I* bet you, Mr. Snake.'

'I'll take them!' Snake nodded. 'Charge 'em to me, Wilkes.'

The storekeeper was impelled by what must have been desperation to burst into a pitiful plea for cash. Snake paid no attention whatever to the whining voice. He was loading the .45s from the box of shells on the counter at his elbow. But, finally, he shook his head irritably.

'What's that?' he snarled. 'What are you saying?'

'Now, don't git me wrong, Mr. Snake! Don't git me wrong!' whined Wilkes, shoulders lifted, hands outflung pathetically. 'But I got a livin' to

make an' goods to pay for. I'm mighty hard up, right now, an' I was countin' on sellin' them Colts an' payin' some debts. Four hundred dollars ain't nothin' to you, but it's jist heaps to a po' man! Gi' me cash jist this oncet, Mr. Snake! If you don't want to pay it all, gi' me three hundred dollars. Gi' me two hundred!

'Are you insinuating that my word's not good for a measly four hundred dollars? Are you, Wilkes? I'm—downright surprised!'

The storekeeper fairly groveled at the purring voice. He stammered pitifully; repeating his story of debts unpaid. Vern could endure it no longer. He stepped quietly into the store, hitching his low-swung Colt a hair's breadth to the front on his thigh:

'You don't have to give credit at all if you're not minded to,' he drawled. 'Now, if I was you, an' things was like you said, an' yo' customer was—well, like he is, I'd think about O'Hara, over at Paradise, an' the way O'Hara handled Snake, when he come into the store tryin' to stick him up for contributions...'

Snake had whirled like a cat at first sound of Vern's voice. His olive skin was paper-white and his eyes smoldered. He still had the .45s in his hands and there was an involuntary twitching of shoulder muscles to tell of the strain he was under. Vern eyed him with his head a little back, a small, mocking smile twisting thin lips. His own right hand was hooked by the thumb in the cartridge belt, just over his pistol. He went on talking, in gentlest, most careless, of drawls, to the gaping storekeeper:

'Yeh, Snake he come hellin' into O'Hara's an' told his li'l' tale of how the boys 'lowed Shamus had better decorate the mahogany. But Shamus—funny!—*he* had different idees. An' he published 'em! He run Snake out of the place. I was watchin'. I'm a Ranger, you see, an' it's my business right now to watch all kinds o' things. Anyhow, Snake has come clean over here, to get him a couple of guns. He tell you how-come he needs new hoglegs? *He didn't?* Then I will! Why, I took his others off him an' smashed 'em all up. He was packin' 'em illegal, you see.'

Suddenly, the sallow storekeeper recovered from his statue-like fixity of pose. His face was more drained of blood, even, than Snake's. He moved like a jumping-jack—like a man in a fit. But his reaction was not at all what Vern had invited. Instead, he fairly threw himself upon the rigid outlaw; he begged him to take the .45s and forget that any cash had been asked for.

'Who's this fella, to come hornin' in like this on our business?' he cried. 'I do'no' a thing about him, Mr. Snake! I don't want to know nothin' about him. You jist take them guns an' any ol' time you feel like payin' for 'em—

that's a' right, Mr. Snake. I can handle my business without no Ranger buttin' into it.'

'In those circumstances,' Snake said in quiet voice, 'I'll accept them. As for you, Dederick ——'

'Yeh? As for me?' Vern nodded eagerly.

'I'll see you again—soon.'

He brushed by and there were no illusions whatever in Vern's mind concerning him. Checked he was. He had not tried even what should have been a sure bit of gunplay. Which merely showed him as more dangerous than a man lacking the iron control he had. For Snake Stett, so Vern was now assured, was a gentleman who could assay his chances in a split second and hold his play until it promised to be utterly sure. He was no more affected by this contemptuous treatment of him, no less dangerous, than would have been a rattler driven off.

'You git out o' my place, will you?' cried the storekeeper to Vern. 'An' I hope you don't never come back!'

'You people around here certainly must like to be robbed!' Vern said contemptuously, making no move to depart.

'Huh!' cried Wilkes. ' 'Tain't that we like to be robbed. It's that we *don't* like to git killed!'

CHAPTER VIII

'They're a-Layin' for You!'

VERN came out of the grand jury room. He walked through the hall of the square, stone courthouse, thinking of the jury's make-up, rather than of what might lie ahead of him. And Snake Stett might be waiting for him on the street, this morning.

He nodded absently to himself. Considering the conditions in Ord and Paradise Counties, it seemed to him that a better, a grimmer, set of veniremen could hardly have been selected. There were three angles to the work of cleaning up these counties—as he saw the task:

First, and most important, this grand jury must return indictments. Second, he and his two helpers—Dud Blaze and Ody Gardineer, when those two cheerful stalwarts arrived—must make the arrests. Third—and this was most irritating of the three phases, to a direct-minded man—juries must be found which would convict the indicted men.

'An' with a crooked district attorney, workin' in harness with the defense—ah, hell!' he snarled.

Going downstreet, still thoughtful, but mechanically watchful as became a personage as unpopular as he, Vern met that man who had identified for him Judge Mingo Adams and Dr. Brill, at the moment of his arrival at the courthouse the day before. Erskine was the name, Vern knew. A freight contractor. Now, Erskine was as roving-eyed and nervous as upon the day before, when he had hurried away from open contact with a Ranger. But, also, he had something on his mind; something urgent:

'Come to my corral—right away. Back of it. *Don't go no further down this street!*'

Then he was past, with face as blank as if he had not whispered that urgent summons and warning. Vern, too, let no hint of his thoughts twist well-trained features. He stopped, tossed away the stub of his cigarette, rolled another, looked carelessly along the innocent-seeming fronts of saloons and stores and houses, then vanished from the street by way of a narrow passage between the two buildings on his right.

And he vanished so swiftly and inconspicuously that two men who were lounging fifty feet away from him, in front of the Bull's Head Saloon, and who had turned their heads for an instant, stiffened when they turned back toward the spot where he had been. They looked this way and that way; their

expressions were ludicrously bewildered. Then they gaped at each other and, as by mutual consent, popped inside the Bull's Head. Vern, watching them, laughed. Then he went on.

Vern knew Erskine's corral. He gained it without any self-advertisement whatever. There was a big stack of hay in a corner of it and, as he neared this, an arm appeared suddenly and beckoned him. He went alertly toward Erskine's hiding-place and stopped with eyes narrowed thoughtfully to study the contractor.

'They're a-layin' for you, Sergeant! They been a-watchin' a hour an' more, for you to come out of the co'thouse. If you got life insurance an' a lovin' wife, you can shore-ly fix it up for yo' lovely widder to collect—by just oozin' inside the Bull's Head!'

'You said, "they,"' Vern meditated gently, aloud.

'Lute Cane's elected to do the actual job,' Erskine said nervously. 'But Snake's got nine-ten more—just in case. They do'no' much about you, but I gather that Snake's been playin' safe—same as per usual. He has been takin' you as the fastest gunplay proposition in the Rangers—or outside 'em! That's Snake's way. He never puts his money on ary thing but a shore thing. But when he figures it is a shore thing—'

'Now, Lute Cane's slick as you'd want to meet—shootin'. Born killer, same's that Squinty McBrett you downed in Paradise other day. Snake uses him for just this sort o' job. I could name you nine men Cane's got in the last couple years; all fast gunfighters; some with Santone an' El Paso rep's. So—Lute's waitin' for you.'

'I'm not a bloodthirsty man,' Vern drawled reflectively. 'But I do'no' that I wouldn't just as soon down such as Lute Cane, this mornin', as anything else I can think of. But from what you say, Erskine, if I go into the Bull's Head an' pick a row with Cane an' accident'ly kill him, that won't keep my skin unpunctured...'

'Nary bit!' the freight contractor assured him with sinister grimness. 'Na-ry—bit! The others'd down you one-two-three!'

'An' still'—Vern's eyes were smokily violet, but his tone was the gentlest, most meditative of drawls '—it's no way right an' proper—such as Cane layin' for a man. Why, for all he knows, I may be the sweetest an' loveliest kind of fella! An' here *he* is, all painted up to kill me off. Somethin'll have to be done... You reckon, Erskine, that if I was to see Sher'f Drake, now, he'd make Cane take off his plowhandles an' put him under peace bonds or somethin' like that?'

‘He might—if he’s had a plumb complete an’ thorough change o’ color an’ disposition in the last half-hour! When *I* see our noble sher’f last, he was in the Bull’s Head, a-drinkin’ with that crowd. Me, I was in the back room listenin’ to ’em.’

‘Reckon he’ll stick there, while they’re rowin’ with me? Him an’ Snake?’

‘No-o, I don’t hardly reckon Snake or Drake either one’ll be in the saloon,’ Erskine said judicially. ‘Snake don’t never let himself be too hooked up with such a deal.’

‘Fine!’ Vern said explosively. ‘Will you help me out some? See if Snake’s still in the Bull’s Head. If he’s gone, send somebody in, to slip up to Cane an’ whisper that Snake says for him to come—by himself—to the Three Jacks. An’ quick. Can happen?’

‘Can happen!’ nodded Erskine, with blissful, anticipatory grin.

Vern gained the Three Jacks without—he thought—being noted. He edged in to the bar toward the rear of the room and ordered a drink. There were not many men here. It was too early in the forenoon and, too, the Three Jacks was not a bar catering to the wilder cowpunchers. The Bull’s Head had most of that trade and, so, most of the bar trade this morning.

He had been there for five minutes or a little more when he saw Lute Cane come through the front door and stand looking about him. Apparently, the little first lieutenant of Snake Stett was puzzled. He came on down the room. Vern was flat against the bar, with a man on his left who shielded him well enough from Cane. So his elected killer was almost behind him, when Vern turned suddenly.

‘Well!’ he said cheerfully. ‘Look at what the cats drug in! How’s tricks, Cane? Arranged any more murders since the Barnes business?’

Cane gaped at him; his dark face was pale. His small hands were opening and closing nervously. The tip of his tongue came out like a cat’s, to lick his lips.

‘You’re lookin’ for Snake, of course,’ Vern nodded affably. ‘He’s not here. I sent you that message. I heard you ’lowed you had somethin’ to say to me an’, in a big crowd like that’n at the Bull’s Head it’s—oh, kind of hard to hear plain. So I got you down here where you can talk plain, an’ I can be certain I’m hearin’ you correct, an’ all that.’

Still Cane said nothing; merely licked his lips and stared incredulously at his expected victim. Vern watched him with slow, contemptuous grin. Very well, indeed, he knew the killer’s ways. These fellows who lived to cut

notches on their pistol butts were surprisingly often 'sure-thing' gamblers. They wanted either assurance of their superior speed when going against a victim, or a stage setting that assured a safe killing. Now, Cane's staging had been rudely jarred. He stood here, facing a man of unknown ability. He stood alone. Obviously, he did not like this situation.

'I have heard,' Vern drawled, 'that you esteem yo'self to be chain lightnin' an' several claps o' thunder, on the draw. That you've downed some fast gunfighters. Maybe you're all that you believe yo'self to be. My notion is that, when you buck a Texas Ranger, you're—*nothin'*! But I'm no ways bullheaded. No, indeed. If you think you're fast—faster'n I am—let's go!'

'I'm not lookin' for trouble,' Lute Cane shrugged. His face, his voice, were sullen. They were somehow uncertain, also.

Vern eyed him for a moment. Then his temper leaped up and he did what he knew to be a foolish thing. He stepped forward and smashed the dark little killer in the mouth. Cane staggered backward. His hand came flashing up, to claw at the open neck of his shirt. But Vern was raging. He gave Cane no time to whip a Colt from shoulder holster. His darting hand caught Cane by the right wrist. He twisted it downward. Cane made a squealing noise most rat-like. Vern flung him away, to reel half across the bar-room. Then he jumped after him.

Scientifically and mercilessly he manhandled Lute Cane. He smashed him back and forth, hitting hard, but taking pains not to knock him senseless. He used his superior height and reach and weight to administer a pounding cunningly calculated to hurt tremendously and yet leave the victim on his feet, a staggering, moaning thing with face pulped beyond recognition. And every time a hand clawed up toward pistol butt, it was slapped down.

The men at the bar, and the red-faced, gray-haired proprietor behind it, watched broodingly. They nodded appreciatively when Vern set his feet calmly and drove over the *coup de grâce*—a short straight right that landed squarely on the button and crumpled Lute Cane as if he had been a tissue-paper figure.

'That was a dam' foolish thing to do,' Vern told them—and himself—very savagely. 'Nothin' but killin' serves such as that. An' there's no use puttin' it off. The quicker they're killed the better for everybody!'

He stooped and picked up the battered, senseless figure, and, with it under his arm like a meal bag, went out the front door. Behind him, the

drinkers looked at each other; looked at Paddy Ryan the owner; and slowly, they shook their heads:

‘Never even bothered to take his gun off Cane!’ one said. ‘Yuh know, if I was some people—I think I would set down an’ think right hard for about a hour. Then I would git up—an’ run like hell!’

Vern went down the sidewalk, ignoring the amazed gaping of those men he passed swiftly. He came to the door of the Bull’s Head and stopped; there was a good deal of talk inside. And someone asked, in tone audible where Vern stood, for Lute Cane.

‘Lute Cane?’ Vern answered them, from out of sight, in a puzzled voice. ‘Who wants Lute Cane?’

‘I do!’ an unidentified voice replied to the question, from inside. ‘Yeh.’

‘We strive to please!’ Vern cried. ‘Here’s Lute Cane—with the compliments of the Texas Rangers!’

He swung the half-conscious, limp figure deftly, by a hand and a foot. He sent Lute Cane hurtling toward the swing doors. Through them Cane smashed, to drop on the floor at the very feet of the drinkers along the bar. Vern waited with hand on Colt butt. But out of the thick silence inside came no rise of wrathful voices; through the swing doors poured no knot of angry men.

‘This is certainly a windy country!’ Vern called.

He went on down the street to the courthouse.

CHAPTER IX

Guilty Conscience!

‘THIRTY-NINE indictments,’ Vern mused, ‘found in about four hours! Well, well, an’—*well!*’

He turned the papers over in a big hand, regarding them pleasantly. It was morning, again; morning of the second day in Ord. The manhandling of Lute Cane, though still a topic of conversation wherever two citizens met, was past history for a busy Ranger sergeant. Vern grinned slowly. He was recalling what the waspish Dr. Brill had said, about giving to a grand jury that owned a backbone enough evidence to connect Snake Stett with many crimes in the Culebra River country. He had not seen the little doctor since. He wondered if news of these indictments would bring the doctor into Ord with his ‘lists.’

‘Mostly, they seem to be warrants for men over in Paradise,’ he remarked to Judge Mingo Adams. ‘So, I reckon I might’s well drift back over there, Judge. But I’m wonderin’... I am that! I’m wonderin’ if you can corral some juries that’ll hang these fellas. That is, if they don’t resist arrest...’

Judge Adams regarded him with an amused glint in shrewd black eyes. Vern saw, and grinned selfconsciously. They were sitting in the judge’s chambers, behind the courtroom.

‘A week ago—no! But now—perhaps!’ the judge said. ‘I think that you could set down in your diary, if you had time and inclination for such frivolities as telling about the worthy deeds that fill your days, that you came into Ord and looked around; and that immediately some brave and cautious men became brave men, only! You see what it is to set a good example. So, I am beginning to be most hopeful of our courts!’

‘In spite of this crooked district attorney, Rogan?’

The judge smiled unctuously and looked down at the joined tips of his fingers, resting upon the judicial paunch.

‘Ah,’ he said softly, ‘but have you never encountered that interesting institution, known as the Special Prosecutor, my friend? If not, you will! For he will make an appearance in Ord, Sergeant Dederick. Rogan may chafe at having his work lifted from his shoulders. If so—I have the salve for his chafed places. Yes, we’ll get in a man from San Antonio who has no equal in all Texas as Special Prosecutor.’

He nodded, rolled thin cheroot slightly in a mouth corner, and spoke with a short of cheerful grimness:

‘You go on and serve those warrants—and don’t take any unnecessary risks in the serving! Trust me for the rest! When you stick your head into the lion’s—or should I say snake’s?—mouth to bring those scoundrels into court, I’d be ashamed to stop short of a broken neck, at hanging them after they arrive!’

Vern got up and stretched tigerishly.

‘I wish my two young friends’d drift in,’ he said lazily. ‘I never did claim to be more’n fourteen-fifteen foot high, or to have eyes in the back of my head, or above two gunhands. Even if it cut my credit down an’ my so-called reputation, to take some help from those two hellcats, I would risk it. An’ bear up pretty cheerfully, at that. But they’ll be along in time.

‘Well,’ he said, moving toward the door, ‘I’ll be driftin’ to Paradise. Be seein’ you, Judge, if that’s on the cards. An’ if you come upon a black bear in pants an’ high heels, trailin’ along after a half-pint, blue-eyed child—a regular mamma’s darlin’—I wish you’d tell those two crosses between barbed wire an’ death-dealin’ destruction that I’m in Paradise. They’ll answer—the black bear to Ody Gardineer, an’ the deceitful-lookin’ an’ actin’ child to Corporal Dud Blaze.’

‘I’ll be glad to direct them. *Vaya con dios*—if possible!’

Pico was in the livery corral. Vern saddled him, looked to the hang of the carbine in saddle scabbard, then mounted and rode out. It was a quieter town than it had been the day before. For Snake Stett and the hammered Lute Cane had gone somewhere the afternoon before, taking with them the contingent Snake had led from Paradise into Ord.

Pico foxtrotted down the main street, heading for Paradise. But a big voice boomed Vern’s name, from the sidewalk before the Bull’s Head. Vern eyed the beefy bulk of Rogan, the district attorney, with calm disfavor. He liked the red-faced, terrifically solemn Rogan as little as he fancied Sheriff Drake, who was a tall, narrow-bodied, narrow-faced man. Drake was at Rogan’s elbow, now.

‘Shall I elevate my snoot, Pico?’ Vern asked the chestnut. ‘Tell ’em both to go to hell, official, an’ ride right on by? If I’m goin’ to have trouble, nothin’ like havin’ it early!’

But he did not snub them. He found himself curious about the pair. He wondered what they might have to say to him.

‘Somethin’ bitin’ you?’ inquired Vern, riding over to them.

‘You—are aimin’—to go back to Paradise!’ Rogan charged, with double chins folding upon his breast, glaring up in his best charge-the-jury fashion from under his brows.

‘Please, Mister,’ whined Vern, ‘if you’ll le’ me off this time I won’t never do it again—maybe!’

‘Don’t attempt to be puttin’ me off, now!’ Rogan said heavily. ‘I know you are aimin’ to go back an’ I want to tell you, there’s a question in *my* mind about your jurisdiction to come interferin’ with our local affairs! Ain’t that so, Sheriff?’

‘Shore is!’ Drake nodded, without, however, meeting Vern’s eyes.

‘Now, we got a perfectly capable deputy sheriff over at Paradise. An’ a justice o’ the peace. I don’t see that we need no Rangers hornin’ in. Do you, Sheriff?’

‘Not a bit!’ Drake said, with conviction, staring hard at the white star in Pico’s forehead.

‘So I’m warnin’ you’—Rogan shook a thick forefinger impressively at Vern ‘—that I’m district attorney an’ along with Sheriff Drake, here, I have been a-strivin’ against the embattled forces of criminality that have besmirched the fair name o’ our county an’——’

‘Ne’ mind all that flapdoodlin’ fireworks, Rogan!’ Vern interrupted impatiently. ‘Save ’em for Fourth of July an’ somebody you can take in with ’em. You’re a big bag of wind an’ water, Rogan—an’ you know it. Me, I’m the commonest kind of Ranger sergeant—but I’m in charge of the counties, right now—an’ you know that! You see that jail down the street? Well, you an’ yo’ friend the sher’f, here—that can’t look a man in the eye—you be figurin’ on how you’d like to board inside there! For—*por el cuerpo de dios!*—I’m aimin’ to put you there!’

He whirled and rode on downstreet. Cut into the rolling chaparral he sent the chestnut at mile-eating foxtrot. Some miles upon that track, he topped out of a long hollow and upon the far crest turned in the saddle and looked back—a mechanical evidence of alertness. And stiffened, with hand sliding down to carbine stock. About a half-mile in his rear was a fan-shaped body of riders, coming hellbent.

He kned Pico into a gallop in two jumps and streaked off across the level. He had little fear of being overtaken. If there were horse in this country to touch his chestnut, he refused to admit the fact without the fullest proof. That was Snake Stett’s outfit—no doubt of that. It could hardly be anyone else.

From the crests of rises he looked back and scowled a little. He was gaining, but with snail slowness. There were some very good horses under those outlaws. This threatened to be a long race and he was not going straight toward Paradise. Something white shone well ahead of him—looked like a stone house; about a quarter-mile away. He spurred toward it. The place was the only shelter he could see.

Then Pico stumbled, recovered his balance and went on, but with slight limp. Vern's mouth drew thin. He tightened the rein as he went on. Now, he saw nothing but that house ahead. He came up to it, staring hard. It was deserted. He rode around it and coming back to where he could see the riders, heard their savage yelling. They were no more than an eighth-mile away, now.

It was a stone cabin of one room. There were great holes in the dirt roof. But Vern grinned as he backed Pico away from the doorless opening after a glance inside. He put his carbine up to the top of the stone wall and pushed. From saddle pockets he got two boxes of shells and dropped them into the blouse of his shirt. Then he rode Pico into the cabin and tapped the chestnut's leg. Pico came down and Vern walked to the front door. He looked out at the oncoming men, then turned back.

'You stay down there in that corner, boy!' he commanded the horse. 'I'm goin' to caucus with Mr. Stett from the roof..'

He went outside, looked shrewdly at the tiny window in the rear wall, stepped back six feet and ran at it. He jumped, put foot on its sill and slapped hand up to catch the walltop. Over it he scrambled, to pick up his Winchester and trot across the solid places of the roof to the front. He slid the carbine over the parapet and fired twice, one fast shot, one aimed shot.

A horse went down in the mass of riders. The others yelled, whirled to right and left and rode to encircle the cabin. Vern grinned slightly. For not only did they ride like Comanches, they shot like circling Indians, loosing wild slugs to rap the stone walls or miss entirely and go whining overhead. He rested the carbine on the wall's top and picked his targets. So he killed two more horses, if he did no execution among the riders—which he could not tell—before they raced out of range and jumped off.

But they could work up close to the cabin, covered by the chaparral. And if they could keep him here until dark, keep him from going through a hole in the roof to get Pico and make a dash through them, he was done for. But it was still a long time until dark. Danger hours away was too distant to worry Vern.

He walked around the roof, watching. When he saw movement in the chaparral, he fired quickly, lacing those leaves with .44 slugs. The movement stopped, but he could see nothing. Then, from a jumble of boulders and chaparral not forty yards from the cabin, Snake called to him.

‘Oh, Ranger!’ Snake yelled, very good-humoredly. ‘Any last wishes? Pre-execution requests? I told you that your race was about run. The boys will tell you that I’m always right when I make a prophecy like that. But if you want a testimonial, I’ll admit that you’ve lasted longer than anyone else who ever bucked my play. I’ll put that in writing.’

‘Put me down for the same notion Shamus O’Hara’s got!’ Vern answered cheerfully. ‘Just drop me in the hole with you an’ the others that’ll side me when I come to Jordan Ford. I’ll be satisfied! But what’s the matter with you fellas? What are you hangin’ back out there in the brush, for? If there’s any fight in you—which I doubt!—bring it up an’ put it in the pot!’

He went quickly back to look over the rear wall. It was time. The men out there were working closer, but they were not so favored with cover as Snake in front. He could see the movement of the little oaks as they inched up; could sometimes even hear them on the thick carpet of dry leaves. He opened up and drew a yell from some invisible hurt or startled one. Then he trotted back, keeping down behind the parapet, to see the front.

But nobody out there seemed to want a closer view of the little house. Vern amused himself by trying experimental shots at the boulders and brush that sheltered Snake. He drove a man out with a rocketing slug that ricocheted off the piled rocks. He saw the man’s leg give way under him as he fired a second time; saw him roll behind a mask of greenery.

But he heard more noise behind the boulders. Then a harsh voice sounded, and an imperative:

‘Ranger! Hold off that shootin’ a minute. I’m comin’ out to talk to you. Shut up, Snake! I’m doin’ this! Don’t butt in! I got more stake in this than you got! Ranger!’

‘Come on out,’ Vern answered. And then he was inspired. He added: ‘I won’t shoot you, Ord!’

A big, dark man, lean, hawk-faced, bitterly tight of mouth, lifted himself up and walked across the open yards until he was looking up at Vern. Vern listened for sounds from the rear, heard none and focussed his attention upon his visitor.

‘I do’no’ how you knowed my voice, but I *am* Ord. Now, I’m goin’ to tell you a few: I’m runnin’ these counties an’ I aim to keep on runnin’ ’em.

Yeh! For all the Rangers an' what-not can be lugged in! You're in a tight, fella—a damned tight! I can walk off an' leave you be shot to red dollrags. Or I can hand you a chance. If you'll pass yo' word to git on yo' crowbait an' leave my bailiwick in a mile-high cloud o' dust, I'll send the boys home an' you can hightail it. If you don't——'

'I'll certainly think it over,' Vern said politely. 'If you believe all that, I have got to be decent enough to listen an' think it over. I was brought up to respect other folks's beliefs—no matter how simple-damned-foolish they sound to me. But right now, I'm sort o' busy. I can't take up yo' proposition. In fact, it may be Tuesday, before I get around to it!'

'On yo' own head, then!' 'Pache Ord cried furiously. He turned and stalked back to the boulders. From behind them there came the sound of someone laughing. But from the rear of the house Vern caught other sounds—as of racing feet. He darted to the back and when he looked over, a Colt bellowed. He was stung by chips of stone struck off by the slug. Blindly, almost, he pushed Winchester over the edge and fired. By the time he could loose a third shot, he could see one man out there, motionless, with lifted pistol, and a couple more nearing the back door.

He had to ignore the pistol man's advantage. He fired down at that one who was aiming at him. The man spun around like a wind-whirled vane, and fell sideway. His shot nicked the stone so close to Vern's hand that the vibration stung it. But when he shortened his sights to catch the two runners, they were jumping into the house; were already sheltered.

Heavy firing broke out, now, in front. Lead glanced and buzzed from the wall's top, there. He could not show himself near the front without committing suicide. He looked over the back again. The man he had knocked down was visible only as to boot soles, as he crawled back into the brush.

'Interestin'!' Vern acknowledged ruefully. 'I wonder if I can get to the hairpins in the house better'n they can get to me! An' there's the chance o' hittin' Pico—worse luck!'

He went cautiously to the nearest gaping hole in the dirt and timbers of the roof. He moved from side to side of it, trying to see into the dusky interior and at the same time keep from showing himself to the men within. They found him first. He saw the edges of the hole fray under their lead, as the rattle of their fire sounded deafeningly below.

Directing his fire away from Pico's corner, he managed to empty reloaded carbine into the hole. He tried to spread his slugs and when their shooting stopped and he ventured to peep guardedly down, it was to see a

man sliding out of the front door. He crept over to the side and lifted bare head. The man was coming around the corner, close to the wall. Vern fired down at him and the man ran straight for the brush, unhit.

Suddenly, there came a shrill yell from Snake's position. Vern stiffened, listening. The yell came again, unmistakably a recall:

'Let's go! Everybody! Back to the horses! He's got help coming! Come on, everybody!'

He thought at first that it might be a trick, to draw him out into the open. But there was a scuffling sound of feet in the house. A man darted out and, as Vern peered over the wall's top, raced toward Snake's shelter. Presently, he could hear horses on the little dry oak leaves, moving on three sides of the house, moving toward the front. But he waited still longer, before going to the largest hole in the roof and looking in.

The cabin was empty. Sure of this, he let himself down through the hole and dropped to the dirt floor. He heard horses coming—fast. Then a very familiar voice was lifted:

'Vern! Ohhh! Vern! Wha' you, boy?'

He went to the door and looked at the big man and the little man sitting their horses twenty yards away. They spurred up at him, with a yell. They flung themselves from the saddles and charged him, to whirl him about with shrill cowboy yells.

'Cut it out, you dam' nitwits!' he commanded. 'You got here about in time to spoil a real nice Dyin' He-ro scene.'

Briefly, he told them of the fight, and Dud Blaze swore viciously.

'That's the way it is, all the time! I always come late to the wars because of having to drag Ody's big feet along with me! We heard the shooting. We were trailing you from town. And hurried. But we didn't know enough to mix into the *fracas*. Well... Orders from Headquarters: You are nominally in charge of this detail, by virtue of unjustified and accidental seniority. But, because of your many and known limitations, Cap'n directs that in all matters requiring exercise of intellectual qualities you'll be guided in every way, in all contingencies arising, by my suggestions, which will further be endorsed by Ody, of course. Ody will naturally endorse my decisions—for he remembers the cactus which so mysteriously appeared in his blankets, not so long ago. Further——'

'More visitors!' grunted Vern, whirling from where he grinned at Corporal Blaze. 'We're gettin' right popular.'

‘Cap’n!’ gasped the boy who slid to a stop before them. ‘Cap’n! Judge Adams says please come right back to town. Word’s jist come in: Dr. Brill was murdered last night—drug out o’ bed by a masked gang an’ hung to a tree. An’ his family was run off into the chaparral in their nightclothes. The gang robbed the house an’ then set fire to it.’

Vern stared incredulously at the messenger. Then, hard-faced and very smoky of eyes, he whirled instinctively and stared in the direction in which Snake Stett and that gang had disappeared.

‘Come on, you fellas!’ he gritted to Ody and Blaze. ‘This is a kind of sample of the way things have been goin’ around here. But ever’ last man in that gang is goin’ to do the cottonwood-prance himself—or I’ll bust a hamestring! I——’

He stopped short, gaping at them. For it had just come to him that ‘Pache Ord had been with Snake. It seemed only plausible, then, that he had been with Snake the night before, at Dr. Brill’s. He had a sudden, very clear, picture of ‘Cilla Ord. And he was ready to send her father to the end of a rope.

‘Come on!’ he said in a strange, flat voice. ‘It’s goin’ to be a—damned hard job. But it has got to be done.’

‘Shore!’ Ody Gardineer nodded, quite misunderstanding. ‘It ain’t the first hard job we bit off—an’ chewed up an’ et. So let’s git goin’. What d’ we care how hard it is!’

Vern looked at the boy frowningly.

‘Son, I don’t see a speck of use in our ridin’ back to Ord an’ then goin’ out to the Brill place—unless that’s the shortest way. Is it?’

‘No, ’tain’t,’ the boy shrugged. ‘It’s some miles longer. I can take ye to the crossroads. But Judge Adams, he figgered ye might want to talk to Mis’ Brill an’ the gals—they come into town. An’ they won’t talk much, except to tell it was a masked gang, an’ how the Doc’ was hung an’ Tuck hightailed an’ they run with the gang after ’em—Judge thinks mebbe ye could git ’em to remember better—remember faces.’

‘Oh!’ Vern nodded. ‘They’re afraid to talk... Well, if it’s like that, we’d best fog it for town, then.’

He went around the house to where Pico stood patiently. He pushed his foot blindly at the stirrup, Caught the horn mechanically. ‘Pache Ord... Where had he met Snake and the others? When? Today, or—last night?

‘I’ll give him the chance I’d give my blood-brother,’ Vern thought. ‘But that’s all! If he was in that murderin’ bunch that pulled a rope last night—I’ll

damn sure see that a rope goes around his neck. If a .45 slug don't beat the hangman out of the job! An' that's that—Priscilla Ord!

CHAPTER X

A Track and a Half

DR. BRILL'S house had been a narrow two-story, with one-story wing, built of cut stone. Now it was but a blackened shell, with wisps of smoke still rising here and there from ash-packed embers.

Vern Dederick, with Ody Gardineer and Dud Blaze close behind him, sat Pico before the remains of the front veranda. He stared somberly about. A couple of hundred yards to the right was a clump of live oaks which would be sinister trees until their stumps rotted into the ground. For it was to that thick right-angling limb of the tallest tree in the motte that the waspish little doctor had been hanged.

'Scatter out!' Vern grunted to Ody and Dud, without taking brooding eyes from the live oaks. 'See what we can find. It's goin' to be all on our shoulders, I tell you. Judgin' from the luck we had comin' out from Ord, nobody in this county will talk—except maybe to spill some fine lies!—about Snake Stett or any of that gang.'

'It's too bad the family couldn't identify a single one of the gang,' Dud said regretfully. 'Remember that Dunbarton case in Mary-Anna? A lot like this in some ways. But Granny Dunbarton had a glimpse of that green patch on Ab Simmons's blue overalls, and you *could* say that Ab Simmons was hung by six square inches of green homespun, as much as by manila rope...'

Vern looked at the little corporal and grinned twistedly. For he was not in a mood to be amused, even by Dud's innocence.

'Queer that none of the family caught a single distinctive detail of anyone in that pack,' Dud pursued his puzzle.

'You're a fine, noble boy, Dud,' Vern drawled. 'That open face an' high, intelligent brow—you do'no' how you impress an old, hard-case Ranger sergeant like—like me! Yeh. You make me realize how if I'd lived a better life an' cashed in on my talents, I might've amounted to somethin', some day. Yeh.'

'An' him just a tender child, alongside o' me!' Ody Gardineer jeered. 'Ain't got thirty rings on his hawns, yit! But I know whut he's drivin' at, Dud. I been pesticatorin' around, it's a jugful o' years, now, on the frontier. *I* was with N. O. Reynolds's E Company that cleaned the brier-breakers out o' Kimble County. I have seen, it's heaps an' heaps o' crime—an' heaps an' heaps o' bright young co'p'rals. Whut Vern means is, that——'

‘That when you had the Dunbarton case on yo’ hands,’ Vern nodded grimly, ‘you had a family that wanted to see the men in that necktie party strung up *pronto*! When Granny Dunbarton saw Ab Simmons’s green patch, she told the first lawman—you—all about it! An’ when you figured it was Ab Simmons you needed for yo’ return necktie party, all the Dunbartons joined in—an’ all their kinsfolks, too!—to help locate Ab. This is different!

‘Suppose you was old Mrs. Brill, or one of the two girls, an’ you’d seen yo’ father murdered in a peculiar awful way, an’ there was a nineteen-year-old boy that might go the way his father went? Well? Would you do much talkin’, unless you had extra good reason to believe the murderers’d be heeled instanter?’

‘Reckon not,’ Dud nodded. ‘Well—what’s to do, Solomon?’

‘Find somethin’!’ Vern exploded furiously. ‘Find somethin’ that’ll hang this onto Snake Stett an’ that passel of slinkin’, murderin’ bushwhackers he bosses! Scatter out! Hunt!’

They went like coursing hounds, afoot, searching every inch of the dooryard’s black earth. It was quite a place, this of the little doctor. There were two or three hundred acres of pasture and cultivated fields enclosed by stake-and-rider fences. Vern knew that Brill had been a gentleman-rancher. He had bred fine stock. His horses were known throughout the Culebra River country. Their stables showed now only as an elongated rectangle of ruined walls and black ashes. Every head of blooded saddle stock had been run off by the outlaws.

Ody Gardineer was the best tracker Vern had ever seen. He was from the German settlements beyond Fredericksburg. He had spent most of his life in the open. He worked back and forth, now, black eyes focussed on grass and bare ground and little rock. But after an hour he came up to Vern and hunkered beside him, to look across the dooryard and shrug.

‘Plenty tracks, a’ right,’ he reported. ‘But nothin’ to pin the deadwood onto nobody, partic’lar. Hell, too!’

‘I talked to Mrs. Brill an’ the girls for an hour,’ Vern said sourly. In effect, he merely talked aloud. ‘She’s plenty hard to pull anything out of. Anything she’s not aimin’ to tell. An’ the two girls, they’d look at the old lady an’ just shake their heads, when I’d ask ’em questions.’

Dud Blaze came up, to lean beside Vern against the corner of the house wall. He made a cigarette.

‘The boy, Tuck, hightailed in the excitement?’

‘Not exactly. The doctor sent him at the first alarm, to get help. When he come back, with help, it was all over. An’ his mother sent him off again to keep out of sight. All that saved him was bein’ sent, too, you can bet! Snake Stett would have had him hangin’ on that oak tree with his father!’

He looked grimly around the little yard. The scrubby oaks stretched away on all sides to the horizon. Here and there a tall tree reared above the chaparral. Staring hopelessly so, Vern chanced to look vacantly at such a tree. There was a white blaze high up, plain to be seen from the house. His eyes narrowed; it seemed to him that he had seen from the corner of his eye some movement among those leaves.

As he stared sharply, a puff of smoke blossomed there. Then came the report of a rifle. A bullet thudded into the stone wall ten feet to the right of where Ody Gardineer hunkered. The three of them were veterans in the ancient game of shoot and be shot. They were galvanized into activity like that of startled wolves. As Vern yelled a warning, dropping flat as he yelled, Ody seemed to wriggle snake-like into a doorless opening. Dud Blaze and Vern went around the corner on hands and knees.

They heard the heavy rifle *whang-whang-whang!* in the treetop that commanded the house clearing; the firing rapid almost as a drumbeat. They heard, also, the bullets pinging off the stones of the wall, very near to where they had been outlined against it. They counted the shots mechanically, to see if the marksman would unload his weapon.

Vern and Dud looked at each other. Dud Blaze’s blue eyes were interested, not alarmed. He moved the muzzle of his drawn Colt in a sort of longing gesture. Vern, too, had a pistol out. He twirled it on crooked forefinger inside the trigger guard. He scowled intently, watching the chips of stone fly from the corner of the wall. But it was too far for any pistol to carry; a range too long for even the short carbines on their saddles. Ody Gardineer came to them through the house. He was chewing placidly on a grass stem.

Vern led the way to the back of the house and around it. The horses were in shelter of the chaparral that ringed the house clearing. They sprinted across the open space, caught up trailing reins and topped their mounts quickly. Without any word of voiced decision, they went at a quick trot into the chaparral and rode by winding stock trails through the scrub toward that tall tree with the white blaze.

But they rode cautiously, none the less. Frontiersmen, all of them, they interpreted flashingly the small sounds that came to them from right and left and straight ahead. Their carbines were across their arms; their thumbs were

on the hammers. When they came close to the uprearing tree, Vern swung down and the others dropped off behind him. They left the horses with the reins trailing. Then, in three different directions, they slid into the chaparral and moved to converge upon that tree.

There was no sound except the small noises each made as he worked toward that tree. They met at its foot and looked, first up into its great spread of limbs and leaves, then at the soft mold, and last, very quickly, at one another. Ody Gardineer's expelled breath made a hissing noise in the silence. He went down to his haunches. Dud and Vern bent to stare.

In the bare earth, where dry leaves did not carpet the mold, there were the prints of two sets of feet—or, rather, of one and a half sets! That was the odd part. The tracks of a booted man—a big-footed man, too, he was!—showed coming up to the giant tree. Another set of his tracks told how he had left it when sliding down to drop and trot off. But all around and over this fellow's footprints were the smallish casts of one moccasined foot and a round stump. A peg-legged man...

'I be damned!' Ody breathed as he stared. 'Of course, there's plenty one-legged folks at large an' likewise loose, in Texas as well as in lots o' other States. But, somehow, this looks to me more'n usual funny. What d'you make out o' the business, Vern? One shootin' at us for snoopety folks, while t' other'n' watched, huh?'

'Can happen,' Vern nodded slowly, frowning at those round holes beside the moccasin prints. 'An'—*can* happen some other way, too. Looks to me like a man with a track a kid could read at the run—well! you'd expect him to be more careful about puttin' his trademark on a job of Ranger-pluggin'. I'm findin' it a lot like fordin' the North Llano in wet weather! A right boggy crossin'. I bet there's more to it than shows right now.'

A man might believe, he thought, that this peg-legged one had come along soon after the bushwhacking gentleman who had been up in the tree with his Winchester. For those unmistakable prints were overlying the booted man's tracks. Nowhere that he could see did the big boots cover Peg-Leg's trail. Vern began to move forward to check that point. He followed the booted man's trail, by which he had come to the tree and left it so hurriedly. But after a few yards he shook his head. Naturally, that dry gulcher had come on a horse. He had only needed to run back to where it had stood, swing up, and cut stick out of that neighborhood. Not much use in trying to follow his horse's trail.

But he came to a larger bare spot than the others. He looked carefully at the ground, then his triumphant grunt brought the others up to him.

‘Our peg-legged hairpin didn’t come up to the tree with our Winchesterful friend,’ Vern explained to them. ‘No, sir. He slid out of this brush, here, an’ begun to investigate. Looky! He’s followin’ that would-be murderer off!’

Then, as they stared, a horse nickered softly, somewhere ahead of them. The three Rangers scattered like a covey of quail to get off that trail. They moved quickly forward, ignoring for the moment the tracks of the two men. They went toward the place where that horse must be. Vern found the animal quickly—a buckskin of unmistakable quality, standing riderless, with reins sagging. Vern crouched behind a bunch of chaparral and from that shelter studied the whole scene inch by inch.

The buckskin’s left side was toward him. There was no brand to be seen. But Vern found that significantly empty rifle scabbard very interesting, indeed. He edged closer, watching for any tiny movement of the chaparral that would indicate his bushwhacker’s presence.

The gelding pricked intelligent ears and watched him. A fine horse it was, *sin dudar!* He judged it a half-blood, Morgan crossing native saddle stock. But he wondered about its rider. If the fellow had acted the congenital idiot, and hung around the scene of his ambush—Vern’s mouth tightened to a crayon-white line across grim brown face. He was in no sense a bloodthirsty man. But neither had he any scruples about using the most convenient tool for removing human vermin—his Winchester.

He turned for an instant to look back at that tall tree. As he stared, a shrill Comanche-scalp yell lifted bloodcurdlingly from where Ody Gardineer was hidden somewhere in the chaparral. Vern forgot the horse, temporarily. He ran toward that black and efficient frontiersman and found Ody stooped over a prone figure that wore a red shirt—no, it *had* been a white shirt! for there were still some patches to show...

‘Man!’ Ody drawled calmly, ‘I have seen, it’s a lot of cuttin’, in my time. But never a hairpin whutever so en-tire-ly, com-plete-ly carved up into ribbons an’ likewise dollrags as this *gunie!* He’s bled plumb white—an’ still he’s warm! Our peg-leg, Vern, he is quite a fella in the brush, I tell you! Looks like he slipped up behind this hairpin. An’ he just—look at him yo’s’e’f, an’ save me huntin’ that kind of words!’

Vern turned the fellow over. Merely a hard-faced cowboy of middle twenties. Nothing about him distinctive, even in red death; least of all in death. A rifle lay close by him and at sight of that weapon Vern stared. For it was an ancient Remington single shot; what the Texas man called contemptuously a ‘yellow belly.’ Mexican shepherders often packed these;

and kids; and poverty-stricken ‘po’ white trash.’ *That* gun had not carried the near thousand yards from the ambush to the Brill yard!

Then illumination came. The peg-legged man had slipped up behind this would-be assassin, knifed him and slipped away, taking the bushwhacker’s Winchester. But where had the killer gone? Vern looked about and shrugged, at last. Odd, but that moccasin and stump trail, so plain up to the tree and back to the body, vanished quite. It was as if—Vern laughed a little to himself at that foolishness—the fellow had left the solid earth, once his work was done.

‘Damned if I’m goin’ to tote him back to town!’ he told Ody and Dud. ‘That’s the sher’f’s job an’ he’s welcome to it. He’ll have to roll him up in a blanket or a soogan, to get him in all together, too. Wonder who that peg-leg was? An’ where he hightailed to? An’ who this hairpin was?’

From a thicket of chaparral not fifty feet away came a sudden eerie sound that set the invisible hairs prickling on their spines. They whirled and glared at that inscrutable mass of greenery, with guns jumping out, or up. It was a laugh—but such a laugh! It began on a note so high and shrill that it seemed at the limit of the human voice’s height, but instead of continuing on that note, or ranging downward, it went up and up and up to a new high point, then down again to the note on which it had started.

‘Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-!’

‘Madre de cristo!’ breathed Dud Blaze, normally undisturbed and undisturbable. *‘Por amor de dios, what is it?’*

It had startled Vern so that he knew he must have been gaping, white-faced and like a graveyard-frightened kid. That was all he needed to make him foolishly bold. He rushed for the thicket, with a Colt in each hand. It was sheer idiocy, he knew, to go plowing through there, advertising his coming by his every footstep on the crackling carpet of dried dead leaves. But he went on and found—almost as if it had been intended for his eyes—a single moccasin and stump print, in a tiny glade just within the shelter of the brush. No more—just that one deep impression.

‘You dang chucklehead’ four degrees less’n a born idjut!’ snarled Ody Gardineer behind him, and Dud Blaze’s angry voice endorsed Ody’s opinion. ‘Runnin’ right into a gun muzzle!’

‘I reckon there’s three of the same, then!’ Vern grinned affectionately. ‘What’re you two doin’, followin’ me?’

They stared at the single print, then Dud shivered melodramatically. He turned and with lengthened steps began to move back to the trail.

‘Not for me these chaparral *tête-à-têtes* with gents who can turn their trails off and on like water from a spigot! No, sir! Did I hear you say something about a horse, Vern?’

Vern led the way to the buckskin, explaining that his examination of it had discovered no identifying brand. But when they came in sight of the restless animal, he stopped, gaping. For its tail had been efficiently hoisted and secured to the saddle horn by two ‘whang leather’ tie strings, cut from the saddle. Vern looked instinctively at the ground. Again a single impression—moccasin and peg-end. Like a signature on a job!

Vern moved around and with a glimpse of the hairless underside of the tail, understood what ‘Peg-Leg’ had intended them to find. There was a small, neat 2-B branded under the tail, as is sometimes done with fine horses, to avoid marring the coat in the orthodox manner. It was Dr. Brill’s brand.

‘Let’s go to town!’ Vern grunted. ‘I want to augur some with Judge Mingo Adams. That fella was bushwhackin’ us for a reason plenty good enough for him. He was ridin’ one of the Doc’s good horses—an’ all the Doc’s stuff was run off the other night. An’ our friend Peg-Leg had it in for him—but not for us, else he could have downed us all while Dud, there, was keepin’ us out in plain sight with—whatever it was he done.’

‘Why, you lying buck-passer!’ cried Dud, indignantly. ‘You stood there, until that laugh sounded, then you began to run and you got all tangled up and ran toward him. You——’

He kicked desperately at Vern’s hat, as he was lifted off the ground, but Vern evaded the flashing boot toes, grinning.

‘Calf rope!’ howled Dud. ‘Remember I’m a corporal and entitled to respectful treatment. Le’ me down, you big intimidator. We have to go to town—before—*That* laughs again.’

And as if it were signal, again that weird cackling came from a thicket of chaparral within fifty feet of them. But this time they made no effort to locate the laughing one. They turned and trotted back to their horses, whirled and came back to catch up the buckskin’s reins. Then—they rode! Rode fast.

CHAPTER XI

The Jumping Dog

‘WELL?’ inquired the judge, when the four of them were sitting in his chambers. ‘What did you find—that we can take before the grand jury? I’ve hopes of a warrant for Stett...’

‘Haven’t got a thing to even point to him—more’n we had before we went out. Lots of tracks, but nothin’ to prove anything. But—Judge, you happen to know a right mysterious hairpin that can appear an’ disappear like a—a ghost? Fella kind of undecided in his mind, like—so dam’ uncertain about what he ought to wear that he uses a moccasin on one foot an’ a peg on the other? Fella who’s a whiz with a knife?’

The effect of the question on Mingo Adams was electrifying. Much like the effect of the fellow’s weird laughter on them. He leaned forward tensely, with the color gone from his full, pink face. The gimlet-like black eyes blazed.

‘You—You said “do” I know him? I—*did* know him.’

‘Well,’ said Vern slowly, ‘why do you say you *did* know him? If you did know him, you *do* know him, surely.’

‘In a way. Only in a way. For—this is why your question startled me—it was two months ago that I was asked to speak a few words—at *his burial!* So—why are you asking about Old Cass Furby? Did—have you heard anything of his daughter?’

‘Daughter? Never even knew he had a daughter. He——’

Briefly, he told of their experience at the Brill house and Judge Adams shook his big white head marvelingly. When Vern was done, he wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

‘Well! That is about the strangest thing ever to bob up in my experience. You undoubtedly found Old Cass’s tracks. I couldn’t testify as to that laugh, for I never heard him laugh—goodness knows he’d had little enough to laugh about, of late. But how could you find his tracks, when I myself saw him lowered into the grave? Saw him covered with earth! So did Dr. Brill. Brill was called in by some neighbor who passed and found the old fellow dying. By the time Brill got there, Old Cass was dead. It’s—it’s impossible! Incredible! And yet—I don’t know.

‘Brill and I rode back to town together—Old Cass’s poor little cabin was seven miles over from the Brill place. We decided that it was the kindest stroke Old Cass had received since Snake Stett carried off his daughter, Vingie.’

‘Stett carried off this old fella’s girl?’

‘She was a little beauty. No education, only fifteen or sixteen, and just as pretty as a young wild thing. Snake went by Old Cass’s cabin one day, so everything indicates. Saw her and wanted her. So some of his men appeared, slapped old Cass over the head with a pistol barrel and—that was that! The old man couldn’t find a trace of her, but it was rumored that Snake took her to his place beyond Paradise, on the Culebra. Then, later, that one of his handy men had her. Nothing definite was ever learned. Snake always denied having laid eyes on her. But nobody believed him.’

‘An’ the county authorities, Mister Sher’f Drake an’ Mister District Attorney Rogan, as usual, couldn’t find a bit of evidence to point at Snake—or anybody,’ Vern nodded grimly and contemptuously, as if recounting something he had seen.

‘Ex-actly,’ Judge Adams said. ‘But—that’s not answering our question; solving our puzzle. If it had been my own brother who saw Old Cass Furby buried, I could doubt that. But I saw it; heard the dirt thud down on his coffin lid. So, how can I believe that he’s alive; dancing around the chaparral and cutting to pieces a healthy young cowboy who’s trying to assassinate you? Would you call this ghostly business?’

‘I don’t take much stock in ghosts,’ Vern began, with a slow smile. Then came memory of that eerie cackling; of the mysteriously appearing and disappearing tracks. Of the way the—whatever it was, had vanished, almost in arm’s length of him, with no sound or movement of the brush.

‘Leastways, I never did!’ he finished, wiping his forehead and looking belligerently at Ody and Dud.

‘Who was the fella that was bushwhackin’ us so gay?’ Ody the practical wished to know. ‘Ridin’ one o’ Doc’ Brill’s hawses, he was, Judge—2-B brand under the tail. Ol’ wore-out kak.’

‘We can find out, by now, from the sheriff’s office. If anyone has come back. Suppose we go see? I’m sure his identification will prove most interesting. If he were not connected with the masked murderers who lynched Dr. Brill, then why would he be shooting at you three Rangers?’

None of the sheriff’s party had returned, but several of the citizens who had accompanied Drake and his chief deputy to the Brill place had come

back into town. From these it was learned that the dead man was Dock Scrutchett, a rattle-headed young cowboy who had worked on various ranches roundabout. Nobody seemed to have seen him on that Brill buckskin.

A voice whispered in Vern's ear; Erskine the freighter:

'Come down to my corral. Got a leetle bit of news.'

So Vern slid away and disappeared without being noticed even by Ody and Dud. Erskine was against his haypile, as on the day when he had warned Vern of Lute Cane's ambush.

'That Brill hawse Dock Scrutchett was ridin'—he never had it till the mawnin' after Brill was murdered. The night before, he was ridin' a ol' pinto he'd had two-three year. But I caught a leetle glimpse of Dock the next mawnin'; long way off. He was on a buckskin. The other day, right before you had yo' exerciser with Cane, Dock an' Snake Stett an' Cane was all mighty thick together, in the Bull's Head.

'I see 'em the' an' I says to myself, then: "Well, the's one more re-cruit for the scoun'els." Dock never was right hefty on workin'. Liked to gamble. Yesterday, when you was talkin' it all over with Mingo Adams, Dock was in town. Dam' if I know what he was ridin'. Hung around the Bull's Head an' took a fling at Crawley's wheel. Told folks he was bust' when he went off. A' right! I see him on the street, happened. Big Tawm Eddelmann was with him. An' right back to Crawley's he went an' dropped two hundred dollars. An' that wasn't all he had!'

'You're more use than I am!' cried Vern. '*Por dios!* If ary thing happens around Ord you don't smell out, it wouldn't do for stuffin' up a rat hole. It'd be too blame' small!'

'Listen, Sergeant,' Erskine said grimly, 'I have seen a lot of things around this here county. It's a way I got—to see what happens around me. But heretofore, politics has been too dam' anti-godlin' for me to open my yawp. It's different, with you around aimin' to straighten out things. I was sher'f of Ord one term, before this outfit got too strong. I'll be sher'f ag'in, too, you watch! For you can't straighten out this mess without hangin' the present county ring.'

'I'm pullin' for you!' Vern said heartily. 'I wish to *dios* you had the office now! We'll see about it, *amigo mio*; can happen there'll come a shakeup an' a temporary sher'f'll be needed. I do'no' anybody I'd rather work with than you.'

‘Mis’ Brill claims she never recognized none of that outfit—of course,’ said Erskine sardonically. ‘If a fella could git them girls off from their ma, the’d be a chance of findin’ out somethin’. Or Tuck Brill, for that matter. Tuck is a right hefty boy. Takes a lot after that leetle banty game rooster, his pa. Only thing that *might* keep Tuck from talkin’ would be gittin’ scared you-all’d cramp his hand. He’ll be on Snake’s trail, an’ don’t you never think for a minute he won’t!’

‘If you should have a chance to talk with him,’ Vern said slowly, thoughtfully, ‘s’pose you give him this to gnaw on: If he would go before the grand jury an’ give evidence that’d result in Snake’s indictment, that’d change Snake’s position in this country. You can say to him, private an’ on yo’ own hook, that wouldn’t he rather have Snake an outlaw than a just-as-good-as-an-honest man? Of course, if I land a warrant for my de-ar friend Snake, I aim to put him where the li’l’ dogs can’t bite him—an’ keep him there, plumb safe, till he’s hanged with all the legal formalities. But the kid won’t need to know all the details. Well, I’m siftin’ uptown.’

He went along the Main Stem of Ord looking for Ody and Dud, for it was past supper time now, Lights were springing up in windows along the street. Dance-halls and saloons and gambling-hells and other resorts of the sporting crowd were glaring with light long since. He could not find the pair and so he had a meal by himself in a Chinese restaurant. Then, feeling at peace with a part of the world, if he made certain mental reservations he sallied out again to find his companions. He stepped inside the Three Jacks—and found himself well remembered by the proprietor and a part of the customers, for his manhandling of Lute Cane. He had a short drink on the house and the red face of Paddy Ryan came close to his, without in any way seeming an obvious motion:

‘D’ ye know wan Eddelmann? Ye do! He is savage drunk, m’ friend an’ he’s lookin’ fer ye. Whin that kind do be quiet drunk—well! He was in here a bit back. Now, he should be where the others of the county’s hard cases do be hangin’ out—at the Bull’s Head. Ye would do well to watch Eddelmann.’

He straightened and turned with the glasses he had been sloshing around in the tub under the bar. He gave no sign of hearing Vern’s curt thanks. But he looked frowningly after the big figure, as Vern promptly went out. He shook his gray head forebodingly, then shrugged fatalistically.

Vern stopped three doors away from the Bull’s Head. It was dusky under the wooden awning over the sidewalk. He decided to take a chance of not being recognized in the dark. So he *clink-clumped* with seeming casualness like any puncher-without-idea, then halted as if making a cigarette. Nobody

seemed to look at him. He sidled over against the wall, where a window commanded a view of the long bar and the drinkers.

‘There’s the bold, bad man,’ he said to himself. ‘An’ Ryan read him right. He’s quiet, mean drunk. I reckon, if ever he was a dangerous hairpin, he’s the Funeral Anthem right now!’

He got inside the swing doors before the sullen Eddelmann saw him. Vern ignored the hulking figure—or seemed to. But he saw Eddelmann’s hand come away from the glass on the bar’s top; saw how the man’s tongue came out to wet dry lips; saw that gunhand slip lower and lower until it rested on the black butt of a low-swung Colt that, in defiance of Ord’s rulings, he wore openly on right thigh.

‘You son of a dog!’ Eddelmann bellowed abruptly. The feel of the Colt grip seemed to have emboldened him. ‘Tried to run a sandy on me, over at Paradise, didn’t you? Sneaked up behind me an’ cracked me over the head with a pistol, huh? Well, now——’

‘Who might this be?’ Vern inquired in a puzzled voice. ‘Yo’ face is sort of familiar, even in a dump like this where most of the faces are kind of misbegotten, but that’s not tellin’ it all: a fella that sneaks around, robbin’ drunk Mexicans, an’ tellin’ it scary, an’ above all, a tinhorn hard case that goes usin’ two names, he’s hard to keep a loop on. He’s too slippery a *gunie*. Too slippery for honest folk to know his ins an’ outs.

‘One time you call yo’self “Wild Bull Harrigan.” Then folks tell me you’re also goin’ by “Big Tom Eddelmann,” an’ that you’re nothin’ but Snake Stett’s jumpin’ dog. But, hell! I bet you got a flock of other go-bys, too, over where you started from. Why did you start out, anyway? Come on, now! Come on! Don’t make me go huntin’ you-all through the *Fugitive List*!’

If he had owned any doubt of the truth of his insinuations, Eddelmann’s face, with mention of the dread *List of Fugitives from Justice*, would have resolved that doubt. The big man turned pale as he glared Vern’s way. But he did *not* become shaky! His yellow teeth showed through thick lips in a wolfish snarl. His great shoulder twitched. In that instant Vern, whose scruples weighed only so much at any time, anywhere, twitched hat from head with left hand. He flipped it across, into Eddelmann’s face.

It spoiled the big man’s draw and, though he was checked only for a split second, Vern had time to whip out a Colt. So their shots roared in the still room almost together.

Eddelmann staggered a little, under the impact of the heavy slugs. But, as is sometimes inexplicably the case, he was not knocked from his feet. Nor was he beaten—yet! He hurled his gun from right hand to left hand in the flashing ‘border shift,’ for one of Vern’s .45 bullets had snagged his gunhand. Grimly, Vern continued firing. Every one of his five shots scored. He slid forward, rapped the gun from Eddelmann’s laxing hand, straightened.

There came a roar, blending with the jangle of smashed glass. A bullet clipped a lock of yellow hair from Vern’s head. That slug came from somewhere outside, over the swing doors, or through the window.

Vern’s second gun he carried under his shirt, in a left-hand shoulder holster. It came snapping out, now, with the speed born of long practice on that draw. Vern pivoted, snarling. He had one dim glimpse of a face outside the shattered window through which he had seen Eddelmann. The face was above a pistol thrust inside the bar-room. He fired three times, as rapidly as he could pull back the big hammer, let it drop, lifted it again. The face vanished, seeming to drag the Colt after it.

As he stood glaring from window to bar—and at the silent men backed up against it—someone whispered behind the bar. It was the pallid, shaking bar-tender, just now lifting curled head above the polished bar-top.

‘My God!’ the man of drinks said fearfully. ‘Snake Stett an’ ’Pache Ord—they’re in town, too!’

Vern laughed at the fearful whisper. It was a hard, high, entirely humorless sound. He half turned toward the bar.

‘Fine! That’s just fine! Some of you fellas tell Snake about this, will you? An’ tell him I said Eddelmann’s funeral certainly ought to come out of his pocket. For it’s no more’n right, when a man owns a cur dog an’ sicks that dog onto somebody an’ it gets killed, that he should pay for the buryin’. Don’t forget it, now; an’ be sure you remember to say that *I* am the one who said it.’

CHAPTER XII

Apron Strings

HE was barely outside when he heard the sound of running feet. He looked hard into the darkness. Mechanically, he lifted the left-hand Colt. Then Ody Gardineer and Dud Blaze, side by side, popped into a narrow shaft of yellow lamplight that came from a store window. He looked, then, at the shattered sash from which somebody had fired at him. Evidently, his shots had not struck that ally of Big Tom Eddelmann.

‘What’s it?’ Ody grunted, as the two saw Vern and halted.

‘Eddelmann again—an’ for the last time,’ Vern said savagely. ‘Didn’t happen to meet an emigrant, did you? Comin’ from this direction?’

They shook their heads. Dud Blaze went to the swing doors and looked over them, standing a-tiptoe to see. He shook his head and came back. He lifted sandy brows inquiringly. Vern shrugged.

‘Get our *caballos*, will you? An’ get ready to make a second try for Paradise. Maybe we’ll get there, this trip. No use puttin’ off the work any longer. Way I’m feelin’, now, servin’ that bunch of warrants Judge Adams handed me will be ex-act-ly the job I’d pick.’

They nodded and went into darkness again. Vern moved off. Snake Stett and ‘Pache Ord were in town, were they! Well, since they had not been in the Bull’s Head, their usual hangout, they must have gone to some quiet place for conversation. He thought that he could guess the subject of their talk, too. And he desired greatly to add to their topics of discussion.

He found a man, after several attempts, who thought that Snake Stett and Ord were at the hotel. At least, he had seen them come out of the hotel’s dining-room and take chairs on the wide veranda, not so long before. Vern thanked him and went on.

The hotel was a rambling two-story house. When Vern came along the main street, nearing the end of town, where he could see the place, the dining-room was dark. Some second-story windows showed lights. There showed like fireflies in the darkness, on the veranda, the red coals of cigars and cigarettes, where men sat. Vern crossed the street and came along a dark sidewalk.

He went around to the back door, came into the long hall and moved toward the front door. The stair was on his left hand. A wall lamp burned

pallidly at its head. He looked up, saw nobody and went on. A man coming in from the veranda to the hall looked curiously at Vern, but with a sort of mechanical curiosity.

‘Stett an’ Ord outside?’ Vern asked him.

‘Nah. They went somewhere quite a spell ago.’

He went on, that cowboy, as Vern stood irresolutely in the hall. Then light steps sounded on the ancient Brussels runner of the stair. Somehow, before he turned, Vern knew who came downstairs. He looked up into Priscilla Ord’s blank young face, then moved over to put an elbow on the newel post and watch her.

‘Well!’ she said unpleasantly. ‘Since neither Dad nor Snake is around, you feel safe to stay for a minute, I suppose?’

‘Funny,’ he said quietly, ‘but you’re pretty, even when you are tryin’ to be ugly. I wonder what that proves? That you’re really a pretty kind of person, an’ all this imitation Snake way of yo’s is just put on? I wouldn’t be surprised. We had a kid hangin’ around the company, one time at Ysleta. He picked the old sergeant we had then, to pattern after. Old Flanagan... An’ Flanagan had him a pair of boots made in El Paso. Twenty-eight dollars they cost him. An’ they was too tight. But we pulled out on a scout an’ Flanagan had the boots out at Hueco Tanks.’

He stopped, looking up at her where she had halted with a small and tolerant and gentle smile. She had been staring down at him with dark brows drawn together frowningly.

‘Well!’ she prompted him tartly. ‘And what did this hero-worshiping boy do—that I reminded you of? Go on! Don’t mind me! What you say is’—she moved slim shoulders in a gesture very arrogant and—very youthful—‘of no importance, anyway!’

‘You have never seen Hueco Tanks—the Hueco Mountains... They’re pretty rough little mountains—when you are scramblin’ over ’em huntin’ stock-thieves an’ killers. Flanagan hubbed hell in those tight boots. Finally, he cut ’em all across the foot to ease his li’l’ toeses—an’ blame’ if that kid that was trailin’ never cut up *his* boots! Not to ease his feet. But to look like Flanagan! My, my! I never will forget that—nor how Flanagan cut the tops off the boots an’ wore ’em around camp. “Flanagan’s twenty-eight dollar slippers,” we called ’em.’

‘You didn’t tell me where to laugh!’

He moved slightly. His hand went up, closed over hers and pulled. She came down the two or three steps and stood very close to him. He regarded

her gravely, now.

‘You happen to hear anything about a fella lookin’ for me?’ he asked her in casual tone.

She hesitated, frowning at him, then suddenly the frown was gone. She leaned toward him, lifted her free hand and put it over his big knuckles.

‘Vern,’ she said softly. ‘Vern—I know that’s your name—if I do something for you, will you do something for me? And—will you do it, not only to return a favor, but because I—I ask you to?’

‘You *are* pretty!’ he said with emphasis. ‘You haven’t forgot what I told you, on the trail the other day? That you’re goin’ to, not like, but love, me?’ ‘Cilla, honey——’

‘Will you do something for me? Never mind talking about anything else—until—until you’ve shown me you like me enough to do as I ask. Will you?’

‘What’s it? An’ what were you goin’ to do for me?’

‘Big Tom Eddelmann—you know, the big man you happened to best in the Coney Island—is hunting you. Vern—he’ll kill you! He’s one of the most dangerous men in all this country. He has killed a half-dozen fast gunfighters, to my knowledge. He won’t fight fair. He fights only to win. And he intends to kill you, because you beat him in Paradise. Now! Haven’t I proved that I—like you? Now, here’s what you can do for me:

‘Go back to Paradise. Keep the boys quiet. But don’t try to do the impossible! Don’t crowd your luck because it’s been running. Live and let live, there, and you’ll do more than anyone else has ever done. You’ll certainly satisfy Austin and satisfy your captain. And—I can promise that you won’t have any more trouble with the boys. Vern! Will you do that for me? You said you—liked me...’

‘If you aren’t a li’l’ bitsy masterpiece!’ he drawled marvelingly. ‘You tell me about Eddelmann; fix it up for me to take life easy—why? Because you’re beginnin’ to love me?’

He drew her closer. She held back for an instant, then came to him. His arms slid around her. He lifted her quickly over the stair rail and held her in the crook of his arm, bent and kissed her. It was like kissing a child. She put red mouth up, without any emotion, then drew back, to look at him with lifted brows.

‘You’ll do it for me, then,’ she nodded. ‘And—watch for Eddelmann! He’s plain poison! He likes to kill!’

‘Eddelmann,’ he told her gently, ‘is dead. I had to kill him a while ago in the Bull’s Head. I came huntin’ Snake to tell him it’s no more’n fair that he pay for the funeral. Eddelmann was his trained poodle, his jumping dog. Hon’, I’m goin’ to Paradise, all right. An’ I wouldn’t be a speck surprised if I—we—kept the boys over there right peaceable. But as for the rest—I might satisfy Austin by just keepin’ things quiet. I might even satisfy Cap’n Tandy, though I’m not a bit certain of that. But I wouldn’t satisfy somebody else! I wouldn’t satisfy Vern Dederick a bit, an’ *he’s* the hairpin I have to look at every time I shave! So——’

She jerked and twisted, freed herself and skated away from him. Her hand came up to her mouth as she glared furiously at him. He watched her narrowly.

‘Oh—I hate you worse than I ever *dreamed* I could hate anyone!’ she whispered. ‘You—you lied to me! You—I let you *kiss* me——’

She wiped the back of her hand jerkily across her mouth and rubbed the hand upon her shirt.

‘You’ve had lots of luck, Mister Ranger! But the string’s running out! You’ll know more about what happens to meddlers in our country, pretty soon. You think you can buck Snake? *You?* You’ll see!’

‘I already see a lot of things,’ he said grimly. ‘I see how you tried to hoorah me, tellin’ me why you wanted me to lie down on the job. Is that the first time you ever tried it? Lallygaggin’ a man into the loop of yo’ apron strings? I reckon it was—you made a tol’able job, but not too good. So you let me kiss you, did you? Ah, well! Anybody that kissed Snake *can’t* be too particular. Tell him I said so. An’ tell him, too, if you like, that if he’s got a wall handy, he can watch it. For the handwritin’, you know!’

He went quickly past her. She cried out tensely as he went through the front door. Her voice followed him, high and shrill:

‘Handwriting on the wall, is it? Then you’d better learn to read! For the writing’s already there! Don’t let the Eddelmann accident fool you!’

He went on as if he had not heard. He moved down the street very much like an irritated bull, careless of who might be lurking in the shadows, watching for him.

‘More fool you!’ he snarled to himself. ‘Thinkin’ that she had changed! She is still more boy than girl. She is tryin’ to walk an’ talk like Snake Stett. He’s her *he-ro*! She thought she could do somethin’ smart for Snake; make a fool out of the dumb, driven critter that calls himself a Ranger; give Snake a chance to hit a lick while the lovesick fool wasn’t watchin’. Hell!’

He clumped into the gateway of the livery corral. His thumbs were hooked in the waistband of his trousers. His hat was low over his eye. His big shoulders were hunched belligerently and his chin was lifted. He glared around him from under hatrim.

‘*Amor de dios!*’ a voice said despairingly from somewhere in the darkness by the line of stalls. ‘Our revered superior is oryide, Ody! How he got this far without somebody parting his hair neatly with a .45 is beyond even a Great Mind—like mine!’

‘He ain’t drunk,’ Ody scoffed from his invisibility. ‘Somebody tromped on his toes, that’s all ’tis. I’ve knowed him since he was a child—a lovely child with yaller hair an’ big blue eyes. Yeh. I’ve knowed him, it’s months an’ months, now. Somebody snuck up an’ grabbed his lollypop an’ he’s mad. That’s all. He——’

‘Will you two featherless magpies kindly quit yo’ gabblin’ an’ get aboard yo’ horses!’ Vern snarled at them. ‘We have got work to do. An’ it won’t get done with two nitwits that’re supposed to help sittin’ around like a couple old maids, gossipin’ about what they don’t know a thing about!’

‘There!’ Dud Blaze said severely to Ody Gardineer. ‘You see! Always gabbling. Talking about your betters. I swear, Ody, I don’t know what to make of you, sometimes! You know more things than any man in Texas. Yeh! And know ’em all wrong. He says it wasn’t a lollypop, and, anyway, it wasn’t grabbed. He dropped it!’

Vern shouldered past his tormentors. They had saddled Pico for him. So he led the chestnut out into the lantern-lit open square by the gate and with side remarks pretended to find fault with the *cinchas*.

‘Do’no’ what’s comin’ over the Rangers!’ he said bitterly. ‘They just opened up the gate an’ let Tom an’ Dick an’ both their kid brothers in. Can’t even put a blanket straight on a horse. Don’t know how to tie a *latigo*, even. An’ as for hangin’ a rope on a saddle——’

He swung up, having altered nothing. He rode out of the gate and rammed the hooks into Pico. The chestnut went down the street and past the last houses of Ord in a smooth flash of speed that Dud and Ody quirted desperately to match. After a half-mile, Vern pulled in. The road was a gray ribbon between the chaparral’s dark masses. The sky was blanketed with heavy clouds and there was the smell of rain in the air. A thought came to Vern:

‘That kissin’—she was like a ten-year-old about it. If she kisses Snake that way, well, she *is* just a baby, tryin’ to act like grown folk. An’ so—but

what the hell's it to me!'

He let Ody and Dud catch him. They rode, siding him, in silence. When Vern laughed shortly, harshly, Dud's groaning sigh of relief would have carried for a hundred yards.

'Well! It's all over, is it? Patient may live?'

'I was just thinkin',' Vern said pleasantly. 'Thinkin' of the fun ahead of us: Here we have got a sheaf of warrants. Yonder ahead, in Paradise, are the hairpins the warrants read for. We're anxious to serve the warrants an' those *gunies* are just as anxious not to have 'em served. I ask you: What could be sweeter?'

They rode on with amused noises, the *entente cordiale* re-established. Though it was late when they reached Paradise, that 'all-night' town was well lighted, evidently on pleasure bent. They pulled in at the edge of town and looked toward the center of the main street, where the lights were brightest, closest together. They made three gigantic and menacing shadows across the dust of the street. It was Vern's idea that, within a few minutes, those shadows would blanket the whole town in reality.

'I'll take the Coney Island,' he decided aloud. 'Dud, you hit for the Best Drop yonder. Ody, you take that dance-hall. You know the men we're after, by their descriptions?'

'Reckon,' Dud Blaze said impatiently. 'And if we're not certain in any case, we have the names they're using here. We can "ax about." Let's get going. If there's anything I hate, it's a featherless magpie, gabbling and gabbling——'

He departed in a thutter of loping hoofs, his shirt slipping through Vern's outstretched hand. Back to Vern and Ody came the shrill cowboy yell with which Dud announced happiness to the world. Vern grinned and shook his head.

'He's a hell's handful!' he grunted. 'But he's right. Let's be at it. That's Dallas Jenny's place, Ody. Right up in the *crème de la crème*, too. You keep yo' eyes straight front in there an' don't go lallygaggin' with Jenny's girls. There's some lookers in the bunch. Remember you're the same as a married man—what with that widow in Uvalde polishin' up her .45 *trousseau*. Don't you let 'em seduct you!'

'That's one o' Dud Blaze's dam' lies!' Ody said indignantly. 'Ain't no widder—an' she don't live in Uvalde, anyhow.'

Vern's grin vanished as he rode upstreet toward Dan Dill's Coney Island. This was the first real blow he had had an opportunity to strike at Snake, he

reflected, since throwing down the gantlet. The disarming in the saloon here had been no more than a preliminary announcement. But, since then, Snake had promised so many deadly things, had made so many loud threats, that the country was waiting to see the outcome.

‘An’ if we slam some of his prize hellions in the jail, an’ keep ’em in, an’ try ’em an’ convict ’em, it’ll make the boys wonder about Snake. They’ll be namin’ him “Hognose,” first thing he knows, after that four-flushin’ snake that puffs an’ blows an’ makes faces—an’ sneaks off. Well!’

He swung down at the Coney Island’s hitch rack, tied Pico with a slipknot in the hitch rope, ducked under the bar and was across the plank sidewalk before the men under the awning had much of a look at him. He pushed back the swing doors and went quickly to the end of the bar. Dan Dill, the proprietor, was not in sight. But that bar-tender who had been on watch when Vern blasted Squinty McBrett away from the bar-end, stood stiffly, gaping at the tall figure which had appeared so abruptly.

‘Let Old Crow flap his tail feathers this way,’ Vern directed him. ‘Well, how’s tricks, fella?’

The bar-tender made a mumbling noise as he put whiskey and glass before his obviously unwelcome customer. Vern poured his drink left-handed and set the quart bottle down. With left hand, too, he lifted the glass and turned a little, so that he looked down the room. Face by face he studied the customers, without letting his eyes rest overlong on any man. The Coney Island’s patrons looked at him, too, but furtively. Tension was in the room. He wondered if it were only the general effect of his coming, or if something had awaited his coming.

But sight of one face down the bar pushed that speculation out of mind. Enson, this lean, dark, silent man called himself around Culebra River. He looked efficient. His eyes were level and steady. His hard face was changeless. Vern had seen him several times, in both Paradise and Ord. He seemed to ignore the Ranger’s presence, now. But staring as he was, he could watch Vern in the bar mirror, without seeming to stare at Vern.

‘Oh, Enson!’ Vern called. The lean man turned a slow head, but made no other motion. His face was blank of interest. ‘Come here a minute. Want to ask you somethin’.’

‘Not a bit farther from there to here than it is from here to there,’ Enson drawled. His head turned again toward the mirror.

Vern grinned. He saw nobody else in the bar-room for whom he held a warrant. He put his glass down, empty, then turned away. As he walked

toward Enson, the dark man wheeled slowly and watched him steadily. The bar-room became suddenly quiet. Enson's left hand was behind him. His right hung limply at his side.

There was the distant report of a pistol from somewhere on the street, then, in rapid succession, two more shots, and silence. Then screaming—women's voices lifting. Enson's eyes narrowed, jerked from Vern's face for an instant to glare at the swing doors, then back. And the left hand whipped into sight. He had a stubby single-action Colt in his hand—jerked from his waistband in back, Vern knew. His hard mouth tightened, widened, as the pistol swung to bear on Vern.

Vern twisted flashingly to the side and the Colt went by him as he stepped into Enson. He snatched at Enson's wrist, caught it and jerked. Enson came forward and the pistol roared. Vern could feel through his boot sole the rap of the slug on the plank floor. He swung on right heel and drove left fist in a short hook to Enson's ear. Enson made a coughing sound and his knees buckled. Vern hit him again on the ear, harder. Enson came down to his knees and fell flat upon his face. Vern let go his gunhand, then stepped on it and with the other foot kicked the gun away.

The women had stopped screaming. Vern wondered grimly if that uproar in the dance-hall indicated arrests made or loss of Ody Gardineer. But he had his own problem, here and now. He looked sharply around. Nobody seemed minded to interfere. So he bent over Enson. There were derringers in the side pockets of Enson's old coat. There was a long dagger in a sheath inside his waistband. Vern relieved him of the weapons. He spoke to the bartender and when a quart bottle was pushed to him, he stooped to ram the neck into Enson's sagging mouth. Enson sputtered, blinked.

'You didn't give me time to tell you I had a warrant for you,' Vern explained gently, helping Enson up. 'But I reckon you are a lot like me—got second sight. You knew I had the warrant.'

'From where? What for?' Enson grunted savagely. But he could not keep anxiety out of his face or tone, now.

'One from Ord, for assault to murder. Where did you expect it to be from? Not from Ord! I can tell that by the way you are lookin' relieved! Well, come along. We'll fix it so's you don't have to pay a board bill for a while...'

The swing doors flapped into the bar-room. Ody Gardineer came in, half turned and pulled at two men who, handcuffed together, were close behind him. One man was a sullen towhead, with such little beauty as he had ever owned sadly marred by the blood oozing down his cheeks from a cut on his

head. The other prisoner, a stocky little cowboy with the look of a breed, was unmarked. Ody jerked his head toward the door:

‘Dud’s got a couple, too. He’s bringin’ ’em. That brand-blottin’ hairpin with the Tom Tack go-by, he couldn’t stand the notion of bein’ arrested none whutever. So he—committed suicide. These fellas, though, they come right along almost peaceable!’

‘Well, let’s go meet Dud,’ Vern grinned. ‘I reckon we’ll find out, now, what a boardin’-house keeper’s troubles are like.’

CHAPTER XIII

'Enson Won Vingie from Snake!'

THE sheaf of warrants was thinner by eight. Vern thumbed them meditatively. In the bull pen of Paradise Jail, behind the office where he sat with Ody Gardineer and Dud Blaze, six of the former ornaments of saloon and dive now waited for their transfer to Ord Jail. The warrants were properly endorsed. So were the warrants for that Tom Tack who had committed suicide by resisting arrest, and for Enson.

'No wonder Enson was cat-eyed,' Vern grunted. 'He couldn't tell if I wanted him on account of Tarrant County's murder charge or just needed a match. He didn't take a chance my cigarette was out, either. I reckon he's safe in Ord Jail. Drake wouldn't dare turn him loose after what I told him.'

'Friend of yours coming,' Dud Blaze offered, from where he sat with chair tilted back against the wall, a position that commanded a diagonal view of the street. 'Mangy coyote!'

'Where's Ery Tricker comin' from?' Vern asked dryly, looking up from the warrants. 'Happened, I was comin' along the back of Dallas Jenny's an' looked in a window. Ery was havin' his both ears filled up by that fancy woman of Snake's—that red head; Molly Vere de Vere or whatever she goes by. I—wonder!'

He looked thoughtfully at Ery Tricker when the deputy came into the office. Ery's expression was no more than normally shifty. He kept his dull blue eyes fixed upon the toes of his enormous boots and cleared his throat several times. None there offered him encouragement. He looked furtively up, then down. Vern grinned. He waited; as did the others. Ery pushed back the rim of his enormous *sombrero*, ventured a shifty glance at Vern's now hard face, then looked away, with a rasping noise in his thin neck.

'Uh—Dederick, I—I be'n a-thinkin' things over,' he mumbled. 'No use playin' the jack an' tryin' to believe Snake an' his gang's on the level, no more. I—You—That is—Well, I know, now, that you was right all along. But I never was one to go believin' wrong of folks, s' long's the' was a chance to figger they was right. I—I'm backin' you up, from now on.'

'Why, that's just downright fine an' noble of you, Ery, ol'-timer!' cried Vern with utmost heartiness. 'You do'no' how good it makes us feel to have you come in thisaway an' orate to that effect. You back us up, *viejo*, an' we'll surely see you get ever' last thing's comin' to you, ex-actly as you

deserve it. Set down an' look shorter! I got a flock of warrants, here. You can help us serve 'em. How about it?'

He expected quick protestant excuses and was surprised at the deputy's quick, eager nod of agreement.

'Yeh, that's rightful work of mine, Dederick. It's—well, you know—oh! I'd look like a jack, settin' around with a star on, while you-all, Rangers, done my job. So, just gi' me them warrants an' I'll augur around with myself about where I can locate the fellas wanted. Knowin' the country, I can scheme it better'n you can, you bein' a stranger.'

'Yeh... Yeh... Of course,' Vern nodded. He was leaning back in the rickety chair before the pine table, with eyes half closed. He seemed half asleep, but through slitted lids he was studying this strange specimen of The Complete Change. What had got into this shambling, spineless beanpole? Then he recalled the red-headed Molly's quick, excited, imperative gestures, and Ery Tricker's respectful head noddings.

'You—wouldn't kick about servin' a warrant, now? No matter who 'twas for? Say—one for Snake Stett an' one for Cane?'

'Make no difference a-tall to me! When I git a warrant, I serve it. An' if the fella objects—well...'

'Where's Vingie Furby?' Vern shot at him abruptly.

'Why, I—Who? Never hear of anybody by that name,' Ery mumbled. But he gaped fearfully at Vern, nevertheless.

Vern lifted a boot and laid it carefully across the corner of the table. He fished the makings from a vest pocket and began the building of a cigarette, shaking his head thoughtfully the while and remarking that it was funny—dam' all-around funny...

'Whut is? Whut's funny?' cried Ery, when he could bear it no longer. 'Dam' it! I—You—Whut's funny?'

'Why, they told us over in Ord, that you knew all about her, an' how Snake had her carried off. You bein' from Ord, Ery, ol'-timer, it's funny you never happened to know Ol' Cass an' the girl. An' knowin' Snake so well, it's funny you never knew about him havin' the girl at the Snake Ranch...'

'Well, I—I never!' Tricker said with a shrug. 'Say! Who told you all this, over to Ord? Somebody was lyin'.'

'You know'—thus Vern, meditatively eyeing the end of his cigarette—'I would certainly hate like hell to be one of those bold kidnappin' hairpins that did Snake's dirty work for him that night—smackin' Ol' Cass an' takin'

that poor kid off. I—certainly—would! Somebody's on the trail of that bunch. An'—you knew Dock Scrutchett, Ery, ol'-timer? Now, you know you did; couldn't help it! Well, did you hear how he was killed?

'I—I never even hear he was,' Tricker said, with what seemed truth. 'I—— But how-come? Who killed him?'

'He was just cut to pieces with a razor-sharp knife, out in the chaparral beyond Doc' Brill's. An', Ery, he was killed because he belonged to Snake's outfit. I don't think he was in the gang the time Vingie was carried off. He'd joined up just a few days before Doc' Brill was murdered. But it was enough for—for this fella on their trail that Scrutchett was one of Snake's hands an' out in the brush. So—— The rest'll go the same way, now you mark my words!'

A horseman stopped before the jail and bent in the saddle to peer into the semi-gloom of the office. It was a young cowboy of twenty or so, and he was obviously swelled with news:

'Hey! Sarge!' yelled this newsbringer. 'Yuh in the?'

He flung himself off the horse and came at a half run inside. He was so anxious to talk that he stuttered.

'Sarge! Yuh know that feller Enson yuh sent over to Ord? One that was wanted up at Fo't Worth for murder? Well, sir! If that reward notice never read "A Thousand—Dead or Alive!" yuh' shore out a thousand dollars! He's deader'n Pontius Pilate!'

The four of them gaped at him. He waited, green eyes going impressively from face to strained face:

'Yes, sir! When ol' Monk Fuller went up to feed his canary birdies this mawnin', Enson was a-lyin' in his cell at the end of the tier. Cut up somethin' scandic'lous! He'd been stabbed right smack-dab through the heart, first off, they say.'

'He—He—Enson won Vingie from Snake!'

That retching whisper seemed to be ripped from Ery Tricker's throat. The Adam's apple in long, thin neck worked convulsively, sliding up and down as if Ery were being strangled.

Vern stared hard and long at the trembling, wild-eyed figure, looked at Dud and Ody, then back again at Tricker. Bodingly, he shook his head:

'Ery! Ery!' he said very sadly, 'I just do'no' what to make of you. Sometimes I'm afraid you're not above tellin' a man a lie! Why—not five minutes ago, you told all of us, right here, that you hadn't even heard of

Vingie Furby, or Ol' Cass Furby. You said that you didn't know anything about Snake havin' her. Now—— Well, you're just too much for me!

'I forgot!' mumbled Ery miserably. 'Clean forgot. I don't know nothin', nohow! Jist happened to hear one time that Snake had a gal out to his place. They was drinkin' an' gamblin', one night, an' Enson, he was lucky. So Snake—I heard—put this gal up—whoever she was. Enson won her. Snake never cared, I reckon. He could git him plenty gals. An' the' was this Molly, too.'

Vern stared at the cowboy, who was gaping at Ery Tricker.

'Well?' he asked. 'Who was the knife artist? You don't mean to tell me they haven't found out who could knife a prisoner in a jail cell? It's not reasonable!'

'Well, they hadn't found out when I rode over. Nobody in the jail heard a thing last night—or seen a thing. Monk Fuller can't figger how anybody'd git in from outside, into that tier of cells. He was sleepin' in the office with the keys.'

'Well,' Vern meditated aloud, 'it just goes to show you, Ery. Proves what I was sayin'. This sight-unseen hairpin I mentioned, he's whittlin' down the bunch. Well! I'm glad that I wasn't mixed into such a lowdown deal. How about you? Why—Ery! To look at you, a man'd think you had a finger in it! Wouldn't you, Dud? Wouldn't you, Ody? I swear, *I* could believe it!'

'I never! I never!' Ery Tricker babbled, almost sobbing. 'I never knowed a thing about it! I—— God! It's hot in here!'

'A guilty conscience, now, it's certainly hell,' Vern nodded, watching the shambling figure go rushing across the street toward the Coney Island's swing doors. 'Ery was on that job.'

When the cowboy had gone on, Vern sat staring out through the door in the direction Ery had taken. The lank deputy did not reappear. Dud Blaze sauntered over and returned to say that Ery was down at the bar's end, drinking steadily and by himself, deaf to all the gibes flung at him by other drinkers.

'Fine!' nodded Vern half absently. 'For I have got an idee. Anyhow, the loose makin's of one. An' Ery Tricker figures in it real prominent. The drunker he gets, the better.'

'Another visitor,' said Dud Blaze. They watched the small, thin-faced man getting down from his horse at the jail hitch rack. He came quickly, nervously, over to the door and looked inside. Vern invited him in and he slid inside.

‘I’m—— Which o’ you gents is the Ranger?’

‘There’s three of us, all Rangers. I’m Sergeant Dederick.’

‘I’m Riggels, storekeeper down at Placita, the Mex’ village sou’east o’ this, on the River. I was robbed two days ago. My pardner was killed. I was lyin’ sick in the back room, an’ they come in, an’ that killer, Frio Jack, he busted me one in the jaw an’ they took nine hund’d out from under my pillow.’

‘They?’ drawled Vern pointedly, but with a steady glitter in his blue eyes belying his lazy tone. ‘You recognized ’em?’

‘Why, I——’ Riggels stared down at his boot toes, then looked up brazenly at Vern, meeting his eyes rigidly. ‘I couldn’t say as to the two others. They was masked, you see.’

‘How were they dressed? Just gi’ me a few details, so’s I can hunt ’em with some idee of what they look like.’

‘I—I reckon I can’t. You see, Frio Jack—I recognized him, a’ right—he banged me in the jaw an’ I never got what you’d call a good look at ’em; the others. Just—oh, medium-sized men, in regular cowboy clothes. Nothin’ to notice about ’em.’

‘It wasn’t, by any chance, Snake Stett an’ Lute Cane?’

He knew instantly that it had been. The swift, alarmed batting of the storekeeper’s black eyes told him that it had been—and that Riggels had recognized them, but was afraid to give evidence against the powerful outlaw leader. Mockingly, he grinned at the little man.

‘Won’t ask you no more,’ he grunted. ‘You’d just lie. You told anybody about this? Bury yo’ pardner? Make complaint?’

‘I buried him, yeh. Had to. They shot him when he went for the gun under the counter. He was a dam’ fool! Better lose a few hund’ds than lose yo’ life! I wouldn’t have made a complaint, now, but I hear about a Ranger bein’ in town.’

‘Le’s go!’ said Vern briefly. ‘Ody, you stick here an’ tend the jail. After we’re gone an hour—Dud an’ Riggels an’ me—go down to the Coney Island an’ gather in Frio Jack. The charge is murder. We won’t bother about swearin’ out a warrant. Goin’ to Josephus Tennon’d just give the show away an’, if we’re lucky, we’ll be back before anybody knows we’re gone.’

Riggels stared hard at Vern. His face was pallid:

‘You—you don’t figure me in on this deal? This arrestin’? I ain’t goin’ a step, I tell you! I’d lose that money without a squawk, first. I’m stickin’

right here where I'm safe!

'I'm not figurin' you to help make any arrest,' Vern denied gently. 'But I can't leave you here in town while I'm gone, friend. Not knowin' you, I can't say what you might let out. You'll have to ride along with us a piece, then hightail on back to yo' store. If Corporal Blaze an' I can't make these arrests I'm aimin' to make, an army couldn't. Let's go!'

CHAPTER XIV

The House by the Snake

IN the rolling chaparral country, the Rio Culebra ran between high and chalk-gray banks of limestone, twisting and curving, like the serpent whose name it bore, in a general northwest to southeast direction. Snake Stett's ranch—hangout of the outlaws, so it was understood—was a trifle west of north of Paradise and stretched to north and west with limits known to none but Stett himself, if *he* knew. It was on the southern bank of the Culebra, the bank nearest Paradise County's unofficial seat.

Riding well to westward of the regular ranch road from Paradise, going by stock trails or merely weaving through the chaparral, Vern and Dud Blaze looked thoughtfully at such cattle as they found grazing on the scrubby range. They saw no horses—these would be close up to the house, doubtless. But the cattle were better than average stock, and in good shape.

Vern, after a quick look around, suddenly jerked his rope from the strap and sent Pico hurtling after a cow which was galloping away before them. He piled her expertly and Pico kept the slack taken up in the rope while Vern ran back to his specimen. Dud rode up and leaned from the saddle.

'*Mmm-hmm,*' he nodded, staring down at the brand on the left hip. 'ZOX. At a guess, the 7U once. Let's see!'

He took down his own rope and shook out a loop, which he dropped expertly over a hindfoot. He flipped the cow over. That ZOX (ZOX) showed again on the other side, for vented brand. Snake Stett's wavy Snake (~~~~9) was on the right hip. He shook loose his rope, and pulled it off, as did Vern. They looked at the earmarks.

'Mighty rough work,' opined the experienced, if youthful, Corporal Blaze, whose father's cattle ranged on a thousand hills farther north and east. 'Didn't bother the earmarks at all. And that ZOX over 7U (7U) oughtn't to fool a puncher's baby girl. *You* ever hear of such a brand as ZOX, Vern? I never did!'

'Just goes to show how this country's bein' run,' Vern said grimly, as they went on—more cautiously, now, as they sensed the nearness of the house—toward the Culebra. 'He's so certain of protection that all he does is go through the motions of blottin' that 7U an' rebrandin'. Shows, too, how high, wide, an' handsome this gang is operatin': The 7U's easy a hundred miles east.'

They saw ahead of them the greener, taller timber along the Culebra's course. They bent low as they rode and stopped finally in a tiny glade to peer around a chaparral clump at the peaceful seeming bulk of the stone house two hundred yards away.

It was a pretty scene. Smoke curled slowly upward in the still air, from the great chimney in the end wall. A brindle hound scratched himself lazily at a house corner. There were five saddles hanging on the front wall under the roof of the long, deep gallery that ran the length of the house. Upon these saddles Vern trained his glasses for several minutes.

'Five... If all of the bunch lives in the house, that's what we'll be buckin'. If I could get in arm's reach of Snake, I wouldn't give a little bitty dam' how many he had with him. But, how the devil can we get up, without bein' seen? I hate to wait till dark. There's that brindly hound, too. He'd likely bark at us. Not so good, Dud, ol'-timer. In fact, not so *good!* Yo' mother'd never forgive me.'

But Dud's head was turned to westward and he was tensed like a pointer, listening. Vern listened and he, too, heard horses coming from that direction. As he and Dud were now, they were at the eastern end of the house. The ranch road to Paradise—and doubtless with a fork toward Ord and another shooting off to southward and the Rocker-O of 'Pache Ord—was west of them. There was an eighth of a mile of clear grassland in that direction. They would be able to see the newcomers for a few minutes before their arrival at the house.

Vern trained his glasses on the extreme edge of the open space and with sight of the two riders coming suddenly in view, he grunted. Then he lowered the glasses and looked flashingly at the house. Snake Stett and several men had come out onto the gallery and were looking at the lean, hard-bitten figure of 'Pache Ord, the slender shape of 'Cilla, who rode beside him.

'Come on!' Vern grunted swiftly. He ran to his horse, Dud following. They mounted and went as quickly as they could, still farther to eastward, then up through the scrub to northward and turned in toward the house.

'We'll leave the horses here!' Vern explained quickly. 'If we can slide into the house while they're lookin' at 'Pache an' 'Cilla, we have got 'em where the hair is plumb amputated!'

They left the saddle guns with the horses and ran through the chaparral to the windowless east end of the ranch house, stopped a moment and listened strainedly. They heard a cry of greeting from Snake on the gallery. They slipped around the corner of the house and found the front gallery

empty. Noiselessly, they stepped upon it and stole to a blanket-covered window. The room it opened upon was a long, dusky, and empty chamber, littered with clothing and odds and ends of men's possessions.

Dud slipped through the window ahead of Vern, who was but a moment behind. There was a rush from a corner that Vern, coming through the window with eyes upon the room's inner door, saw from the corner of his eye. Dud whirled, with pistol jumping up, but groaned softly as something swung down, catching him on the head. Vern was pivoting toward that figure.

His eyes relieved, now, from the white glare of the sunlight; accustomed to the gloom of this blanket-shaded room, he saw a big Mexican jerking back the heavy quirt butt which had struck Dud down. In he slid, with Colt across his chest. The Mexican whipped up the quirt, but Vern chopped out with pistol barrel a split second faster. Three times he struck the man on face and head. He glanced flashingly down at the limp figure, then raced across to the door into the narrow hallway.

Still the others of Snake's outfit were on the back gallery. The hall was empty. He ran a-tiptoe down it, and, as 'Pache Ord and 'Cilla swung down at the gallery edge, he popped into the back door with a Colt in each hand.

'*Nds up!*' he snapped. 'In the name of the law; by authority of the State of Texas——'

A wizened, grizzled little man of that bunch had a gun under his arm, and at the moment of Vern's appearance, his hand chanced to be at his throat. He attempted to make use of the advantage. The hand flashed inside his shirt and Vern, watching Snake Stett hawk-steadily, was almost caught unaware. The wizened rider's stubby pistol was out before he caught the movement from the tail of his eye. He lifted his Colt muzzle a trifle and with its roar the wizened man folded up, dropping his weapon. He sat on the gallery floor, coughing for a moment, then dropped flat and lay still.

'He won't die—unless he's got a weak system,' Vern said grimly. 'But the next break for a gun'll be just plain dam' foolish suicide! Stick yo' hands some higher, Snake! It's good law an' good judgment, both, to mind yo' *p's* and *q's* when a Ranger is talkin' to you—an' kind of punctuatin' his remarks with a .45. Line up, the bunch of you. 'Pache! You keep down there an' don't be actin' like yo' hand's itchin' for a pistol scratch! For if it gets to itchin' too much, I'll pistol scratch it! Same for you, 'Cilla! You two stand clear of the horses!'

He whirled at a soft footfall in the hall behind him. His right hand gun roared and Dud Blaze dropped flat on the floor. The bullet splatted from the

stone door opening and ricocheted into the hall. Dud got up, grinning.

‘Ought to’ve yelled,’ he shrugged. ‘Serve me right if you had drilled me. Want these hairpins disarmed?’

He moved over to them, while Vern kept them covered and, at the same time, watched the fierce face of ’Pache Ord, who in the dooryard was acting like a man who could barely restrain himself. ’Cilla Ord leaned against her black horse and watched with great, dark eyes smoldering, and smooth, scarlet mouth a thin, tight line. Dud produced a rawhide string and poked it through the trigger guards of the confiscated pistols.

‘You fix that Mex?’ Vern asked him and Dud nodded. ‘Then I wish you’d gather up anything that’ll shoot that’s in the house, Dud. These boys are kind of harum-scarum, you know; no tellin’ what idees they might get into their young heads.’

’Pache Ord came stalking to the gallery. But Snake Stett, a perfect statue of balked fury, took a quick step toward Vern. He had almost lost his ordinary control. He swallowed thickly:

‘I’ve already promised to kill you,’ he grated. ‘Now, I am promising that it won’t be a quick or an easy death. I——’

‘Surely,’ nodded Vern, with tremendously sympathetic tone. ‘I ’lowed you would likely take it this way. But don’t get overhe’t about killin’ me. Where you’re goin’, Snake, you won’t do any killin’—unless the Devil allows fightin’ in hell!’

‘What kind o’ skullduggery’s this, anyhow?’ snarled ’Pache Ord, brushing past Snake. ‘I told you the other day that if you knew what’s good for you, you’d leave my country in a mile-high cloud o’ dust. What you think you’re doin’—throwin’ down on these men like this? By God! I’m Ord! I’m ’Pache Ord——’

‘Yeh, I know you—an’ I don’t think much *of* you!’ Vern said viciously. ‘You run with a mighty lowdown bunch of sneakin’, murderin’ skunks. Not one of the passel’d assay one per cent *Man!* A slimy bunch, lower’n a snake’s belly in a wagon track; a yellow livered bunch that sneaks up to an old man’s house an’ murders him! I’m arrestin’ this prize skunk, here, with his li’l Number Two skunk, Lute Cane. An’ I want somebody to try stoppin’ me! I’m just beggin’ somebody to try it!’

‘He an’ Cane an’ Frio Jack heard that one of the store-keepers down at Placita was sick. So they figured that three of them, with luck, could handle the one well man. They went down there an’ murdered the fella. They went

in an' took nine hund'd from under Riggels's pillow. Frio Jack decided Riggels was good an' sick, so he was brave enough to hit him.'

'You're a liar!' Snake snarled. 'I——'

'Don't you call *me* a liar!' Vern said, so fiercely that involuntarily Snake took a half step backward before the menacing pistol muzzle. 'First thing you know, I'll hand you back a gun an' then ram it so far down yo' neck the front sight'll snag yo' gizzard! I'm takin' you an' Cane in, an' if anybody tries to take you away from me, on the trail, you'll die so quick you'll have to get into hell on a special ticket!'

He looked grimly around at the others. His eyes rested for a moment on that wizened little man he had shot through the shoulder, then upon the squat, bat-eared man who had been silent through it all. Dud reappeared with an armful of Winchesters, a couple of pistols, and even a thin butcher-knife. These he deposited on the gallery and went back inside. When he came out again, he was dragging the big Mexican who had assaulted him with the quirt. He had the Mexican neatly tied up, with loops about his thumbs, the thin rawhide *cuervo* running from thumbs by way of crotch and up the back, to end in a slip-noose about thick neck.

'Here,' said Dud contemptuously, 'is the only Man in the whole sneaking bunch, Vern. But I reckon he's been so corrupted by traveling with these polecats that *he* can't shoot until it gets good dark!'

'Watch 'em a minute,' Vern grunted.

He hunkered comfortably on the gallery floor to produce his sheaf of warrants and sort them on his knee. One by one, he checked them and, at the last, nodded contentedly. He fumbled in shirt pocket and with sight of the silver whistle brought out, there was a small, explosive, thoroughly angry sound. Vern looked at Priscilla Ord with sandy brows climbing. He grinned:

'*You* know that whistle, don't you? An' you know what it's used for, too! Well, well! There's nothin' like education...'

He put it to his lips and blew shrilly until Pico came galloping, with head lifted cannily to keep the trailing reins out from under his feet. Vern stepped down to the chestnut and slapped him affectionately on the neck. From a saddle pocket he took his thick, gray paper-back, 'Bible Two' of the Rangers—the current *List of Fugitives from Justice* as reported to the Adjutant-General in Austin by the sheriffs of Texas' counties. He leaned on Pico comfortably, one eye squinting against the upwreathing smoke of his cigarette, thumbing the *Fugitive List* pages.

It was a pose calculated to wear thin the scant remnant of patience left to the prisoners. But Vern's intent and studious expression was not altered by angry sounds from the gallery. He even hummed softly to himself. At last, he nodded and looked long and pleasantly at the bat-eared man.

'I had a notion that you'd turn out to be some kind of Particular Polecat,' he nodded. 'Yes, sir! When a misbegotten face like yo's is found in the kind of skunkified company you keep on the Culebra, it's bound to mean somethin'. An' again the infallibleness of my judgment is proved. Cut another notch in the tally stick, Corporal Blaze. The Old Man is right again!'

'Find him?' Dud grinned ferociously, leaning forward.

'Seven hundred an' fifty dollars' worth!' Vern cried. 'Yes, sir! Abilene wants her li'l' woman-killer back that much. Ed Slack is his name. "He busted Taylor County Jail with his heel," says the sher'f at Abilene. Well... He won't break Ord County Jail—not with his *head!*'

He looked at Dud's particular prisoner, the big Mexican:

'That ought to be Teodoro Sanchez. He's a welcome guest in our middlest, too... Yes, sir! Warrant says "horse-theft." An' if that li'l' unjudgmatical jigger, that's seepin' all over things out of the hole in his shoulder, is Tony Blossom—an' I'd bet a *peso* he is—there's a courtroom scene waitin' for him, too. Same charge as Sanchez's, but with some few extras like alterin' a brand, mayhem, an' assault with intent to murder. Dud! You go slap the kaks on our customers' horses, will you? They're so fond of our company that they're goin' to side us a piece of the way home.'

'You're due to learn something—new,' Snake Stett said, with amused twist of thin mouth. 'You think you can hold me? Or hold any of us? You'll discover your mistake! We'll be out within a half-hour of our arrival in town. And when we're out—what you'll learn will probably do you no good...'

'You're the roughest talker!' Vern complained, when Dud moved away toward the corral. 'You don't care a bit *how* much you scare me with that murderin' talk. An' it's not a bit kind of you. With—*two* of us, here, that's had our hearts weakened by things happenin' in these very counties!'

He looked humorously at Priscilla Ord and she promptly turned flaming red from shirt collar to the roots of her dark hair and glared at her tormentor. Snake looked quickly that way, following the direction of Vern's lazy stare. He frowned with sight of the girl's face, looked long at her, then malevolently at Vern.

‘A man that’s just good enough to do till somebody else comes along,’ Vern said vaguely, grinning at Snake, ‘he can’t amount to much after that somebody else arrives, huh, Snake? Ah, well, there’s Molly, you know. An’ poor li’l’ Vingie Furby...’

Dud brought the horses back. Ed Slack, Abilene’s woman-murderer, went sullenly to help saddle, at Vern’s suggestion. Vern looked blankly at the silent owner of the Rocker-O.

‘You can hightail, now,’ he said evenly. ‘I know where to find you, any time I want you. Don’t get notions. I *always* deliver my prisoners one way or the other: As pigs *or* pork!’

CHAPTER XV

Killer Dust

THE little jail at Paradise was well filled when Vern and Dud poured these new prisoners in with the original half-dozen they had arrested. Ody Gardineer had 'gathered in' Frio Jack while Vern and Dud rode toward the Snake. With addition of Snake and Lute Cane, Ed Slack who was seven hundred and fifty dollars, at Abilene, the wounded and bandaged Tony Blossom, and the Mexican, Teodoro Sanchez, bull pen and corridor were crowded. Vern unlocked all interior doors and let the men roam at will.

'It's little enough to do for you-all,' he told them solicitously. 'Seein' that the only way some of you'll ever get free again is by jumpin' through a loop—a hangman's loop.'

He sat with Dud and Ody in the jail office on the morning after their return with Snake and his men from the Culebra. Life was a pleasant experience in this cool and pleasant hour after breakfast—and an excellent breakfast at that, sent over to the office from the Boston Eating House across the way. Vern was pondering the wisdom of taking his prisoners to Ord and having a long talk with Judge Mingo Adams.

Appeared to him, then, halting in the office door, the bristly headed and big-jawed Dan Dill, well and unfavorably known to Vern through his ownership of the Coney Island Saloon. He was not a diplomatic person, Dan Dill. He glowered at them all and asked Vern, in a tone that made it no request at all, for permission to see Snake Stett. Vern shrugged carelessly:

'Open that door, yonder, a crack. An' then, stick yo' head inside. You can have yo' wish with side dishes; you can see Snake inside the bull pen an' we throw in free-gratus-for-nothin' a view of some others not quite so skunkified—but still men who would draw a second sniff in any part of the country but a place like the Culebra River country. Take yo' look, fella! There's no accountin' for tastes!'

Dan Dill glowered at him. From within the jail proper came sounds as of a bunch of cowboys on a celebration. They were singing and the choruses came in with a bunch of *yip-yip-yipping*. Snake Stett was showing a side of him that Vern had not suspected; one that, perhaps, had much to do with his influence over these hard-living rough riders of the chaparral country. He was the good fellow; the leader in every song; with a biting humor that suited them exactly. They were making a holiday of this time in jail.

Dan Dill opened the door a crack and looked sourly sidelong at Vern. And Snake Stett's entirely carefree voice came into the office in an interval of quiet:

'Frio, let's have that deck of cards of yours. We'll have a little poker game. I'm putting up one hat; one second-hand shirt—blue flannel; one pair Colt .45s, bone handles, nine-inch barrels—cheap guns; one pair waist overalls; one pair boots. The whole parcel effects of a dead man.'

'But how-come you got 'em, Snake?' demanded Lute Cane, in puzzled tone. 'Whose was they, when this hairpin was alive?'

'They belonged to a Ranger sergeant who was my meat. I let him run along for a spell, then——' The sound of his snapping fingers was clear to those grinning listeners in the office. 'Of course, the hat may not do any of you any good. It's a specially stretched model, you see...'

'Ho-ho! How the li'l' laddies do carry on,' Vern grinned. 'Oh, Snake! Hey, Snake! Ever hear that ol' one, about Pappy Wish an' Sonny Thought? Just thought I'd tell you. Dill!'

He looked narrow-eyed at the saloon man:

'You packin' a gun? Any gun? Yo's or—any intended for—anybody else? Speak up, li'l' man! Speak up, now! It'll save a raft of grief an' *oh-why-didn't-I-figure-that's?*...'

From his watch pockets Dan Dill drew out a brace of wicked little Remington derringers, double-barreled, caliber .44. He laid them on the table with contemptuous lip-stretching.

'Y' can search me f'r hideouts, if y' want to.'

'Go on inside, then. But, Dill, in case you *should* be lyin' to me—— Well, I would advise keepin' a saloon window open. You know—just in case you should have to jump out! That way is a lot easier on the glass. It's hell to jump through a window that ain't been opened. Cuts a fella up scandalous!'

They listened to the murmur of voices inside, where Snake and Dan Dill were standing together on opposite sides of the barred partition that fenced off the cross-hall from the jail enclosure. Then Dan Dill came out, picked up and repocketed his 'stubs,' and with curt nod to them went out.

There was silence for a time in the jail. Vern's thoughts were roving, gone out to the lean and slinking Ery Tricker. Ody and Dud Blaze were snarling at each other in a low-toned argument. Then the prisoners began to whoop it up. Ribald songs of the cowland; the salty, unprintable version of 'The Old Chisholm Trail'; shrill choruses of coyote yelps. Vern looked up irritably:

‘Will you two dam’ billy goats cut out that arguin’! You have been snarlin’ about a seven-inch an’ a nine-inch barrel, ever since my sins drug me into associatin’ with you. See if ever’thing’s all right with our skunks out back, will you?’

Ody Gardineer stepped to the door, looked keenly inside, then turned tight-faced to Vern. His hand slid down to Colt. His voice was very gentle when he reported.

‘They got a half-dozen bottles,’ he drawled. ‘Reckon Mr. Dill slid ’em in. Shall I make ’em hand the stuff over?’

‘No-o, I reckon not,’ Vern drawled. Idly, he looked about the office. There was an old buckboard singletree in a corner. He went over and picked it up, balancing it delicately.

‘Bring the keys, Dud,’ he said quietly, and went inside.

The howling stopped. Quiet was thick enough to cut as he unbuckled his cartridge belt and laid his Colt down. Dud Blaze was unlocking the door in the barred partition. Vern stepped inside, swinging the singletree. He looked around him:

‘You got one chance—nary one more, either,’ he told them. ‘Pile yo’ bottles in that corner, or I’ll have to talk Mr. Morse’s telegraph code to you—all, with this here whiffletree...’

He swung the length of hickory and the loose iron hooks at its ends jingled dully. He waited, but they were moveless. The Mexican, Teodoro Sanchez, was in the forefront. His hand was sliding down to an opening in his bell-bottomed *charro* trousers. Vern shot across to him like a racing snake, and Sanchez cried out in agony, as a long knife dropped to the stone floor, its tinkle accompaniment to the dull snap of a broken arm. Vern jumped backward, letting the knife stay on the floor.

‘Put the bottles in the corner,’ he said slowly.

They looked longingly at the knife; looked at the snarling Teodoro nursing his arm; looked at the singletree; then in a sheepish procession, stacked the flasks as ordered. Vern smashed them. Then, ostentatiously turning his back on the pack of them, Vern went to the door and Dud let him out.

‘Stay here, the two of you,’ he commanded Ody and Dud. ‘Better push that glass into a corner out of their reach. An’ pick up Sanchez’s knife. I got a li’l’ visit to make. Shut up! There’s goin’ to *be* no trouble!’

He buckled on his belt and went out and across the street to the Coney Island. Dan Dill was behind the bar, at the end nearest the street. Ery Tricker

was at the far end, a shaky and red-eyed figure with bottle before him. There was a tolerable crowd there and Vern knew that in the main it was a hostile one.

‘You never opened that window, Dill,’ he said quietly to the saloon man, who stood with arms extended, hands on the bar’s edge. ‘Mighty poor judgment, that. You know, I don’t permit my prisoners to have liquor, unless *I* say so...’

Dill’s right hand slid the tiniest inch lower. He merely looked grimly at Vern, green eyes steady, unalarmed. But the right hand was moving almost imperceptibly—and steadily. So Vern, leaning against the bar, watching those behind him in the mirror as he watched Dill, also, shot out a hand to catch that right wrist; while its mate flashed to the bristly head and, as he jerked Dill forward, he pushed the head down.

So Dill’s big chin cracked the bar’s edge. Vern half threw himself over the bar, caught the saloon-keeper by the slack of his pants and heaved him bodily over it, to crash on the floor in front. Nor was he forgetful of those stubby derringers...

Dill was a tough-chinned one. He rolled over and scrambled to his feet. He rushed at Vern with big, knotty fists going like a windmill. He had no science of boxing, which made this an even battle. For neither had Vern. But both were skilled in the much more deadly devices of rough and tumble.

Vern caught him with a long right to the cheek and followed it with a hail of blows from both hands. Dill was too jolted by that first lucky one to get set. He was driven back until his shoulders touched the bar’s front. He fought back, but Vern was tireless and Dill’s blows were hampered. He tried to slide sideway, but was beaten back. And suddenly he slumped and crashed to the floor under a terrific left to the stomach. His head cracked the brass rail and he was still.

Vern was breathing heavily. He looked down at Dill, then around at the men; turned without a word and walked out. Dud was in the doorway, and at sight of the gash in Vern’s chin, cut by Dill’s heavy finger ring, he broke into angry speech.

‘“Going to *be* no trouble!”’ he quoted Vern. ‘Oh, no! No trouble at all! A *fi-ine* one you are, Vern Dederick!’

‘Ah, be still!’ Vern grinned at him. ‘There wasn’t a bit of trouble! Just a small Number One Fight! Who’s this fella?’

CHAPTER XVI

Ghost Evidence!

THE man mentioned was a huge and red-mustached individual, who looked understandingly at the gash on Vern's chin and thrust out a hand comparable to nothing but a ham. He said his name was Wethermon and by occupation he was a freighter, in the employ of Erskine at Ord. He had just come in with his outfit, on the way to Placita and points west.

'Brung a package for you,' he finished, producing a thickish packet. 'I can tell you what's in it, though,' he said, in lowered voice. 'Erskine told me. He got hold o' young Tuck Brill an' talked the boy into goin' before the grand jury.'

There was a letter and a dozen warrants. The letter was from Mingo Adams and was but amplification of what Wethermon had just said. Tuck Brill had been persuaded by 'someone you know' to go before the grand jury and give evidence against the riders who had murdered Dr. Brill.

'So,' the judge ended his message, 'I'm sending this hurriedly by a man I can trust, before word gets about that ten indictments were returned against Snake Stett, Lute Cane, Frio Jack, and seven others. You will have trouble enough arresting Stett and his men, if they don't suspect your purpose. Hold this gang at any cost, when you have taken them.'

Vern stared down at the new bunch of warrants. He knew that they must duplicate, in names, some of those he already had—and had served. Then a thought came to him. He knew that his hands were shaking a little as he thumbed them; knew that the trembling was increased when he had read the last name:

'Pache Ord wasn't in the gang, it seems,' he said aloud. 'I—I kind of thought he was. But Tuck would have said so. No, he wasn't involved in that dirty murder.'

'I'm *certainly* glad he wasn't!' Dud Blaze nodded. 'Aren't you, Ody? Why, you know you are! We're so pleased, Vern! For your sake, of course! If you had been forced to arrest him, there's just no telling how—*she* would have taken the action...'

'Will the both of you kindly go to hell!' growled Vern, reddening furiously. 'I reckon I can make a statement, without a dam' magpie talkin' me to death with dam' foolishness.'

‘*You* didn’t see her, Ody,’ Dud said rapturously. ‘My, my! You just don’t know what you missed. Pretty? *Pretty!* When she and Vern hook up in the well-known double harness, Vern’ll be so busy looking into her eyes that he won’t even realize what he says. And that will be: “Yes, my love! If *you* say so!”’

‘You make me tireder’n a whole winter’s work!’ Vern said disgustedly. ‘I—— Well, Mr. Justice Josephus Tennon!’

Tennon flap-flapped inside. He looked the man who came on an unpleasant errand, but must come regardless. His weasel features were strained; his weasel eyes he kept fixed upon the Mexican sandals that covered his sockless feet.

‘I come down to hold a kind of—well, preliminary hearin’. Then, if any of the prisoners wish to give bond for their appearance, you see, they can ——,’

He stopped abruptly—oh, most abruptly! For Vern was before him, stooping to peer under the brim of the greenish-black hard hat, into the pointy face. Vern was staring hard at him.

‘You know, I don’t *sabe* a thing about law,’ Vern was drawling. ‘But I do *comprendo* heaps an’ heaps about evidence. An’ it’s one of the rules of my virtuous life never to turn loose of any evidence. An’ these fellas in the jail, they’re evidence—evidence that I served the warrants for ’em. So, fella! We ain’t holdin’ court today. Nor, likewise, we ain’t talkin’ bond. So, trustin’ this finds you the same—git out!’

‘You can’t high-hand me!’ yapped Josephus Tennon. For he had noted the half-open door into the jail and must have realized that all that was said here was audible in there. ‘I’m going to hold court in accordance with the law and——’

He was swept up, easily, contemptuously; swung shoulder high by a big hand that was set like a steel clamp on the back of his scrawny neck. Suspended thus, he was borne to the door and tossed out into the street. Vern stood looking after him, with a sort of brooding peace upon his face. But when Tennon scrambled to his feet and moved to recover his fallen sandals, Vern whistled—as to a dog; then crooked a beckoning finger. At his second whistle, Tennon came reluctantly.

‘You’d *better* reconsider——’ he began.

‘*Sh!*’ said Vern. ‘An’ we won’t hold court tomorrow!’

There was silence in the jail; that is, no loud and cheerful noises such as had disturbed Vern’s thoughts earlier in the day. Noon. Ody let a waiter from

the Boston Eating House inside the bull pen with the prisoners' meals. He ate with Vern and Dud in the office. But suddenly, he began to hurry. He finished the quarter of a pie in a gulp and got up. A piece of rope was hanging on the wall. He took it and went out into the cross-hall of the jail. Dud and Vern looked after him, but finished their meal leisurely. Presently, they looked into the jail.

There Ody hunkered in plain sight of the prisoners. He was doing something with that length of rope. They moved and he held up his handiwork to squint at it critically. He regarded them solemnly; the prisoners scowled blackly.

'Just figgered out a way to save the county consid'able money,' said Ody. 'We could've done without three o' them meals today, if I'd just thought o' this. All you got to do is come out here an' tie hang knots in this yere rope... Funny!'

Vern went out along Main Stem. Checking the warrants issued for the murderers of Dr. Brill, he found himself short three men. Once he had them in custody, he could take the entire crew over to Ord. But where the men he wanted might be was the thing to find out. They might be a hundred miles away.

Dallas Jenny's place was notorious in all this wide scope of the chaparral country. Her dance-hall was the finest; her girls the prettiest by a good, long shot. Half absently, Vern was thinking of this as he passed the now silent door. Then a girl came out and stood looking at him. She was that vivid red-headed girl, Molly.

Vern stopped, eyeing her blankly. She smiled at him, the mechanical lip-stretching of the professional man-handler.

'An' this is the sergeant that's been tiein' the boys in knots!' she said. Her eyes were not smiling, Vern noted. They were cold and wary. He thought that he could do better than she. *He* smiled and put both lips and eyes into it.

'Reckon I'll have to plead guilty to part,' he admitted. 'An' I'll tell you, right off, that I know who *you* are! Everybody in the Culebra River country between nine an' ninety talks about just one girl—Molly Vere de Vere.'

'Well! He *is* alive! He *is* human!' she cried. 'An' here I been wonderin' if you never danced, or—looked sideways at a girl... But I reckon you been too busy! An' no wonder! Slammin' Snake Stett an' his circus animals into the *juzgado* is jist about as hefty a job o' work as most folks'd want to tackle! Say! I wanted to see you, not just because o' the dancin'——'

As he stared inquiringly at her—and considered her very thoroughly—the rouged young face went suddenly serious—deadly serious. She stood close to him, now, looking up with wise blue eyes widening. Her hand came up, to catch his sleeve. Vern let none of his suspicions show as he frowned down bewilderedly.

‘Come inside, Big Fella! Nobody’s around, this time o’ day. I can tell you somethin’ you—you ought to know! Come on in!’

‘I’m scared of you,’ Vern said suddenly, and grinned. ‘That shows my good judgment. Anything as pretty as you oughtn’t to be let run loose. She’s about as safe as so much dynamite. You crook yo’ finger an’ the likes of me come runnin’...’

‘Yeh? I wish I believed that! For you wouldn’t be a bit hard to take! If I could crook my finger an’ have *you* come in—well! I’m crookin’ it! You comin’?’

‘It might be safe,’ Vern said solemnly. ‘Now, with Snake locked up where he can’t claw me for walkin’ over his posted signs. I guess I can take a chance.’

‘Posted signs! Listen, Big Fella! Nobody puts up the posted signs on li’l Molly but—Molly! Snake nor anybody else has got the loop on my heels! If he has got ideas along those lines, he can buck out from under ’em *pronto*! You’re not tellin’ me that you give a whoop about Snake, anyhow! Listen, Big Fella! If you wanted a girl, an’ the girl—oh, just maybe—wanted—*you*—would you stand back because Snake was in the neighborhood?’

‘Like hell!’ Vern said grimly and in real earnest. He was thinking of another girl, entirely, but Molly seemed satisfied with his hardening expression.

‘Then come on in! You do like me some, already. An’ I’ve been watchin’ you, Big Fella! I think we’re goin’ to get along. An’ maybe you’ll find out that I can help some, in ways nobody else can. Come on!’

He followed her into the great, empty room. She led the way to a dusky corner and he watched her go swaying, at the skilled dancer’s graceful pace, ahead of him. She was a shapely youngster and pretty; hardly over nineteen, he thought; not yet beginning to break under the strain of this life. Snake Stett’s girl... pretending, now, not to be... Vern set himself to match wits with her. He thought of Ery Tricker as he had looked through a window and seen the shambling, stupid, fearful deputy leaning across a table to this girl; leaning and—listening intently.

‘Beer?’ she asked hospitably, when she halted at a table in the corner. He nodded and she disappeared through a door to the small bar-room adjoining Dallas Jenny’s dance-floor. She came back with bottles and glasses. She sat down.

Vern opened the beer and poured their glasses expertly. She watched his big hands with a worried frown; then looked abruptly up at him, blue eyes very wide.

‘Big Fella! Ain’t you afraid o’ this outfit? I know you can handle yourself—good Lord! I like to fainted when I heard about you wanderin’ into the Coney Island all by your lone an’ stickin’ up that bunch o’ curly wolves an’ takin’ their hardware! But all the licks that’ll come at you won’t come from the front! You can’t be watchin’ front an’ back, both, all the time!’

He drank his beer and watched her. It was good beer, with a San Antonio brewery’s label. He wondered what was coming. What had Snake set her to do? So he shrugged fatalistically.

‘Listen! I might as well come right out with it: I like you. I reckon I fell without ever seein’ you—that night you hit town an’ like to knocked everybody dead in the Coney Island. I says to Snake, that night, I says: “I’d like to see the man that took your fancy guns off you!” An’ it made him awful mad, I can tell you!’ She giggled reminiscently. ‘Awful mad, Big Fella!’

‘Aw, don’t you hoorah me!’ he protested, moving his shoulders embarrassedly. ‘You don’t mean that. I never had much to do with women, but I know Snake’s the kind that women fall for. Me, I’m nothin’ but a roughneck cowboy turned Ranger. I ain’t backin’ down from hell or high water. I’m a better man than Snake Stett’ll ever be, but——’

‘ ’Course you are! An’ that’s what I’m tellin’ you. You think *I* can’t tell a Man when I see him—or hear about him? Well, I certainly can. I—I——’

She put her hand across the table; covered his. He frowned at her, then turned his hand to catch hers. He drew her up from her chair and around the table; down upon his knee. She put her cheek against his face. He had one swift glimpse of her and it penetrated the masklike smile of surrender. Inwardly, he grinned as he slid arm about the slim waist. She had him! she was thinking. He was ready to hear what Snake wanted him to hear...

‘You wouldn’t try double-crossin’ me?’ he said grimly. ‘I’m no ladies’ man. But I know somethin’ about ’em. You wouldn’t get away with it, a

minute. I believe you do like me. But you try to play me against Snake, or Snake against me——’

‘Listen, Big Fella! If the women haven’t been chasin’ you, it’s because you didn’t give ’em the chance! You could tell it, if I didn’t mean what I’m sayin’. You’re twice the man Snake is—an’ he’s man enough to boss the whole Culebra River country. I—I reckon I’m scared o’ Snake. Or I was. I won’t be, with you standin’ between. I had it out with Snake the other day. I told him where to go. But he looked at me, with that snaky eye o’ his—an’ I turned cold all over. I didn’t let him see I was scared. But I was—plenty!’

‘What was it you wanted to tell me, hon’?’

He held her close against him while he poured more beer, using his left hand. He picked up his glass. She lifted hers and looked over it into his face.

‘You slammed Snake into the *calabozo*. But he’s got plenty men outside, Big Fella! An’ they have got plenty guns—an’ plenty knives. You ever happen to see a scar-faced Mexican in *charro* rigout? He packs two knives down his back. Throws ’em.’

She put down the empty glass and cuddled closer. Vern grinned. He was still in the dark about her. Unless this were preliminary, it seemed a lot of talking to accomplish very little. But Snake had chosen his tool well, he conceded. Intuitively warned, as he was, he found her a pleasant burden on his knee. The luring face so close to his own was enough to make any normal man’s pulses hammer. But he was curious:

‘You won’t try any double-crossin’, now? It’s hard to believe that your kind’ll ever shoot square, with any man!’

‘My kind’ll shoot squarest!’ she contradicted him vehemently. ‘I’d go any place, do anything, for the man I loved! You can’t say as much for a dam’ Sweet Innocent in a sunbonnet!’

‘I reckon you would,’ he nodded grudgingly. ‘But I still can’t be sure it’s not Snake you’re lovin’.’

‘I’m not denyin’ that I did! Till you come in. Now—try me, Big Fella! If you don’t believe I’ll do anything for you, you just ask me whatever it is you want to know an’ I’ll hoodle it out o’ Snake for you! Tell me what it is. I’ll do the rest!’

‘I’m leavin’ town for a while, pretty soon. You find out from Snake what *he’s* schemin’. I’m worried about what he’s got up his sleeve. If I know, I can spoke his wheel. If you find out, I’ll believe you. But if you don’t——’

He lifted her gently and began to get up. She pushed at him, trying to make him sit down again. He shook his head, smiling down at her.

‘I have got some things to do,’ he said tolerantly. ‘I’ll be catchin’ hell from my cap’n, if I spend too much time playin’ around with you.’

‘But you ain’t been here ten minutes! You—you ought to like me well enough to want to stay a while. An’ I—I have got lots o’ things I want to tell you. Wait a minute, Big Fella! Let’s don’t stay here——’

He shook his head, still smiling, and scooped her to him. She walked draggingly, but he moved her toward the door. She hung to his sleeve, there. He was freeing himself gently when the soft fall of horses’ hoofs in the dust of the street came to him. He looked mechanically that way. ‘Pache Ord and Priscilla were riding at a walk past the dance-hall. They were looking at the pair in the door. Vern looked at them, then turned calmly back to Molly. He caught her by both elbows and lifted her up until her face was level with his own.

‘Got to go, hon’. You see what you can do. An’ if you get too intricate with these Culebra River bowlegs, don’t you think I won’t know about it. An’ I’ll be on the prod when I come. I’ll about bust that pretty neck of yo’s—I catch you crossin’ me!’

‘I got to dance with ’em,’ she said—and shrugged. ‘But no more’n that, Big Fella! Don’t you worry! I’ll be seein’ you, then—soon? Tonight?’

He nodded slightly. He decided that this was no more than the preliminary he had guessed it to be. She had had no other purpose in stopping him, delaying him here, than a desire to break the ice and get him ready for whatever scheme the subtle Snake had prepared. He thought that he had fooled her completely. As completely as she thought she had taken him in. She——

From upstreet, from the direction of the jail, there came a sudden staccato splattering of shots—pistol shots. ‘Pache Ord and Priscilla, now thirty yards past, stiffened and leaned forward. Vern listened tensely. Then Molly laughed and caught his arm.

‘Fool cowboys,’ she said, almost naturally. ‘They’re always shootin’ off their guns, leavin’ town. Big Fella——’

But Vern understood, now, all her provocative methods of the past hour; all her strategy. She had done exactly what she was supposed to do. She had held him here when he should have been at the jail. She *had* taken him into camp. He freed himself with a jerk and ran up the street.

‘You’re a wise egg, Mr. Dederick!’ he told himself acidly. ‘Only smart thing *you* did was not to leave the hall with her!’

CHAPTER XVII

Ranger Style

FROM the doorway of the sheriff's office smoke came slowly drifting. In the doorway Vern Dederick saw a crumpled and moveless figure, a-sprawl across the sill. Now appeared one who gained the sidewalk with a tremendous backward leap. He landed, a gun in each hand. He threw down, right hand, left hand. The Colts barked each time. He was firing into the door.

Vern was running upstreet rapidly. He recognized the belligerent gentleman as he drew nearer. He was a sulky, dark man, Nep Till by the name he used in this country. He had been with Squinty McBrett, the night the little rancher Barnes had been murdered by Snake Stett's order.

Till's fire was being returned from the sheriff's office. This was a matter for relief, to Vern. He had wondered furiously if Ody Gardineer and Dud Blaze had been surprised and murdered by friends of Snake Stett.

At sound of Vern's pounding feet, Nep Till whirled and a Colt came around instinctively to cover the big, running figure. Vern fired from the hip, without checking speed. He missed pretty closely. Till promptly dived behind a water-barrel close by and from that shelter blazed away. It was folly to run up on him, but Vern was not concerned just now with matters of wisdom. He thought that but a single gun was firing inside the sheriff's office. He wanted only to get at the one visible member of the Stett gang. He ran on.

Nep Till could not stand the pressure. His first bullet fired from behind the barrel came so close to Vern's face that the wind of it was apparent. But his second and third shots were wild. He jumped up and began backing off. Vern fired with both hands; right, left, right again. He was always at his best under pressure; facing fire. Nep Till sprawled like a bundle of old clothes in the street.

Vern gave him but the most casual of glances, then ran to the door, yelling to Ody and Dud. Both answered him. He jumped inside, over the dead man in the doorway. The office was a shambles. Two men sprawled across the floor, the pine planking red beneath each. One lay at the door leading into the jail corridor and still clutched in his right hand the big bunch of cell keys. Ody Gardineer's head and face were coated with blood that came from a wound on his skull.

‘What happened?’ grunted Vern, looking swiftly about.

‘It was supposed to be a jail delivery,’ Dud Blaze said judicially. ‘But it didn’t quite pan out that way. We were sitting in here, cursing you for running off and leaving us to do all the hard work, when Nep Till and another hard case whose name I don’t know drifted in. They were highly curious about the charges against Snake and the others. They sat down and augured for a while. They had decided to leave Snake and try some other part of the country, they said.

‘Ody was close to Till and, being a simple and a trusting soul, he turned his back. Till cracked him over the head with a pistol barrel, while the other hairpin grabbed me. Then two others jumped inside. Evidently they had been watching and listening at the door. One got the keys and started to let out our canaries in there. But I managed to donate a knee to my wrestling partner—right in his bread basket. I snatched his pistol out and killed him with it. And downed that one in the door.

‘Nep Till dropped behind the table across there and he whanged away at me while I whanged away at the fellow with the keys. I connected and he didn’t. You saw Till coming out, when Ody—who had returned to sense of his responsibilities—began to crossfire on him. I suppose that you downed him?’

‘Pretty complete,’ Vern nodded grimly. ‘In fact, all around she’s right thorough... Four would-be jail-breakers *up*—an’ four *down*! I reckon Snake’s li’l’ playmates outside of jail’ll believe, now, that what the Rangers take, they keep!’

This last was really for the benefit of ’Pache Ord, who had come to stand glowering in the door. Vern turned slowly to look at the boss of the Culebra River country. He thought that ’Pache would have shown surprise, as well as disappointment—had he permitted himself to show any emotion at all, other than surliness.

‘It would’ve been just too sad,’ Vern said in silky drawl, ‘if these wicked characters here had let out Snake an’ the others. You wouldn’t have got to see ’em in that case. An’ I reckon you rode into town to have a pow-wow with ’em?’

‘I did, if it’s any o’ yo’ business!’ ’Pache snarled. ‘Where’s Ery Tricker? He’s s’posed to be here, in charge.’

‘S’posed to be here, maybe—but not in charge! I’m in charge, Mister. So you’ll deal with me.’

Came thought of those new warrants, for the men named by Tuck Brill as the murderers of his father. He moved over to the little desk against the far wall and opened the drawer. He took out the sheaf of warrants and came back to 'Pache.

'Dud,' he said over shoulder, 'get the place cleaned up, will you? An' identify all these fellas—all those we don't know, that is. I have a feelin' that when we find out their names, we can return from three to six of these warrants...

'Ord,' he said in slow, grim voice, 'I have got a new packet of warrants, here. The grand jury found out who was in the mob that went out an' murdered Doc' Brill. I got a dozen warrants, here. Who-all do you reckon's named in 'em?'

'Pache Ord's mouth tightened. But he looked Vern squarely in the eye, fumbling for the makings in a pocket of his buttonless and sagging vest the while:

'Might be 'most anybody—but if you're beatin' around the bush to make me think somebody has put my name on one—you might just as well come straight out an' say so. Ain't worryin' me a speck. For folks in this country know me! An' they know dam' well that 'Pache Ord ain't afraid to face the man he wants to kill—an' kill him single-handed. You ain't got a warrant with my name on it—an' I know that!'

'C'rect!' Vern nodded, with the ghost of a grin. 'Not for that murder—an' I'm glad. For, somehow, I have kind of got hopes for you. Ne' mind how, or why. You wouldn't *sabe* how or why if I told you. But I have got my plans concernin' you.'

'Well, aside from sayin' to hell wi' you an' yo' plans, I got nothin' to say to *you* beyond tellin' you I want to talk to Snake a spell. Do I have to go git Ery Tricker?'

'You can see Snake over at Ord. I'm takin' the whole outfit over there, to slam 'em into jail. Goodness me! The boys have come back to life, out there in the cells, *no es verdad?* Just listen to 'em hammerin' on the walls, will you!'

He turned a slow head toward that wall of the office which was one side of the jail corridor. A muffled, but distinct *tap-tap-tapping* sounded from the cells. He turned back and caught upon 'Pache Ord's dark, grim face an expression of great concentration. 'Pache rolled a cigarette with meticulous care. But to Vern, lounging there before him while Dud and Ody 'cleaned up' the office with the help of a passing and commandeered Mexican, his

tenseness was plain. Vern smiled a little and regarded the ceiling with dreamy meditation.

Suddenly, the tapping ceased. 'Pache Ord looked up sharply at Vern, who was still raptly gazing upward.

'A' right!' said 'Pache curtly. 'I'll see 'em in Ord.'

Vern nodded absently. He went lounging over to the wall near the door into the jail. He lifted a hand and turned to face 'Pache, who was watching him with narrowed eyes. Vern tapped upon the wooden wall with his knuckles; tapped and tapped again—

Rap; rap-rap-rap-rap-rap-rap; rap-rap-rap-rap-rap-rap-rap; rap-rap-rap-rap-rap-rap-; rap-rap-rap-rap-rap; rap-rap-rap-rap; rap-rap-rap; rap-rap-rap-rap; rap-rap; rap-rap-rap-rap; rap-rap; rap-rap-rap-rap; rap-rap:
Dear Snake——

Then he went on expertly, rapping out answer to Snake's message intended for 'Pache Ord, which had told the Rocker-O owner to go on and trust that the gang would be out of jail there very quickly:

You will be too dead to skin he tapped out, if you try to get away on the road to Ord, or if your friends try rescuing you. And if you get out of jail there, you will certainly be killed by the Rangers who recapture you.

'Pache Ord's lean, bitter face was a study as he read Vern's message in the Long Riders' 'knuckle talk.' He turned fiery red and almost pale, then fiery red again. The cigarette crumpled in his fingers. Vern laughed in his face.

'More than Long Riders know that telegraph,' he drawled. 'Well, fella! Yo' little playmates are tryin' to put you up a tree. Best thing you can do'—he was suddenly deadly serious—'is to hightail back to the Rocker-O an' take that girl of yo's with you! Stick there an' keep out of politics for a spell—a long spell! Bust off wi' Snake an' his tribe. Oh! What'd you row with Frio Jack about?'

'Get away!' snarled 'Pache Ord abruptly. He seemed to have recovered his self-control. 'I'll do as pleases me an' I ain't answerin' questions, neither. An' don't you figger, fella, that just because you've had the breaks, this far, you'll have 'em all time. I've told you before an' I'm tellin' you again—this is my country an' no dam' Rangers can come a-messin' into things, with a whole skin.'

He started toward the door, but halted with Vern's quiet order. He stared incredulously at the big, efficient figure.

'I said,' Vern repeated softly, 'that you can't leave us thisaway. Not a-tall. There's a li'l' formality or two...'

'Do you mean—— What are you tryin' to get off, now? Fella, you're hubbin' the edges o' more trouble than you guess the' is! I'm Ord! I'm 'Pache Ord! This is my country. You ain't monkeyin' now with such as Tricker an' Drake an' Rogan! *Por el cuerpo de dios!* I make such as them! I make 'em like a kid at playin' mud pies! I——'

'Said the prom'nent cowman an' political boss, when interviewed by a *Herald* repo'ter today,' nodded Vern gravely. 'But——'Pache, ol'-timer—you're talkin' a lot, but you're not sayin' a thing. I was talkin' to you about stayin' with us...'

'You think you're goin' to arrest—*me*?'

'Arrest you?' cried Vern, in pained accents. 'Goin' to arrest you? Why, I'm not thinkin' about such a thing. You have been under arrest, you see, for the last fifteen minutes! Now, don't you!' he counseled the speechless cowman softly. ' 'Pache, you may be 'leven foot high when you're dealin' with folks that live around here. But when you buck the Rangers—you're nothin'! Not the three-eight's of nothin', you ain't!'

He slid forward, hands twinkling. He had a gun muzzle in Ord's stomach; he was gripping the half-drawn Colt which, in defiance of the ordinance made and provided, the 'boss' of the counties was wearing quite openly.

'Carryin' a deadly weapon with possible intent to gouge, bite, maim, an' otherwise annoy. Have to let you see yo' li'l' friends, after all. Come on, fella! Into the jail you go!'

'Git Josephus Tennon!' roared 'Pache Ord. 'Git him an' be quick about it. I'll pay the dam' fine an'——'

'Now, ain't it too sad...' mourned Vern. 'Josephus Tennon he has departed from our midst. Like a flower blown by the li'l' breezes, he has went from us an' ne'er shall we see his like again—we trust. Yeh, he hath goneth—an' with him hath went around twenty-two hundred, gold, that he'd gathered in the other night when Snake an' his friends was fined. He just couldn't stand the strain of havin' me an' twenty-two hundred around him, at the same time. I—figured maybe it'd be like that. He was not what you'd call a big, strong character.'

He prodded the outraged Rocker-O owner over to the door into the jail and shoved him into the cell corridor among the other prisoners. 'Pache was cursing bitterly. Snake Stett was near the door. He looked at 'Pache, then at Vern. It was a long and calculating stare from opaque black eyes.

'Another nail in the coffin,' he said softly. 'You can almost hear the clods falling on it, can't you?'

'Fella,' Vern said slowly, withdrawing the big key from the lock, 'you're goin' to Ord Jail. An', if I was about yo' size an' general sneakiness, I would be thinkin' about a li'l' business that happened over there one time. Thinkin' about what happened to Dock Scrutchett, out in the chaparral; an' about the way Enson was killed—right in his cell in the locked jail! An' Ery Tricker says that Enson won Vingie off you. Man! I wouldn't like to have a one-legged ghost on my trail! Not one that packs a perfectly good knife that cuts like this ghost's cuts!'

'Ne' mind this foolishness about ghosts!' snarled 'Pache Ord. 'I want out o' this! You git somebody here with authority to talk to me! You git somebody——'

'But who can I *get*?' Vern demanded plaintively. 'If we had a justice of the peace, it'd be easy enough. We could try you an' let you pay yo' hundred dollars—or work it out grubbin' chaparral roots at fifty cents a day—an' that'd be that! We'd confiscate yo' hogleg, too, of course! But now——'

He shrugged—the shoulder-lifting of the Perfectly Reasonable and Kindly and Generous Soul confronted by an immovable obstacle. And Ody Gardineer and Dud Blaze drew up close behind him. They faced 'Pache Ord. Their wide-eyed and good-humored expressions, their uplifted hands, fairly cried out to the King of the Culebra River to see how matters were; to understand the impossibility of what he asked. 'But the great man from the Rocker-O was not impressed. He cursed furiously.

'I swear!' said Vern irritably. 'I do'no' what to make of these Culebra River hairpins. I do everything my bounden duty'll let me, to make 'em happy, but they don't appreciate it a bit! I feed 'em an' lodge 'em while I figure out jurisdictionisms; an' I let 'em ride over to Ord with a handsome escort. But it don't satisfy 'em a-tall. Sometimes I almost get discouraged. I feel like quittin' a honest, helpful life like I've always led. I feel like goin' in for Crime. Not on a two-bit scale like—like Snake does. But in a real big way, like stealin' sheep!'

He moved away from the door, shaking his head gloomily.

CHAPTER XVIII

A Print in the Sand

It was pretty much the same as on that other ride to Ord, though this time Vern was not riding alone. Not by a good many, since, with Ody Gardineer's big bulk on 'point' and Dud Blaze riding cheerfully on one flank, Vern brought up the rear of his column of prisoners from the Paradise Jail.

But crossing Rocker-O Range, again he heard the sound of hoofbeats and looked in the general direction of the ranch house. 'Cilla Ord was coming at a lope and sight of her set Vern's seasoned pulses hammering, no matter what he might tell himself he thought of her. He had seen her the night before, after 'Pache Ord's arrest. But only for a moment. She had made a bitter, empty threat and mounted her horse, to go home. And now 'Pache rode with the other prisoners. But he, alone, was not handcuffed.

'Go on back home!' 'Pache told her sourly when she drew rein beside the procession. 'The's nothin' for you to do, girl. I'm goin' to raise more rumpus in Ord, today, than has been raised around the' for quite a consid'able spell.'

Snake rode out of the line and Vern nodded easily to Dud, who had looked questioningly backward. He thought with grim amusement that closer view of Snake's ornaments would do more to disturb the girl's confidence in the outlaw's power than almost anything else. So he watched them, sitting close together and talking in a low voice.

'See you soon, honey!' Snake said in a louder tone, and turned his horse to resume his position in the column's van. He looked furtively at Vern as he moved.

Vern rode out and up along the halted gangsmen. Passing 'Cilla Ord, he looked at her as if she had been a casual and unimportant stranger. Straight up to Snake he rode and reined in Pico. He held out his open hand:

'I'll take that .38, Snake,' he drawled. 'I reckon you never heard me say that I *never* let my prisoners have guns...'

Snake's face went furiously red. Vern kneed Pico in closer and slid a hand under the embroidered *charro* jumper. The girl's .38 pistol was rammed under the sash Snake wore. Vern pulled it out, looked at it amusedly, then turned and rode out to where 'Cilla waited with red mouth tightened to a hard line.

‘Take ’em on, Dud!’ he called, and the procession moved forward. Vern held out the pistol to ’Cilla and she snatched it from him. He folded his hands on the saddle horn and regarded her smilingly.

‘Why’n’t you shoot me with it?’ he inquired. ‘They’ve gone on. It’d be safe enough...’

‘I feel like it!’ she cried furiously. ‘You—you —— Ever since that day that Frio Jack shot at me, I have had to find you at every turn of the trail! I’m sick of seeing you! The only consolation I have is that you won’t be around long, to interfere with us! You’ve run out to the end of the rope!’

He made a cigarette carefully, and set match flame to it, before he looked up at her. And then he grinned gently:

‘You know you don’t mean a word of that. Honest men are so scarce in Ord an’ Paradise that you just do’n’ how to act when you run into one. But you’ll get over that. You’ll get so you like it. You know—you have thought you were in love with Snake. But it was his Mex’ dandy’s clothes an’ his swagger that hit you. Underneath, he’s just a common, snaky murderer an’ thief. He’s livin’ off what he can sneak-steal off folks. An’ his li’l’ race is—just—about—over. We have got him, now, for murder—the commonest kind of cowardly murder.’

‘He’s a better man than you ever could be!’ she said shrilly. ‘You wouldn’t dare say a thing like that, to his face, if his hands were filled. He’d kill you!’

‘That so? Well, ne’ mind; ne’ mind! What I started to say was that you *couldn’t* be in love with Snake, because——’

‘I suppose that I’m in love with you?’ she mocked him furiously. ‘That would be your thought, of course.’

‘Can’t keep a thing from you, can I? Well, ne’ mind! You know you are. An’ you know that I’m in love with you—have been since I first glimpsed you where Frio Jack’d piled yo’ horse on you. You remind me of the tiger kitten we had one time, down on the Rio Grande. It spat an’ clawed an’ fought at first. But then—well, it got tamed an’ would cuddle up to me...’

‘That was a different sort of tiger!’ she flashed at him. ‘Your natural history is good as far as it goes. But it only goes so far, Mr. Ranger!’

He laughed. But he was studying her thoughtfully, for all his expression of gentle amusement. He could not forget how he had lifted her—a light, precious burden—over the rail of the stair in the hotel at Ord, nor how she had raised her face to be kissed... Even though she had been trying to play a part, with Snake’s advantage her only thought, he could not forget.

He wondered, with an odd discomfort in his throat, what it would be like to knee Pico over beside her black; to slip an arm about her again; and to have her smile up at him, lift her mouth again—and *mean* what she had only pretended to mean, in the hotel's dusky hall. But she was glaring at him—like that jaguar kitten from the *bosque*; glaring as the kitten had done before he had tamed it. He stared soberly at her:

‘Do you think I’m just jokin’—about the way I feel? Hon’, if I had met you anywhere but in Ord or Paradise, I would’ve been a steady camper on yo’ doorstep from about the first minute I ever saw you... Yes, sir, an’ if I had found somebody else even lookin’ sideways at you, I’d have sharpened up my tomahawk an’ rained all over him. But it happened that I found you in’—he made a wide, sweeping gesture that encompassed all the great scope of the Culebra River country, and his face was bitterly hard, contemptuous—‘this!’

He stared grimly at her, and she, seeming to forget to be furious for the moment, frowned in something like bewilderment.

‘A country where a girl thinks that the tallest man, the best man, is a handsome thief an’ murderer! The like of Snake Stett, who never has done a thing on his own, by himself—an’ if you can stop me an’ tell me of one brave deed the hero has done when he didn’t have a mob to back him—then stop me! You can’t do it, can you? Can’t tell me one time he lone-wolfed a hard job, can you?’

‘I know of a lot of things he has done!’ she said defiantly. ‘There’s no use arguing with you, though. He controls the hardest men from everywhere. Not one of them will dare cross him——’

‘No? How does he keep his hold on ’em? Not because they’re afraid of anything *he* will do to ’em. But because he’s got a gang of thickhead killers who can be tolled into doin’ his killin’s for him! He has more head on him than they have. He schemes the stealin’s for ’em. They know he can do that better’n they can. So they put up with him.’

He flipped his cigarette end away contemptuously:

‘Won’t buck a man in the open. He’s the kind that knifes him from behind. Yeh! He’s the kind of hero that rides out to an old fella’s place with a dozen sneakin’ scalawags behind him, an’ has his gang set the house afire, an’ hang one feeble old man right before his wife an’ daughters. He’s one of those big, bold fellas, that steals an old man’s daughter, an’ puts her up as stakes in a poker game when he gets tired of her! *Ahhh!*’

‘Those are just lies!’ she cried shakily. She seemed on the edge of crying. ‘They blame Snake for every dirty trick that’s done in this whole country. Enson stole Vingie Furby. *Enson!*’

‘My goodness!’ he drawled gently. ‘First he stole her, then he had to win her again, at poker! Enson stole her an’ carried her off. But when it got to the poker game, he had to win her off Snake. Somehow, I can’t get that straight in my head! I tell you: You think it over an’ if *you* can make that add up, le’ me know about it, next time we meet!’

He whirled Pico and went at a fast gallop to overtake the prisoners and escort. Two hundred yards away, he looked back. She seemed frozen in the saddle, staring after him. Somehow, her pose reminded him of a little girl—a child facing something that she could not understand.

Vern took up his position in the drag, once more. Dud Blaze, who had been riding there, looked sidelong at him; began to hum, then softly to sing:

‘I’m a pore, lonesome cowboy.
I’m a pore, lonesome cowboy.
I’m a pore, lonesome cowboy,
An’ a long, long ways from home!’

‘I ain’t got no sweetheart.
I ain’t got no sweetheart.
I ain’t got no sweetheart,
To set an’ talk with me!’

‘Shut up!’ Vern said grimly, and Dud, with a second, closer inspection, grinned to himself:

‘If that’s the way she be—I’m shut!’

They rode on and presently the road came out upon a hogback, not three miles from Ord. They were riding along in column, with thick chaparral on both sides of this rounded ridge. Ody Gardineer was still in the lead, with Snake Stett behind him. Next was that wizened Tony Blossom whom Vern had shot through the shoulder at the Snake Ranch.

They had come so far without event that none of the Rangers was more than mechanically alert. When a rifle *whanged!* down in the chaparral, and Tony Blossom fell across the saddle horn, they gaped—Ody and Dud and Vern—at the little man. He slid a trifle farther downward, but the rope which connected his ankles under his horse’s belly kept him in the saddle.

Again the *whang!* of the Winchester, and a gaping rent appeared in Snake Stett’s tall *sombrero* crown. He cried out chokingly and sent his horse bounding over the hogback’s rim and to the shelter of the far side. Once more that rifle *whanged!*—in spite of the bullets that Vern and Ody and Dud

were raining into the brush around the blossoming smoke spirals. The other prisoners were following Snake, and Dud had whirled to go after them, lest any decide to take this opportunity to escape. A miss, this time. Again it sounded, as they milled...

This fourth bullet caught Teodoro Sanchez, who, like Tony Blossom, had shown fight at the Snake, the day that Vern and Dud had performed that ancient Ranger evolution known as 'rounding up the ranch.' He made no sound, for the heavy slug struck him squarely in the back head as he started to turn his mount.

Vern saw that Ody and Dud had the prisoners safely herded together. So he turned Pico and rode straight toward that spot in the chaparral from which the shots had come. It was gambling on his conviction. For if it were not the same one who had killed Dock Scrutchett and Enson, he offered a perfect target as he loped downhill. But as he had expected, silence greeted him. He came to the particular spot he had marked and saw upon the ground the brazen shells. He stooped from the saddle and scooped up one—.45-90...

'He got a .45-90 off Dock Scrutchett!' Vern muttered. 'Of course, the's plenty rifles that caliber... Still——'

Then he saw it—that single moccasined imprint and the round indentation of a peg. Involuntarily, he shivered. For it appeared but the once—like a signature. And from the far depths of the chaparral rose that eerie sound he had heard the day of Dock Scrutchett's killing, beyond Dr. Brill's; the same unbelievably high note that climbed higher and yet higher, then sank to the note on which it had started:

'Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!'

That settled it. He was not going to waste time—as he had done that other day at Brill's—in trying to locate this mysterious killer who was upon the red vengeance trail. He turned the .45-90 shell over in his hand thoughtfully. He looked down at that single moccasin and peg track and it came to him to wonder what the outcome of this might be. Scrutchett—a mere recruit of the gang who had ridden on but one job—the Brill murder. Enson, who shared with Snake criminality in the matter of Vingie Furby's kidnapping. Tony Blossom and Teodoro Sanchez—who, very probably, had ridden on that expedition with Snake. Four dead...

'Keeps on, he'll certainly whittle down Snake's Three Hundred!' Vern grunted aloud. 'Reckon he was shootin' at Snake when he hit Tony Blossom. That second shot takin' Snake in the hat kind of proves he was huntin' for Snake. But when he blowed a hole in Sanchez, *that* kind of

showed he was reachin' for any of the gang he could collect. Snake was over the hogback. Well—well—well! Le's see if I can bother Snake some!

And with a grim smile he whirled Pico and sent him up the slope and over the hogback. Dud and Ody regarded him calmly, where they sat in strategic positions by the prisoners, carbines across their arms. He had rather expected them to show some concern. Then Dud's jerk of the head and remark about the weird laughter, which had carried faintly, but identifiably, to this side of the hogback, explained their ease of mind. For they had realized that the mysterious assassin would not fire on him.

'I explained to our little friends here what that sound meant,' Dud drawled maliciously. 'I told them what you would find down there. Now, if you don't mind, Vern—let's hear what you did find. They were—a bit doubtful of my venture. Especially Snake—who really should believe me...'

'Four .45-90 shells I picked up. An'—there's just one track down there. Left a-purpose, same as the time Dock Scrutchett was downed. One moccasin an' one peg-end track. Snake, I toted these shells back. You might put 'em in yo' pocket, you know, an' kind of augur about 'em. An' augur about stealin' girls an' things like that...'

'You think you can worry me?' Snake said, with great scorn. 'I'd ask nothing better than to meet this bushwhacker. As for your insinuations that a ghostly vengeance is following me—— Hell! Save your ghost stories for kids! Not that I admit to knowing anything more than a good many others about this girl being stolen. Enson, now, *he* may have known a good deal.'

'You're a peculiar an' thorough-goin' kind of skunk, now, ain't you?' Vern wished to know, with a curious stare at Snake. 'A great one for tryin' to ease blame over onto others, too! Well, I do 'no' a thing I'd like better, either, than to have you meet this mysterious bushwhacker of ours. You see, you wouldn't even know what hit you—an' the county'd be saved a dollar an' a quarter, which is the price of the rope. An' dam' me if I can figure how you're worth that much!'

With the bodies of Tony Blossom and Sanchez now across the saddles they had occupied, they went on to Ord, and men came slowly to the doors of store and saloon and gambling-hall to stand staring.

'Pache had asked to go into town by the back street, but Vern had refused him curtly. He wanted the county seat to have a good, long look at these prisoners. Particularly at Snake Stett and 'Pache Ord.

'They might's well get used to the difference between cattle like Drake an' his dep'ties an' Rangers,' he told Dud Blaze—but for Snake Stett's

benefit and 'Pache Ord's.

Drake was standing before the Bull's Head Saloon, and as Vern's procession came abreast of him, Marcellus Rogan, the district attorney, came out of the saloon wiping his thick mouth. The two stood together. They stared at the column with no pleasure that Vern could detect. He rode across to them, stopped Pico and stared from face to face.

'You come on up to the jail, Drake,' he said grimly. 'I want a receipt out of you, for the prisoners. An' acknowledgment for the two dead ones that—*somebody* bushwhacked as we crossed a hogback comin' in.'

'Bushwhacked!' Drake and Rogan gasped together. 'Bushwhacked! Who done it?'

'Who knifed Enson in yo' very jail?' Vern shrugged indifferently. 'Same one—I'll bet you. I'll tell you somethin' else—somethin' a li'l' birdie said: This same bushwhacker is huntin' him an easy-goin' sher'f an' district attorney, too! You might spend a li'l' bit of time thinkin' about that.'

CHAPTER XIX

Winchester Wedding

ORD, VERN thought, was unusually quiet. He looked to right and left as he moved along the street, working toward the freight corral of Erskine, the ex-sheriff.

Another peculiarity he noted was the near willingness of the citizens to speak to a Ranger. Heretofore, when he had walked past their places of business, they had avoided his eyes, or given him the most colorless of hurried nods. Evidently, they had decided that their breakfast *menu* was not to include a Ranger sergeant—not immediately. Or so Vern told himself.

‘But if it’s quiet, it’s maybe just the quiet before the storm,’ he thought bodingly. ‘I reckon it’s about time I made a report to the Cap’n. He might feel like sendin’ on a few boys to keep our prisoners safe—not that the three of us, with a few like Shamus O’Hara an’ Comanche Smith an’ Erskine, couldn’t hold the jail against all Snake’s crew. But he ought to make the decision. He has to answer to the Adjutant-General for results.’

He moved in and out among buildings snakily enough to drop anyone who might be watching him. He slid into Erskine’s corral and looked at the one-story house of the freight contractor as he moved toward the haystack of their several conferences. He had only two or three minutes to wait, before Erskine came quietly around the stack and grinned at him.

‘I ’lowed you might be comin’ this way, when I see you take the pris’ners into the *juzgado*,’ he said. ‘You done it up proud!’

‘I s’pose you noticed that some of the pigs we brought to market were plumb pork by the time we got here?’

‘I never *did* see live men ride on thei’ bellies across a hull,’ Erskine nodded dryly. ‘How-come? They go Enson’s road?’

‘They did that! An’ it has got me wonderin’. What do you think about—oh——’

‘Ghosts?’ Erskine cut in blandly. ‘Same to you!’

‘I don’t take a bit of stock in ’em! But how the devil can you explain this moccasin an’ peg track? S’pose somebody *was* able to fix ’em to look like Cass Furby’s trail? He’d have to have a reason, wouldn’t he? For campin’ on Snake’s gang’s trail! As strong a reason as Cass would’ve had! An’ who has got it?’

‘Well,’ Erskine shrugged, ‘I’m like Mingo Adams: I was at the grave when they buried Ol’ Cass. If it was my own brother that saw him buried, I could say that he was maybe mistook.’

They sat silently for a while. Then Erskine looked across at Vern. His eyes were narrow, very calculating:

‘You know,’ he said slowly, ‘if *I* was a fella with a lot o’ warrants to serve, an’ couldn’t find heaps o’ the subjects, that Bonney weddin’ out at the Rocker-O would certainly take my eye about like the flappin’ o’ somebody’s new, red shirt! You see, Bonney’s quite a hairpin. Do’no’ just what the connection is, between him an’ Snake’s scalawags, *but* about a hundred o’ the saltiest gunfighters an’ all-around hangman’s meat in Texas, they’ll be at the weddin’ with their hair all in a curl.’

‘Aimin’ to do nothin’ but celebrate the festivities?’

‘Well’—Erskine’s slow grin was a match for Vern’s own—‘you just never can tell, with such as them, what they’ll figure proper celebratin’ takes in. O’ course, Snake’s their boss. An’ they must feel kind o’ sore—you chunkin’ his rump into the *calabozo* the way you have done.’

‘Can happen!’ Vern said flippantly. ‘Well, thanks a heap, Erskine. Mingo Adams is inditin’ a young book to the Governor. No tellin’ but what we’ll have to tip our hats to you, yet—an’ call you “Actin’ Sher’f!” Hope so, anyhow!’

‘Siftin’ anywhere—particular?’ Erskine inquired.

‘It would be just too sad if that Bonney weddin’ was to fizzle because some li’l’ bitsy thing was forgot! I reckon I’m about duty bound to curl my tail for the Rocker-O an’ look the layout over—just to know that all proper preparin’ is done...’

‘Looky here!’ Erskine said hotly, coming to his feet and wagging a finger under Vern’s nose. ‘Don’t you play the jack, Dederick! The hardest cases in the country’ll be the’! Drunk an’ rambunctious! You’re a hell of a good gunslinger. I know yo’ record. I know yo’ insides, too. But you couldn’t gether in more’n five-six, on yo’ lone. An’ you’d never get off alive. Nahsir! You are Ord County’s Prize Package. You don’t go stickin’ yo’ head into that wolf hole without some o’ us from here sidin’ you!’

‘Not sidin’ me,’ Vern grinned down at him affectionately. ‘Ridin’ after me. I take it right kindly, Fair Sir, that you want to lend me a hand. You can, if you’ll listen to me. I tell you: What I want’s a looksee on my lone. Come ten o’clock, where can I find you an’ yo’ friends, along of Ody Gardineer an’ Dud Blaze, handy to the house? We’ll pay ’em a weddin’ visit!’

‘We will that! Why, the crick runs along west of the house a quarter-mile or less. The ranch road from here crosses it. Tell you! Around ten o’clock tonight, you expect to find us south of the crossin’, in the brush along the creek. We’ll be the’ by ten. I can get eight-nine good men out of Ord. Fellas that’s filed off their front sights an’ chucked their spurs away. Fellas that won’t shoot till it’s time, but when it comes to time—well, they’ll sound like firecrackers!’

Vern nodded and went around the backs of the buildings on Main Street, then crossed over and came back toward the Three Jacks. Ody and Dud were here and Paddy Ryan was making them very welcome. Paddy greeted Vern like an old and trusted friend. Vern had a drink on the house and in an undertone he told Ody and Dud their parts for the night’s roundup. They objected angrily. He would have been surprised if they had not.

‘*Shh!*’ he said at last. ‘Might’s well be shot as talked to death. There’s too many for this afternoon.’

‘That’s what I think,’ Dud nodded. ‘Ody can stick here.’

‘Be quiet!’ snapped Ody. ‘Let them that’s older an’ wiser an’ heaps handsomer do the talkin’. Me’n’ you, Vern——’

‘Take good care of Dud, Ody,’ Vern grinned. ‘An’ Dud, you don’t want to let Ody take reckless chances like he’s always tryin’ to do. We got to return him to Cap’n Tandy, you know.’

He left town very quietly and followed the ranch road of the Rocker-O for a while, after leaving the Ord-Paradise trail. Then he headed due south, right into the Rocker-O. Ahead of him, he could see the greener timber along that creek of which Erskine had spoken. He rode cautiously. There were no signs of cattle being worked on this section of the range, but wandering punchers might pop up anywhere, and he wished to go unseen.

The creek was a pretty little rock-floored stream. Lowland was on one side of it and twelve-feet-high bluff walled in the other. The water lay in large pools in the limestone, connected by shallow flow. Vern rode slowly along the low bank, with field glasses over his shoulder by the strap, looking for cattle. He wanted to know, both officially and personally, just how far ‘Pache Ord’s dealings with Snake went.

He heard the clatter of unshod hoofs on rock ahead and pushed forward through the brush very quietly. It was a *mañada* coming down to drink. There was a splendid chestnut stallion—cream-colored of mane and flowing tail—with mares of almost equal grade, and colts of various ages. He watched them admiringly, since the wind came from them to him.

Then he trained his glasses upon them and found four or five brands, but always vented, always with 'Pache Ord's Rocker-O. He wondered if the original brands they wore had been altered and then the altered—imaginary—iron vented. But they milled so at the water that he was still trying to check this point when a scornful voice was lifted behind him.

'Fine animals, aren't they?' 'Cilla Ord inquired, with lift of one corner of her red mouth. 'I suppose you're interested in buying some? Those are brood stock. Dad wouldn't sell them. But I'll tell him how interested you were.'

'Oh, don't bother, if he won't sell,' Vern said with ease that he by no means felt. 'Happened to be ridin' along this way an' heard 'em comin' to water. So I thought I'd look 'em over, you know. I'm—always interested in stock.'

'Did you find what you were looking for?' She faced him with that small, contemptuous, knowing smile.

'You busted up my class,' he said gravely. 'I hadn't made out a thing an'—I'm glad I never. You can maybe figure why.'

'I'm no good at figures,' she assured him. But watching her, Vern was suddenly conscious of a difference in her. She was just as scornful; just as bitterly antagonistic; and yet—there was about her *something* that made him wonder if this meeting—to her—were not less important than something else. He hardly knew why he thought so; he knew not at all how he detected this. But something was on her mind, he felt.

'It'd be right sad if I had to rope in my father-in-law-to-be for blottin' brands, or buyin' rustled stock.'

'I imagine it would be,' she said, without any show of resentment at the insinuation, such as she had shown that morning. 'When you come to have a father-in-law-to-be, you had better warn him not to let you catch him. Oh! Has she a father? And is she the marrying sort? And—are you?'

'What're you talkin' about?' snapped Vern, knowing that he was growing red and becoming furious because of that knowledge. 'Who're you talkin' about?'

'You wouldn't need to stay in the Rangers, though, if you did decide to marry her. From what the boys say of dance-hall girls, they make a good deal from their—commissions on drinks. She could probably make enough for you both, that way...'

Vern grinned suddenly. He knew that she was getting the better of the argument, so long as he lost his temper. Evidently, she wished to leave on

that note of advantage. For she spurred her black gently and turned toward the open range. He put Pico after her and she looked sidelong at him.

‘Never saw you in Ord today,’ he drawled innocently. ‘You must’ve kept off the main drag. Yo’ father tell you we had to stick him a hundred dollars? Too bad—but necessary. Law an’ order, you know; it’s got to be kept up.’

‘If he could have seen you after that—— Well, our dear friend, Sheriff Drake, got hurriedly out of sight.’

So she had been in town—and that meant, doubtless, that she had seen Snake. So it might be that her rawhiding of him, about Mollie the dance-hall girl, was not entirely inspired by the glimpse she had got in Paradise, at the door of Dallas Jenny’s.

‘I don’t reckon she’ll have to sell drinks much longer,’ he drawled thoughtfully, as if discussing a mutual friend.

‘Oh, then you *are* going to marry her?’ she smiled.

‘Did he tell you that she was my lady friend?’ he demanded and leaned across to stare straight and hard at her. ‘*Mine?*’

She stared back at him and there was no pretense in her face now. Her mouth tightened; the dark eyes were very wide. As if she considered, not so much what he had said, but what it reminded her of instantly.

‘I was figurin’ that Snake’d likely take care of her—in his will. For if they don’t hang Snake——’

Then he shrugged his shoulders free of Snake. He thrust Pico close in beside her stirrup and looked down at her, with quick change to that gravity with which he had said, that very morning, that he was in love with her. She seemed unable to look away. He put out a long left arm and dropped a hand on her saddle horn.

‘Honey!’ he said quickly. ‘Honey! I have read a couple or three novels, an’ it used make me laugh, to read about that love at first sight. But now—it was like that with me. That day when Frio Jack downed yo’ horse—I thought you were the prettiest thing I had ever met. Since then, even when you clawed at me, I have just been surer. I’m a kind of useless two-legged animal, good for nothin’ I ever found out but Rangerin’. But I certainly would like a show at provin’ that I can be good at one more thing—at lovin’ you.’

The left hand came up and caught her by the arm. He turned her in the saddle and she was slow to begin to fight against him. Close against him he drew her and kissed that oddly working scarlet mouth. For that length of time she seemed to rest motionless, willing, in his arms. Then, very rudely,

she jerked her head and banged an amazingly hard, if amazingly pretty, forehead against his nose.

‘Let me go!’ she panted. ‘Let me go! He’ll kill you for this! He——’

He felt a tug at his holster; looked down swiftly. And then she rammed his own pistol’s muzzle into his stomach. He grunted with the impact of it and let her go. Then he snatched at his Colt, but she backed her horse away, and he was afraid to push her too closely, because the hammer was lifted under her thumb. He sat looking sardonically at her:

‘Well!’ he drawled. ‘I reckon somebody made a jack of himself—wi’ some li’l’ bitsy help from you. Better le’ me have that back, don’t you think?’

‘You’re going up to the house. Dad can decide what to do with you. Oh, yes, you will! For if you balk—I—I’ll kill your horse! I will, so help me! But, no matter what Dad decides to do, Snake will settle with you—plenty!’

‘So it’s Snake again?’ he said softly. ‘Well!’

‘It’s nobody else *but* Snake! I’m going to marry him. I’m going to marry him——’ She stopped suddenly, bright red spots showing on the smooth cheeks. ‘I’m going to marry him and he will certainly kill you,’ she said, something hesitantly.

So fixedly had he been watching her, and listening to her, that he had ignored what Pico had heard—the drum of hoofbeats from the south. When he turned, almost mechanically, a dozen or more of riders were pounding toward them. He stared and automatically his hand slapped empty holster. And his other gun was in a saddle pocket. He jerked at his carbine, while he was kneeling Pico into a jump toward the cover along the creek.

Out came the carbine and at this hostile move a shrill yip-yipping chorus sounded from the riders. It was followed by the rattle of shots along the line. Vern felt a sudden tremendous blow on the head. His brain seemed to explode.

CHAPTER XX

Rocker-O Rawhide

‘If I’d hair on m’ chin, I’d pass for the goat
That bore all the sins in the ages remote.
But why it is, I can never understand,
When each o’ the patriarchs owned a big brand!

‘Abra’m emigrated, a-huntin’ a new range.
When water was scarce, he wanted a change.
Ol’ Isaac run cattle in charge o’ Esau,
An’ Jacob punched cows for his pa-in-law!’

VERN thought that the song had been going on for quite a while. He had a dim consciousness of coming out of black darkness to the accompaniment of its nasal whining. He opened his eyes a slit and saw a golden rectangle ahead of where he lay on a dirt floor. Silhouetted across the bottom of that rectangle was a chunky figure—a man sitting with back comfortably against the door jamb.

‘*Amor de dios!*’ Vern told himself. ‘I have got a *mal de cabeza* like that mornin’ after the night in Fort Worth when we celebrated Dud’s brother gettin’ married! What was it hit me? I was just raisin’ my carbine when the Rocker-O turned a back flip an’ spraddled out all over me...’

Automatically, he started to lift a hand to tender, throbbing head. But the motion was checked before it began. For his arms were bound tightly to his sides, shoulder to wrist. His feet, too—he moved them experimentally—were lashed so thoroughly that the lashing thongs cut into his ankles and calves. He pondered that, while in the doorway the chunky figure finished ‘The Cowboy’ and began upon ‘The Zebra Dun’:

‘We was camped on the plains, head o’ the Cimarron,
When up come a stranger, stopped to augur some——’

It seemed to be a windowless shed that he lay in. The only light was that square of late afternoon sunlight shining in through the opened door. There was the smell of old leather strong in the air. He lay there for a while, fumbling heroically with the bonds on his arms. But they were of rawhide and he admitted the expertness which the tier had owned.

Light footsteps outside the door... The chunky man turned his head a little. Beyond him appeared ‘Cilla Ord, looking so straight at Vern that

instinctively he closed his eyes, before he reflected that she could not see into the dusky interior.

‘Has he come to, Ranny?’ she demanded.

‘Well, I do’no’. I ain’t heerd a peep out o’ him since we chucked him in the’. Yuh tell ’Pache?’

‘No! I’m not going to. What he doesn’t know won’t bother him. See if he has come to. I—I want to talk to him. Perhaps we can persuade him that there are—well, healthful places a Ranger ought to see. A long way from Paradise and Ord.’

‘Oh, don’t bother about that,’ the man Ranny said slowly. ‘About persuadin’ him. We feel right shore he won’t be hard to augur with. Me an’ Erby an’ Bonney was talkin’ about it a spell back, right after the boys toted him in. The’s not goin’ to be no trouble gittin’ him to go off some’r’s an’ quit pesticatin’ around. Yuh go back to the house, ’Cilla.’

She hesitated, frowning down at him. He looked calmly past her and hummed like a man with never a trouble or care. Then she shrugged and moved out of Vern’s range of vision. He pondered Ranny’s assurance to her and, being a Ranger sergeant of wide experience with such gentry as these of Ranny’s kind, he was at no loss to understand just *how* Ranny and Erby and the bridegroom, Bonney, intended to persuade him.

‘I have got to bust loose from this,’ he thought with grim humor. ‘Somebody has got to be disappointed—me or the li’l’ schemers. An’ I just can’t stomach the idee that it’d be me!’

But the pliant, clinging rawhide resisted his most skillful efforts, as it resisted his tremendous surgings against it. And some small sound he made attracted Ranny. He got up and came lounging inside, to look down at Vern. His face, as Vern saw it indistinctly, was square-hewn, and he seemed to regard the prisoner as impersonally and carelessly as if Vern had been a horse in a corral—and not much of a horse, either!

‘Come out o’ it, huh?’ he said matter-of-factly. ‘’Bout time. Yuh been good as dead more’n two hour, I reckon. Do’no’ what they wanted to pack yuh in for. Damned if I would’ve took the trouble. “Let lyin’ dogs sleep,” is my motter. Well—it won’t really make a lot o’ difference,’ he summed up with a sort of sinister indifference.

‘What’s all that yellin’ about down yonder?’ Vern inquired curiously. For faint howls came from some little distance.

‘The clans is gatherin’ an’ the whiskey’s disappearin’,’ Ranny said evenly. ‘An’ I got to stick an’ watch you!’

With which, he kicked Vern savagely in the side, but without any show of emotion, even humming the while. He kicked him twice again, harder still, and regarded him with head on one side. Impersonally, he spat in Vern's face.

'Any kind o' partic'lar louse I do hate, it's a Ranger!'

'Yeh? Must be a hell of a relief to you, then,' Vern said tonelessly, though inwardly he was raging, 'to meet up with one in such shape that the first sight of him don't mean you have to run like a god-dam' jackrabbit—which same you are!'

He saw his opportunity and wriggled snake-like, to get his knees up under his chin. The unwary Ranny was close enough for Vern's upshooting feet to catch him in the stomach. They landed with terrific impact. Ranny went skating backward to crash into the wall by the door. He fell, with agonized face turned toward Vern. His mouth opened and shut with the spasmodic gaspings of a dying fish.

Over and over, Vern rolled frantically toward the guard. He lifted himself to his knees and dropped across Ranny. He butted him in the face with the crown of a very hard head. He scrambled on top of the near senseless man and drove his head time after time into Ranny's face.

Ranny made a strangling noise. His hands twitched feebly. But Vern was smothering him, bringing into play his greater bulk and weight. Hard shoulders, knees, battering head—he made of Ranny a fearful wreck that sprawled like a broken toy on the floor. Panting, Vern lifted himself and listened. He heard no sound from without. He bent and twisted over Ranny. Moving his hand in the short arc the rawhide turns permitted, he fished in Ranny's pocket, but found no knife.

He rolled across him, fished in the other pocket and clawed until a heavy stock knife fell out. He broke a fingernail trying to open it, tried again and got a blade out. Then he could not turn the blade to saw the thongs. He bent and twisted until the knife was gripped, point upward, between his feet. He twisted still farther, but could not touch the blade, so close to his sides were his hands tied.

'Here goes hide!' he told himself grimly and strained. He moved his hands slightly, against the cutting *cuervo*. 'Plenty!'

The point slid under the thong. Carefully, with beads of perspiration breaking out on his face, he sawed. A thong snapped. He pulled until the rawhide disappeared in creases of skin. The twists gave. His hands were free. He worked them savagely, to restore circulation, then caught up the

knife and slashed at the rawhide on his ankles. He could stand stiffly. He flung out a hand, now, to Ranny's Colt. He straightened again, with the long-barreled pistol menacing the door. But he heard no sound except the faraway yells of the wedding celebrants.

He wondered where his captors had put Pico. Probably in some private place, he thought. For if he had been turned into the corral at the house, 'Pache Ord might be expected to find the familiar chestnut there. And 'Cilla had said that she had not told—and would not tell—her father about his presence.

'Well!' Vern shrugged with grim humor, 'one way or other, I have got to get me a horse. An' there's no time, now, to be too picky about what kind of horse I get. If he has got four legs the total of which hit the ground at the ends, I better be happy as a kid at a Christmas tree!'

He looked cautiously outside. Nobody was in sight except around the big house fifty yards away. He moved stiffly close to the wall of the shed and stopped at the corner. He placed the corral and walked quickly across the open toward it. He thought that he might pass for a guest, if somebody happened to look from the house toward the improvised prison. He rammed Ranny's six-shooter into his waistband and got to the corral without noticing anyone staring at him. There were several men around the back door of the house.

He came to the corral and listened. A man was talking to someone on the far side. Vern worked that way, rounding the corral. The voice he heard seemed to be thickened by liquor. He crept closer, along the corral's heavy log walls. He rounded a corner, but whirled back, hand slapping Colt butt, as a rush of feet sounded behind him. He had not completed the turn when a round, familiar object poked his ribs. He stiffened; halted.

'That's right,' a calm voice approved the movement. 'Take her easy an' you'll last longer. *Thought* I reco'nize' you, a-comin' from the shed. I said it was him, Bonney. Git his gun—why, hell! It ain't *his* gun—it's Ranny's!'

Vern turned slowly, to face the dark little man who covered him with a pistol, and a sullen yellow-haired young man who held Ranny's pistol on his palm, staring at it.

'Yeh, it's Ranny's,' Vern nodded. 'I—borrowed it from him.'

'Kill him?' the yellow-haired man—Bonney, evidently—demanded snarlingly. 'If you did—God help you!'

'Back to the shed with him, anyhow,' said the dark little man, who seemed not much concerned about Ranny's fate. 'Too bad that you got so

close to a hawse, Ranger—an' stubbed yo' toe!

Vern walked ahead of them to the shed. He heard Bonney call the cheerful, calm little cowboy 'Erby.' He went into the shed. They followed and at sight of the moveless Ranny, gasped.

'He won't be so quick to kick a tied-up man after this,' Vern said calmly. 'He's not dead—worse luck!'

'*Amor de dios!*' Erby breathed. 'Only thing *I* ever saw, that looked like him, was Charley Frazee after a stampede'd gone over him.'

He looked admiringly at Vern. Bonney snarled:

'When Ranny comes to, it won't be needed to kink a rope on this smart hairpin! Ranny'll be just fit-to-tie—an' nobody tyin' him! Ranny'll clean his plow, proper.'

'If he's dead certain I'm tied,' Vern said contemptuously. He looked down at Ranny, then at the sullen Bonney, and made a small gesture that carried scorn unutterable.

'Of all the stuffed paper sacks of wind an'—*water*, that I ever ran into, or heard anybody that'd traveled tell about, this bunch of imitation bad men in Ord an' Paradise, they *do* take the birthday cake down to the last candle! By God! I have heard more talk about gunfightin'—an' seen less! I have heard more yap about doin' big things—an' seen nothin' really done! I have listened to more yawp than—than any one Ranger ought to be made tired with!'

He looked grimly at Bonney:

'D' *you* know a real, honest-to-gracious ferocious hairpin? If you do—do me a favor an' trot him out! When I hit this country, everybody told me about Snake Stett—an' told it scary! Snake! Hell! Snake in the deep grass, maybe! Garter snake, likely! Yo' big boss! A bad man—a bad, bad man!

'I've done everything but tie his feet, to make him come to a showdown with me. Yeh, a half-dozen times. Will he take the chance to smoke it out with me? Just a common, ordinary, six in a bunch, no coupon, kind of Ranger! Can anybody you know give him the chance? Even sneak up behind him an' ram Opportunity into his paw? Not unless they have got longer legs an' can work 'em faster'n *Lou Dillon*, they can't!'

'Put the whangs back on him!' Bonney snarled.

Erby came forward. Bonney held the gun while the little man tied Vern wrist and ankle, again. But Vern was unrepressed.

‘Snake Stett!’ he grunted. ‘*Sneak* Stett’s his real go-by. But, for that matter, if there’s a *gunie* in yo’ whole territory that’d stand up to a half-grown jackrabbit, where’s he now?’

‘Yeh?’ Bonney cried furiously. The gun waggled in his shaking hand. He seemed on the verge of using it. ‘You can think about that, tonight, when we bend a cottonwood down with yo’ neck! We’ll learn the dam’ Rangers to come messin’ around our business! When they see you, they’ll know a lot!’

He whirled upon the grinning Erby, who was hunkered beside Ranny, shaking that battered one.

‘Watch him, Erby! If he even looks like he wants to try somethin’, hand him a .44 in the middle o’ that big mouth!’

He flung Ranny’s Colt down beside Erby’s foot. Vern looked at Ranny, who was beginning to groan, and now tried weakly to sit up. That problem interested him intensely. Ranny, with his broken nose and blackened, swollen eyes, his cut and bloody face, would doubtless come alive in a homicidal fury. Bonney was hardly apt to stop him. Would Erby? Vern recalled Ranny’s remark to ‘Cilla—that Erby was one of those who had decided upon his permanent removal from Culebra River affairs.

Ranny sat up and blinked stupidly around. He peered out ludicrously enough, through the swelling of eyelids.

‘I—I—— Where’s that illegitimate son of a dog?’ he mumbled, propping himself with one hand, so that he was braced in a squatting posture. ‘He—kicked me in the belly! Hit me——’

His hand brushed the pistol on the floor, as he began to scramble to his feet. He picked it up and stood swaying, blinking, with the Colt hanging limply at his side. Then, apparently by accident, he looked straight at Vern. The hand jerked up and he pointed the six-shooter straight at Vern, who sat rigid, where Erby had left him. There seemed nothing else to do.

Bonney watched with mouth corners lifting in a wolfish grin. But Erby, with a sudden fierce oath, slapped at Ranny’s gunhand as the hammer trembled under Ranny’s thumb. The Colt roared, the slug going wide. Then Erby had the pistol and was shoving Ranny violently across toward the door.

‘Dam’ yo’ bushwhackin’ soul!’ Erby cried furiously, and slapped Ranny across the mouth. ‘He’s goin’ to go, a’ right—because it’s the only way. But I’m damned if you’ goin’ to kill him when he’s tied, when you wouldn’t stand up to him a minute if the breaks was even! You couldn’t handle him by yo’self when he was hogged up with a bale o’ rawhide! An’ if *you* don’t fancy that, Bonney, now’s the time to turn yo’ wolf loose!’

‘You be damn’ careful he don’t handle you like he done Ranny!’ Bonney growled, turning to the door. ‘Come on, Ranny.’

‘He won’t!’ Erby called after them cheerfully. ‘I don’t aim to git in reach of his long laigs—none a-tall!’

He sat down comfortably in the doorway and built a cigarette. When it was rolled, he looked suddenly at Vern, and grinned:

‘Reckon I’m safe to hand you this? A’ right, then!’

He came over and put it between Vern’s lips; lighted it for him. Then he returned to the door and seemed to find amusement in something he saw from there.

‘Ranny’s gittin’ right hoorahed about the way he looks!’ he reported. ‘Boys kind of owe you one, for givin’ ’em Ranny to look at. Fella! I would hate to tackle you untied!’

‘But that’s ex-act-ly what you’re goin’ to have to do,’ Vern said calmly. ‘You lost yo’ chance when you wouldn’t let Ranny shoot me. Not that I’ll forget that favor a-tall!’

‘You don’t aim, then, to be among them present when—certain li’l’ plans is carried out?’ Erby grinned dryly.

‘I can’t! It’d upset *my* plans too much,’ Vern said solemnly. ‘If ’twasn’t for that—— But you can see how it is, Erby.’

‘Well, I always like to see a fella livin’ in hopes, a’ right. You understand, o’ course, that the way you been carryin’ on around here, you just made it plumb necessary for us to down you. Got so, a fella can’t do a thing without settin’ a plate for a dam’ Ranger, too. You have got too present among us an’—*you* can see how it is. No hard feelin’s on my part.’

‘Same here! To you. But there’s some others I’m goin’ to take a lot of joy out of smackin’ right midway between mind an’ mouth—Snake Stett an’ Lute Cane; Ranny; that crooked sher’f, an’ his team-mate, the district attorney.’

‘Dam’ me if I don’t believe *you* believe you’ll live to bust up the outfit!’ cried Erby, staring hard at Vern. ‘I know well enough you’ll never smile ag’in, after tonight, but——’

‘When the round-up starts, you look to the hang of yo’ hooks an’ quirt,’ Vern counseled him quietly. ‘Stickin’ with the others won’t help ’em a bit an’ you can maybe get off to a place where you’ll have a chance to figure out how foolish this kind of doin’s are—an’ start over again.’

‘Thanks for the warnin’,’ Erby said slowly, still staring hard at Vern, who was leaning his wounded head comfortably against the wall behind him, and regarding fixedly the gloom ahead. ‘I don’t reckon I’ll need it, though.’

Darkness came, and the sounds of ‘whooping it up’ grew louder. Vern turned to Erby, who had been oddly silent for an hour.

‘Not goin’ to be such a *fiesta*, with Snake not able to attend,’ he grinned.

‘Huh?’ grunted Erby. ‘Oh! Well—I reckon it’ll be plenty celebration, Ranger. Yeh—I reckon it’ll be plenty...’

He would talk no more. Vern puzzled over the odd tone in which he had made his prophecy. But he was wondering how he was to get away from here. Once that gang at the house was good and drunk, they would be ready to swarm down here. He speculated concerning the possibility of getting to Erby and knocking him out; finding a horse and scrambling across it. But Erby was a better man than Ranny.

A dim shape came to the door and Erby got up. Curtly, he told his relief to be careful, then went away. The new guard hunkered in the doorway, his cigarette end lighting up a stubbled face. He seemed never to turn his head from Vern.

There was no sound before the sudden, dull thud. Vern stiffened. For the cigarette dropped from the guard’s lips and there was a second soft thud when he crashed forward on his face. Then silence. Vern drew his numbed feet under him and with the wall at his shoulders, managed to push himself erect. He was tense as he waited for what this might forecast.

He heard someone approaching him silently. But a hand was on his wrist before he guessed the closeness of the intruder. Then there was a quick tug at the thong that bound his arms. So numbed was he that only when his arms fell naturally away from his sides did he realize that he was free; that the knife’s blade was cutting the thongs from his ankles. For Erby had done a job of tying much more efficient than that of the first man who had bound him.

He moved a foot experimentally. The blood began to return to feet and legs with the pain of a thousand pin pricks. He steadied himself with hand upon the wall, as he almost went forward upon his face.

A hand caught his arm strongly. He found that he could move forward by sliding a foot out and dragging the other up to it. They went out of the shed in that fashion, shuffling across the unconscious guard, then moved slowly around the building. A horse whickered softly in the darkness ahead.

Pico! Vern knew him instantly. Something rasped into his empty holster. He grinned, turning toward his helper, who had removed his hand. There was nobody there!

CHAPTER XXI

Gun Round-up

‘ODY!’ he called in a stage whisper. ‘Oh—Ody!’

He knew of nobody except the big private who could move with such quiet deadliness: who could have slipped up so on the guard and knocked him out with a pistol’s barrel. The big frontiersman was like many from the German settlements, in that uncanny ability to move soundlessly as any Apache.

No answer came to him. Vern cursed inwardly, though he knew Ody’s ways of scouting. He worked his arms steadily, flexing the muscles, starting circulation. He went to the horse—Pico, all right! And he knew the feel of the worn bone handle of the Colt that had been rammed into his holster.

He got into the saddle and scowled around him in the darkness. But Ody Gardineer was a gentleman who needed no shepherding. Whatever had been his reason for thus deserting Vern after rescuing him, he was gone, and that indicated his lack of desire for company, Vern decided. Else Ody would have asked for assistance in whatever it was he had gone to do. Vern decided to head for the *rendezvous* on the creek. Erskine’s party should be there, by now, with Dud Blaze, since Ody had arrived.

The ranch house of the Rocker-O was ablaze with lights. Vern thought that it shook with the sound of dancing feet. He circled it cautiously. He grinned at the high, shrill *yip-yip-yeeeee-ow!* of enthusiastic, and obviously well-liquored, celebrants.

Out of hearing—if, indeed, any could have heard less than thunder, in that uproar—he pushed Pico into a long lope and headed for the creek. He slid down the bluff that banked the stream on this side and on the low shore went vaguely to the northward. When he thought that he was nearing the crossing, he let Pico move on at a slow walk, picking his way.

Silence for a long time. The moonless dark seemed to own substance—like water. Seemed to press in on him. Seemed to be shot with mysterious and sinister little noises. He moved big shoulders impatiently. He could not recall that ever before he had felt like this, and he was veteran of many and many a midnight scout.

Abruptly, there was the sound of horses ahead—instantly checked. He slid from the saddle and caught rein ends in his hand. Then he moved on

quietly, leading Pico. It was all guesswork in that blackness. So at last he squatted—startled men usually fire high—and called Dud Blaze softly.

‘Vern?’ Dud answered quickly. ‘You’re ahead of time. But, *no es importe!* Come on. Erskine’s got ten besides himself. With Ody and me, that’s eleven and a half. With you, twelve and a quarter. Come on in! Water’s fine. Or the whiskey is, anyway, judging from the racket they’re making.’

‘What’s Ody doin’?’ Vern asked, coming up to the darker mass that showed plainly, when he was close against it.

‘Ridin’ herd on this yere Pewee Co’p’ral—Dud Blaze!’ Ody replied for himself. ‘If I had let the li’l squirt slide out o’ sight a minute, since we left town, no tellin’ whut he would have got into. He’s a notionate an’ a meddlin’ child, Vern. An’ impudent, too! You got no idee!’

‘Then—then *you* haven’t been up to the house!’ Vern said before he thought. ‘You an’ Dud?’

‘Whut you talkin’ about?’ Ody grinned. ‘Me let Dud git that close to liquor—after whut I promised his ma!’

‘Ne’ mind!’ Vern said quickly. ‘I—just wondered. You fellas all ready?’

Then he reached automatically behind him, to his saddle pocket, where the warrants had been. It was too much to even think that they would still be there. But they were! Beneath his second gun! Marveling, he shook his head.

‘If *that* don’t beat the Dutch, it ties ’em! Reckon that gang got too busy, bellyin’ up to the whiskey barrel, to remember I might have somethin’ interestin’ in my *alforjas!* An’ so—— But *who* was it that handled the guard—let me loose? *Por dios!* I’ll bet I know: It was that Erby! He was talkin’ sort of funny, before he left. I remember, now: He said it’d be a fine celebration, even without Snake. Meanin’ that I’d figure it so, after he’d cut me loose. *Gracias! Milgracias!* Mr. Erby. I certainly do owe you one. Maybe I can pay off, too!’

He whirled back to the waiting men. Erskine said that all were ready to ‘round up the ranch.’ Vern considered his problem. The place would be a-swarm with armed men, sufficiently liquored to make them ready for a brawl—to make them welcome it. And there were thirteen in this party.

‘We’ll surround the house,’ he told them. ‘Make a skirmish line. Then Ody, Dud, an’ me, we’ll bust in on ’em an’ see about servin’ my warrants. Don’t shoot a-tall unless you’re pushed. But if you are—let go to land ’em

plumb center. I'll let 'em think all you fellas outside are Rangers. Stop anybody that tries to get out of the house. All set? Le's go, then!

They mounted and rode upcreek to the ranch road. Here they forded the stream and were turning up toward the house when Ody grunted suddenly and reined in. The others—tensed all to quick action—followed his example. A horse was coming out the road from toward Ord. They waited and presently there was the quick thud of a trotting animal's hoofs.

'Mule,' Ody grunted curtly to Vern. He leaned forward and added that it was a fat man riding the mule. He 'just knew.'

'Gentlemen!' a high squeaky voice addressed them, when the mule had splashed across the creek. 'Brothers! You are goin' to the weddin'? So am I. Got the call this mawnin', but I was officiatin' at a funeral on the Two-Bar-B an' couldn't git here sooner. A funeral an' a weddin' in one day—a life closes an' two young folks begin life. Amen!'

'Yeh, we're headin' up to the house now,' Vern told the preacher. 'We'll just drift along with you, Reverend.'

They came—to the accompaniment of much jerky talk from the squeaky-voiced parson—up to the house. He seemed not to note that the men pulled in their horses fifty yards away and dismounted, to disappear in the dark. Ody and Dud and Vern went with him, up into the long veranda, or gallery, along the front of the low stone house. He entered first and was greeted by a stentorian yell from all the guests.

Vern waited until he thought their companion had moved a little from the door. Then he pushed inside, the other two at his heels. All had their carbines across their arms.

It was a huge and now almost bare room, except for tables set along the wall to hold huge platters of barbecued meat and slabs of cake and quartered pies and other food. It was a packed room. He thought that the hundred gunfighters of Snake Stett's outlaw organization, whom Erskine had believed would come to Bonney's wedding, must be here.

'*In the name of the law!*' he yelled, for the din had recommenced, to the squeaking lilt of fiddles. But they were not quickly enough aware of the Rangers. He lifted his carbine muzzle and fired twice into the ceiling. Instant silence followed the shots. Everyone in the room whirled toward the front door. Two faces Vern saw, almost in line, that he would always remember. A young puncher had been standing with a piece of pie in his hand. Now, he turned and, with sight of those three grim Bearers of the Winchester, he let

his hands drop and stood motionless, with the quarter-pie sticking out of his mouth.

The other face was Erby's, and *he* gaped as at a ghost. Vern wondered why Erby should show so much surprise. But he had no time now for speculations. Already men's hands were slipping down to Colt butts. Those who had put aside their weapons, on the food tables, were looking or edging toward them.

'Stand still, all of you!' Vern commanded, and balefully looked around at the tense faces. 'Most of you know me—some better'n others. I'm Sergeant Dederick of Cap'n Tandy's X Company. I have got this house surrounded by men enough to riddle all of you, if you try makin' trouble. I come here to serve some warrants I'm holdin'. I do'no' how you folks feel about it, but—I aim to serve the warrants!'

'Pache Ord's lean figure came pressing furiously through the men and women watching Vern.

'You think you can git away with this?' he snarled. 'In my house—on my ranch? Well, I'll show you! I——'

'*Shut up!*' Vern ordered, in a voice like the crack of a Colt. 'Button up that slit under yo' nose! I have got warrants for Bonney—our slinkin' bridegroom; for Thad Potter an'——'

He read off the names on his list, some twenty in all. Then he looked up again at 'Pache, whose thumbs were hooked in a cartridge belt. Something drew his eyes past 'Pache, and he saw 'Cilla Ord watching him, with the queerest mixture of expressions he had ever seen upon any woman's face. Straight through her he looked, wide mouth tightening bitterly.

'You-all heard yo' names!' he said clearly. 'Might just as well step to the front an' save me the trouble of pullin' you out from under chairs! *Step up now!*'

'How many men you got?' snarled 'Pache, thrusting out his harsh face toward Vern.

'Thirty-one—no, thirty-two, countin' me,' Vern said, with artful carelessness.

'Well, *por el cuerpo de dios!* We got close to a hundred here, an' we're fightin'! We'll wipe out the bunch o' you!'

'*You'll fight?*' cried Vern incredulously, in the manner of a man hearing unbelievably good news. 'H'ray for you! The boys was scared you wouldn't! They come down for a fight, an' nothin' else'll give 'em their satisfy! Move yo' women an' children out. I'll tell my boys to let 'em past.

Quick, now! I'll give you three minutes to get 'em out of the way. We don't aim to kill anybody but Snake Stett's bunch of thieves, but my boys are certainly quick and light on the trigger!

There had been murmurings behind 'Pache, but now silence came swiftly, with Vern's acceptance of 'Pache's defi.

'Get ready, boys!' Vern yelled, turning his head toward the door. 'They aim to fight!'

From all around the house came quick, fierce, delighted yells. Each of Erskine's men stretched his lungs and howled like ten. Inside, the men looked shortly at one another.

'On yo' toes, now!' Vern yelled again. 'You with the shotguns! Let 'em have the Blue Whistlers through the windows! Kill ever' man that tries to come out, the rest of you! But wait till I give you the word—they're goin' to move out the women an' children, an' we'll have a clean sweep at 'em!'

'We'll kill all o' you!' cried 'Pache shakily. 'Go on out an' don't make us do it! G'on now!'

'Nothin' doin'!' Vern snarled. 'You wanted a fight, an', by the powers, a bellyful of that same is what you're goin' to collect! Kill us all? We'll buckshot a hole in this Culebra Country Bushwhackers' Association all the teams in Texas could go through abreast. When I leave here I'll have my prisoners—an' they'll be either pigs or pork!'

'We don't want to kill you-all!' cried 'Pache. Vern guessed that 'Pache was perhaps thinking of the vengeance the Rangers would take, for Rangers killed here. And he was a man of property and position, who had to live here. He could not hope to escape.

'Then gi' me that hogleg!' snapped Vern, and twitched the Colt from 'Pache's scabbard.

He clamped iron fingers upon the wrist of a man by 'Pache and a Colt dropped from this one's hand. Deftly, Vern kicked it back to Ody. He called upon Dud to come with him, and right and left he snatched weapons from hands or holsters. Some of the men seemed minded to resist, but *his* mind was made up, and he had the advantage of the man who knows what he means.

Dud plowed his own path through the crowd while Ody's carbine muzzle followed them. Within ten minutes they had at least the bulk of the weapons belonging to the men and were back at the door with them. While Dud strung pistols together, Vern called grimly to those for whom he had warrants to come up.

‘You figurin’ to take us in now?’ demanded Bonney, who was in the forefront of the group. ‘The preacher’s ready to marry me. You’re kind o’ ridin’ rough-shod, anyhow, over us.’

‘It’d be a good thing for the girl if I hauled you right off,’ Vern said contemptuously. ‘An’ I don’t know who she is, either! But if she’s willin’ to swallow you, I don’t know as I need to gag! Where’s she?’

A pretty girl came crowding forward. She glared at Vern and declared that she was not only ready, but anxious, to marry Bonney. Vern shrugged, and the wedding went on, with the three for guard—if not for guard of honor.

CHAPTER XXII

'A Nice Evenin's Work!'

VERN had no thought of letting daylight show how few were his men. But, somehow, sight of 'Cilla Ord standing there as bridesmaid to the pretty girl who was marrying Bonney roused in him a perverse desire to stay here as long as possible and 'rawhide' these men of Snake Stett's, whom she had always seen dominating all around them.

'You-all can have a couple of dances, too!' he called to the crowd. 'Prisoners sashay in an' make her a good one. The Lord only knows when an' where you'll dance next—or on what... But if anybody tries to get away—coroner'll call it suicide.'

Then he lounged grimly against a wall, with carbine leaning against him and hand on Colt butt, watching sharply every movement within range of his very good eyes. He saw 'Cilla coming toward him and ostentatiously he looked the other way. But, with smooth face a vivid scarlet, she came straight up to him.

'Will you stop that whistling a minute and try to answer a civil question?' she demanded. But the words alone were waspish. He looked down at her with tremendous, terrific, indifference and inquired what she might wish to know—of him.

'If—that is—I—your men outside—what will they do if some more men—people invited, that is—what would they do if these men came toward the house?'

It was not only the stammering fashion in which she put the question. It was the dead flatness of her tone that made him feel that she was controlling her voice by great effort. He looked down at her, frowning, narrow-eyed.

'Looks to me like you got about all the rapsCALLIONS in the country here already,' he drawled. 'Except the ones we got in the *juzgado*—an' they're not right likely to attend. But if anybody tries to come through that line out there——' He snapped his fingers explosively and made small signs to indicate complete and utterest disappearance of them. 'Doll rags!' he grunted eloquently. 'Li'l' doll rags!'

'But you—*you* could tell the men to let them through!' she whispered. 'You can give them that order—or—better! You can tell the men who are coming to go away for a while, until you've gone with your prisoners! Will you do that? They—they're our guests.'

‘We’ll be leavin’ soon,’ he said curtly. ‘I’m not goin’ to give any more orders to the fellas outside. Yo’ guests’ll just have to take their chances.’

She shook her head after an instant’s survey of his inflexible face, and moved away slowly, looking very young and very, very beautiful, in white dress and dark-blue sash.

Vern stared somberly after her. But, after all, he told himself stubbornly, she had snatched his pistol from the holster and so had caused his capture. She had known that he was lying in that shed out there, to be murdered in cold blood. She had not turned a hand even to let her father know of his imprisonment.

Stubbornly, too, he fought back his own instinctive impulse to give her the benefit of the doubt; to admit that, in snatching his pistol, she had done no more than he might have done, had their positions been reversed. For, after all, she had never treated him as anything but an enemy. As for Ranny’s sinister threat—he had no way of knowing that she had understood it. She had spoken of ‘persuading’ him.

‘Well, fella!’ a cheerful voice remarked at his elbow. ‘Turned out you was right an’ I was wrong! But I shore never thought you’d manage to best Ardle an’ git clear like this. You—you never killed Ardle?’

Vern stared dumbly at Erby. Was this acting? But, after a space of silent study, he shook his head dazedly. No—that was perfectly honest admiration that showed in Erby’s good-natured face. This man knew nothing of the guard—Ardle—tumbling senseless into the shed; of the placing of Pico outside; of the ramming into his holster of his own gun.

‘No,’ he muttered, ‘Ardle just got smacked over the head. You—you haven’t seen him? Wonder what became of him?’

‘By Gemini!’ cried Erby. ‘Smacked him over the head! If you ain’t got the most *amazin’* pair o’ feet ever I hear tell about! I’m certainly glad I left you when I did!’

What had happened to keep Ardle from running up to the house with the alarm after he had recovered consciousness? Vern wondered if that blow could have killed the fellow. No wonder these people—many of whom had known that he lay tied in the shed—had been so surprised at his entry a while back. Who had set him free? He shook his head. Then he called Dud over and ordered him in a whisper to go look in that shed, giving him directions for locating it.

He was watching absently ’Cilla Ord, who was dancing by him, when suddenly she jerked free of her partner and screamed shrilly, stabbing out

with a forefinger in the direction in which she had been facing. Dumbly, it came to Vern that she had called his name. He whirled toward that end of the room; toward a low-silled window almost against the corner of the house and, so, easily gained from the front gallery.

'Vern! Vern!' she had screamed. *'Look out for him!'*

Framed in the window was a terribly battered face. Upon the sill was propped an elbow, the forearm steadied against the window's casing. And the hand gripped a long-barreled Colt that was pointed straight at Vern. Upon Ranny's flat-nosed face was an expression of murderous triumph. Vern saw the lifting thumb...

He had jerked his own weapon instinctively at the girl's scream. He threw up on Ranny, flipping up the Colt barrel in a twinkle of movement. Automatically, he cocked and fired the single-action; cocked and fired it again. Ranny jerked convulsively and his hand twitched. With the roar of his gun, plaster jumped from the ceiling. His face was now more than battered; almost, it was not. He sagged backward, out of sight.

Ody Gardineer's smoke-wreathed carbine muzzle swung back to cover the halted dancers. Dud Blaze skipped inside the door with a Colt in each hand and the battle flame bright in his eyes. Erskine called to ask what the trouble was. Vern answered them curtly, then turned slowly to find 'Cilla Ord. But she had vanished.

'There was an ugly hairpin out there, crudely but effectively tied up and with seven-eighths of a shirt rammed down his neck—almost to the navel,' Dud reported. 'I turned him over to one of Erskine's stalwarts for holding. He was rather hostile.'

'You that go along with me!' Vern roared. 'Come on! We're hightailin'. Rest of you stay inside for a half-hour. I'm leavin' some of my boys to smack any heads that show outside before that time.'

The prisoners came forward, some sullen of face, others with dare-devil grins. Watching them grimly, Vern wondered if the sullen ones were beginning to doubt Snake Stett's ability to take care of them in any tangles, while the happy-go-lucky prisoners—mostly, these were young cowboys—still believed in their leader's infallibility. It was an interesting speculation. But he had no means of checking his guess.

He herded them all outside and had horses saddled for them. When they were mounted and ringed about by possemen, Vern grunted curtly to Dud Blaze that he had to go back inside for a minute. He went quickly from the corral to the long gallery, crossed it and stepped into the big room again. The

fiddles were once more squeaking. The men left were beginning to dance again.

He looked about and saw the new Mrs. Bonney swinging past beside a huge red-haired man. She glared malevolently at him. But Priscilla Ord was nowhere to be seen. He frowned. Decency, mere decency, he told himself, demanded that he thank her for that warning cry, which had saved him from Ranny's shot. But for that, Ody Gardineer would never have seen Ranny in the window in time to check Ranny's shot, destroy its accuracy, with a homing .44 slug. He found her father, staring at him as bitterly as the pretty girl who had gained and lost a husband within five minutes. Then the preacher who had married the Bonneys burst from a group near the wall. He had a huge chunk of barbecued beef in one hand, half a pie in the other. But his face was very earnest.

'Ranger!' he mumbled, out of a crammed mouth. 'Ranger! I want to go back to town with you!' I——'

'Pache Ord came hurrying toward them. His lean face was dull red. He seemed to be snarling to himself as he came, as well as Vern could make out through the fiddles' squealing of 'Good-bye, Ol' Paint!'

'What you up to?' he addressed the preacher belligerently.

'Nothin'! Nothin' a-tall!' the preacher said nervously. 'I was just sayin' to our Ranger brother, here, I'll appreciate it mightily, to ride alongside his party goin' back to town. I——'

'You ain't goin' back with him!' 'Pache Ord said flatly. 'Because *I* say you ain't! You're stayin' right here——'

'But, Brother Ord, I want to go back, tonight!'

'He's goin' back with me,' Vern said on perverse impulse, 'for two reasons: Because he wants to, an' because *I* say he is. He's just the same as my company, right now. An' he'll be escorted into town by me. Come on, Reverend! I'll have some of the boys hook up that mule of yo's.'

'Pache Ord sputtered. But he said nothing more by way of objection. Vern, after one final look around in search of 'Cilla, took the preacher's arm and steered him to the door.

When the parson's mule was saddled and the procession moved toward Ord, Vern pushed Pico up beside the 'Reverend.' He was pondering 'Pache Ord's furious, somehow baffled, expression.

'What got into the King of the Culebra?' he asked slowly.

'I don't know, for the life o' me—without it was Ol' Devil!' the preacher said in a tone of honest and sincere conviction.

'A man might've thought, to listen to 'Pache, that he'd hired you for the winter an' you was runnin' off without notice,' Vern puzzled it, aloud.

'He acted funny,' the parson agreed. 'But I don't know why he wanted me. They sent word to me to come marry Bonney. I married him an' I don't see how he could blame me for what happened—you boys a-comin' to make your arrests. The man, Ranny, that tried to kill you—maybe Ord wanted me to officiate at his buryin'...'

'Maybe,' Vern said with a dry grin. 'But I wouldn't put a two-bit bet on that. They go out about as happy-go-lucky as they come in, along the Culebra River. About all the officiatin' Ranny'll collect will be somebody lettin' out a big groan an' sayin': "Why couldn't he have been four foot six long, instead of nearly six foot? I hate diggin' holes for tall fellas!"'

But several times, as the party moved through the night toward Ord, he wondered what had been behind Ord's objection to the preacher's going. He gave it up, at last. Probably it had been nothing but bad temper. And he had fifteen prisoners to occupy his mind; fifteen more proofs—sixteen, if Ranny were counted!—that the Day of the Broom had come to the Culebra River country; that what the venal or inefficient local authorities could not, or would not, do, the Rangers could and would accomplish, here, as in other parts of Texas.

'A nice evenin's work, Mr. Dederick,' Vern complimented himself. 'Added to Snake's jailin'—a pleasant evenin', for all!'

CHAPTER XXIII

Sign of the Snake

ORD JAIL was dark and silent when posse and prisoners drew up in the street before it. Vern swung down and bent stiffly from the waist to work the soreness from his back. He was tired. The time he had spent, tied up on that shed floor, had wearied him as twenty hours in the saddle could not have done. He straightened and walked to the office door. He hammered on it, lest the jailor of Sheriff Thuel Drake mistake him for an enemy.

There was no response to his knocking. He pounded more loudly still; called out to the jailor. And to him came a queer gurgling, grunting sound.

He tried the door experimentally. It pushed back before his hand. He scratched a match and held it high, inside. He stared about in the tiny light, then stepped swiftly inside with a furious oath. The match went out and he snatched another from hatband. For on the floor of the office, trussed up like a baking chicken, he had seen a man. When the second match was flaming, Vern bent over the man. It was Sheriff Drake.

‘Dud! Ody!’ Vern called swiftly. ‘Come on in.’

He found the lamp on the wall and lighted it. Dud and Ody, crowding in, stared blankly at Drake. Vern made a grim head motion, and Dud, interpreting it correctly, crossed to Drake, stooped and without noticeable gentleness jerked a wadded bandanna from the sheriff’s mouth. Drake cursed bitterly:

‘Snake an’ the rest’s gone! He says he’s marryin’—tonight!’

‘Marryin’?’ Vern said softly, but there was nothing soft about his face, as he came over to stand glaring down at Drake. ‘An’ they’re gone—all gone,’ he went on, in the same gentle voice that drew the eyes of Dud and Ody to him, then to one another—with significant lift of brows. ‘All our prisoners, that the sher’f couldn’t take, an’ the Rangers had to—gone! Just got tired of jail beans, I bet you! Served notice on you. Then pulled out. You couldn’t stop ’em, of course...’

‘Le’ me loose!’ Drake cried angrily. ‘Take this dam’ lass-rope off me! An’ don’t you try none o’ yo’ in—*insultin’* on me! I don’t care a whoop in hell if you are a Ranger sergeant! I’m the elected sher’f o’ this county an’——’

Ostentatiously, Vern turned his back. He looked at Ody and Dud, grim Bearers of the Winchester. They stared narrowly at the 'elected sheriff.' Vern jerked his head slightly.

'Let him loose. If he's no more use untied than he is tied, still, it works both ways. He's no bigger scoundrel outside that lariat's loop than he is inside it. Sher'f! Hell! It just goes to show—an' I hope it's a lesson to both you children—that the's sher'fs an'—well, sher'fs!'

He passed through the door and stopped before Erskine, who sat his horse in the van of the dismounted prisoners.

'That noble son of a dog in there let Snake an' the others——'

'I heard it!' Erskine said in fury-shaken voice. 'We ought to take him out to the edge o' town, where the smell won't matter, an' put a slug o' .45 disinfectin' through his head! The sneakin' illegitimate! He let 'em out o' the cells! He——'

'Certainly he did! Well, we had best herd this bunch in, I reckon. If you can arrange for some good, salty citizens to camp in the office with just about one double-barrel' shotgun apiece, maybe we can hang onto what we collected tonight.'

'I can do that,' Erskine nodded. 'But what I feel like doin' would be called murder with trimmin's—if Drake was a human bein' an' not a low-lived seven times lower'n a polecat!'

There was no doubt that his good, strong voice carried into the jail. But from Drake there came no sign that he had heard. He stood gaping at the procession shepherded into the office by the possemen. Vern, regarding him with somber dislike, guessed that Drake knew most of the prisoners from the Rocker-O. From the sag of Drake's loose mouth, he guessed that the reputations of some of the prisoners going sheepishly past to the jail door made their appearance here utterly amazing.

'How in the world——' Drake began weakly.

'Listen! An' do it with both those burro ears!' Vern stopped him metallically. 'Sewin' circle's over! Times have changed in the Culebra River country! Times *have* changed! This li'l' bunch of ex-would-be hard cases, they're just the first signs of the new deal that's come sweepin' over the sweet li'l' hills an' the green an' fertile valleys of this wide an' lovely land—*by God!*

'You let Snake an' the others go! Now, you want to sit down an' augur about how-come we gathered in some more. From the minute I first set my eyes on you, Drake, *I recognized you!* You're a scoundrel an' a cowardly

scoundrel at that! You've been standin' in with every thief an' murderer that hit the Culebra! But you're about done! You want to know what disease you'll die from? Rope-burn, by God! A rope-burn around that long neck of yo's! You talk around me when you're asked a question, or I'll forget my kind heart an' fine old Southern raisin' an' I'll make you look like a nickel's worth of cat meat! Where'd Snake go?'

'To his place, I reckon,' Drake said sulkily. 'But I don't like the way you're hintin' around that I had somethin' to do with his gittin' loose—me with a big knot on my head where somebody cracked me with a pistol——'

'*Hintin'*?' Vern cried out in a strangled voice. He took two long steps and rammed his furious face into the sheriff's. Drake began to back away, long hands coming up, but Vern followed him.

'Hintin' that I know you let that bunch out, the minute you saw me out of sight! That it was framed with Snake to tie you up after you'd let him out! Where's yo' jailor? How-come prisoners can walk out of jail? Did you let in the man that knifed Enson?'

'Robbins, the jailor, he had a bad toothache!' Drake protested. 'He went huntin' somethin' for it. I stayed in here while he went. The' never was a bit o' noise. First I noticed, somebody'd hit me over the head. When I come to I was like you found me—an' the tail-end o' the prisoners was goin' out the door. Snake, he was the last out. He turned around an' laughed. He says he's sorry he can't stay, but he's gittin' married—tonight!'

For a flashing instant, the straying black eyes crept up to Vern's face. Maliciously, Drake stared at Vern, then looked quickly at the neckerchief about Vern's neck:

'He says this means *finish!* for you. He says if you're not under the grass-roots inside two days, he'll hand over a thousand dollars to any gospel sharp that'll come after it. He says——'

'I've heard him blow, before! Dud! Ram these *gunies* into the jail. We're goin' to have a citizens' committee to do the guardin'. The jailor havin' a toothache—so convenient an' all!—he's on the sick list. An' our noble sher'f bein' practically fit-to-tie, he's so anxious to wipe out in blood the insult Snake put on the Sacred Name of Drake, *he's* goin' along with us! Look at him! You couldn't hold him back with a bull chain! So the citizens, they'll watch our canaries. Yes, sir! Armed with the consciousness that they represent uprisin' popular public opinion—an' with double-barrel' shotguns, too, of course!'

Erskine came in, bringing four sleepy-eyed, but paradoxically alert, gentlemen. Evidently, the little ex-sheriff had been rousing particular friends of his. Each of the arrivals bore one of the lethal instruments mentioned by Vern. They were of varied makes, those shotguns. They were long and short and intermediate, of barrel length. But alike of heavy bore. As the citizens owning them were alike of grim expression.

‘All these good folks are aimin’ to do is keep house until you’re back,’ Vern said to Drake with elaborate anxiousness.

‘I reckon it’s all right,’ Drake mumbled, without enthusiasm.

‘Then deputize ’em, an’ we’ll be on our way!’

This small formality over, the prisoners were jammed into the cells so lately emptied of their friends. Vern came back to the office and found that Erskine had already remounted his ten men and himself. They would cheerfully do without sleep for a day or two more, said Erskine, if there were good chance of overtaking Snake Stett, and those who had ridden away with him.

‘How many, about, did he take?’ Vern demanded grimly of Drake. ‘Snake, I mean. Le’s see: There was Snake, an’ Frio Jack, an’ Lute Cane. Then some other hard cases that we brought over from Paradise. I remember there was Bud Box, an’ Cage Brinton, an’ Dee Tanner, an’ Bill Choice, an’ some more.’

‘I know some o’ the others by name,’ Drake shrugged. ‘Not all. Walt White, an’ a killin’ Mex’ name Escobar, an’ that little breed, Lebouef—one they call “Frenchy the Grand.” An’ they must’ve hit for the Snake. That’d be my guess, anyhow.’

But Vern hardly listened to him. He was recalling what Snake was supposed to have told Drake—about getting married, tonight. He would hardly have believed the sheriff’s simplest statement, but in this case——

‘Pache was hell on keepin’ the Reverend. An’—*she* said some men were comin’ up the road, invited to “the weddin’,”’ he thought. ‘An’ she had already told me, on the creek, that she was goin’ to marry Snake. An’ she got so worked up about that fresh bunch of her inviteds runnin’ into our party an’ gettin’ shot up—— Well!’ he finished cryptically, with an odd heaviness, a dull hopelessness and sense of futility, ‘it only goes to show that, if you want to make a splash in the Culebra, you have got no business wearin’ Rangers’ clothes.’

For it seemed a matter beyond argument that she had intended to stick by Snake, regardless of what he might be. And by this time——

‘Come on!’ he snarled at the men in the office, with a sudden blaze of rage that made them stare—all but the canny Dud Blaze, who looked at Vern and shook his head a little, pityingly. ‘Let’s get after ’em!’

On Center Street, mounted all, Drake pushed up alongside Vern and Erskine and said something about the Snake.

‘You want to go out there first,’ Vern said softly. ‘You are right sure that’s the way to head?’

‘Why—yeh! O’ course I’m sure!’ Drake mumbled.

‘Then we’ll head for the Rocker-O!’

And Vern turned Pico’s head down Center Street—toward the south. For the Rocker-O lay south and east of Ord.

‘How-come we never run smack-dab into ’em?’ Vern asked Erskine frowningly. ‘I am dead sure they came toward Ord’s place. But looks like we ought’ve met ’em...’

‘The’s two roads,’ Erskine told him. ‘One we come is the main drag. But the’s an old trail forkin’ about a mile out o’ Ord, that’ll be three miles north o’ the main road at the place where it’s farthest between ’em. Snake’d likely use that. Not much chance o’ meetin’ anybody on it.’

They pulled up at the fork in the roads which Erskine had described. Ody Gardineer pushed forward and swung out of the saddle to squat and scratch matches and study the trails. He was joined by the gaunt and taciturn trader the Ord men called ‘Rawhide,’ and together these two moved along the northern trail.

‘’S all right!’ Ody called after a couple of minutes. ‘Ten-twelve hawses come along an’ turned into this trail—goin’ like as if the devil was sittin’ behind ’em!’

The posse moved up the trail after Ody and Rawhide and presently heard their joint and explosive grunt. They pushed up and found the pair ahead dismounted over some long, black objects that lay in the trail.

‘Vern!’ called Ody, with odd note in his usually even voice, as he flipped away the stub of a match. ‘It’s that useless Bud Box, deader’n Phar’oh’s gran’pa! I’d know them squinch-eyes o’ his’n in hell! An’ here’s another I do’no’.’

‘Look at him, Drake!’ Vern snapped at the sheriff.

Drake swung down rather slowly. Beside Vern, who was leading Pico, he went draggily up to that second still and sprawling figure on the trail floor.

Vern scratched a match for him and Drake grunted shakily at sight of the dark, thin face of the dead man.

‘Frenchy the Grand!’ he muttered. ‘Now, who——’

‘The ghost o’ Ol’ Cass Furby!’ Ody Gardineer answered in his ear, in a stage whisper that somehow set Vern’s own spine to crinkling. The effect on Drake was explosive. It seemed to Vern that the sheriff jumped three full feet into the air with Ody’s startling whisper.

‘Yes, sir!’ Ody went on, in full voice now. ‘I found Ol’ Cass’s trademark, like always—moccasin an’ stump——’

‘That’s—that’s dam’ foolishness!’ Drake protested angrily—but without much ring of certainty in his tone. ‘I see Ol’ Cass put under ground an’ he was plumb dead! An’ I don’t take no stock in ghosts——’

‘Then whut’d you jump for?’ inquired Ody, the practical. ‘I swear, Drake, I figgered you must’ve rode with the outfit the time Snake carried off Ol’ Cass’s purty gal; figgered you must’ve done so, an’ was ’lowin’ that yo’ name was due to change from “Drake” to “Gone Goslin’ ”! Yes, sir, I done that! Else why’d you jump like that?’

‘I do’no’ what you’re talkin’ about!’ Drake mumbled irritably. ‘Well, come on, Dederick! If you still stick to goin’ out to Ord’s, instead o’ to the Snake——’

‘You’re a downright funny hairpin!’ Vern marveled. ‘You still tryin’ to toll me off to the Snake, after us findin’ for certain that Snake come this road? Drake! Drake! First thing you know I’m goin’ to be *real* suspicious of you. More suspicious than I am right now, you know. Yeh, Ol’ Cass he is sure whittlin’ down Snake’s Three Hundred. Between him an’ the Rangers, there’s just a few crooked county officials left—an’ some paper sacks of wind an’—well, *water*, left. An’ if I was a gamblin’ man, Drake, ol’-timer, I would put my money on Ol’ Cass!’

A hundred yards up the trail they came to another body. Ody dropped from his horse and looked at the face in the light of a match:

‘Dee Tanner, Bud Box’s side-kicker,’ he reported. ‘One more notch on Ol’ Cass’s .45-90.’

He ranged out to the side of the trail for a moment and came in to tell Vern that this ghost upon the red vengeance trail was riding a horse shod all around.

They went on in a heavy silence toward the Rocker-O. Vern reined in a little way from the big house and frowned at its dark, quiet bulk.

‘Funny!’ he said at last. ‘I did think that with a bunch like they’d invited, even Bonney’s bein’ snatched from the festivals wouldn’t en-tire-ly stop the whirlin’. You reckon all those hairpins are back in the box?’

‘Let’s go see!’ Ody suggested prosaically.

CHAPTER XXIV

Change of Heart

‘WHO’S it?’ ’Pache Ord demanded fiercely from within, when Vern hammered on the door. ‘Dederick? Well, what do you want? Ain’t you raised enough hell around the Rocker-O to do you for one night?’

‘Oh, come on outside an’ talk to me!’ Vern growled impatiently. ‘An’ if there’s anybody inside who thinks he might want to take a shot at me—well, I’m back with the same outfit I had earlier! Anybody that wants to can certainly pop his whip—but he better think her over some...’

‘The’s nobody here!’ ’Pache growled. But he was unbaring the great front door. He opened it and appeared dimly in the doorway, a gaunt, black figure.

‘Snake here?’ Vern asked him abruptly, leaning forward a little to try to see ’Pache’s face.

‘He’s not. Nor ary o’ his boys. But I’m free to tell you, Ranger, that he *was* here, right after you cut stick for town. ‘Seems like you bit off a sight more’n you can chew. By pure, dumb luck, you laid him in jail one time. But you couldn’t keep him in! You been talkin’ a lot about new ways an’ new days for this country—an’ the’ you are!’

‘I couldn’t keep him?’ Vern grunted contemptuously. ‘I had nothin’ to do with his—gettin’ out! But Snake never saw the day I couldn’t take him—an’ keep him till he’s danglin’ where he belongs—under about six feet of straight up an’ down rope! An’ if you think this is the windup, you have got a whalin’ big s’prise comin’, Mister! You’re due to be half blinded by the blaze of glory that’s comin’!’

He tapped ’Pache emphatically on the shoulder.

‘For yo’ own good, I’m tellin’ you this! You big fellas have been tradin’ with these thieves, partly to keep ’em happy an’ off yo’ stuff, but partly because you could trade with ’em an’ make more money than if you dealt honest with honest folks! That’s how-come an outfit like this of Snake’s could build up the way they have done.

‘But the new day an’ new way are right on yo’ front porch! There’s goin’ to be some heavy business done, in rope, an’ shells, an’ graveyard lots, an’ horseshoes—right sudden! I couldn’t do the job by myself——’

'You couldn't!' 'Pache cried with sarcastic wonder. 'I 'lowed you figgered yo'self plumb able. Figgered you was a *Buckaroo* from the fawks o' Bitter Medicine Crick, an' able to civilize us off with one hand an' make a cigarette with the other, all at once.'

'Buckaroo, is it?' Vern grinned, but without humor showing in his thinned lips. 'All right, then, I'm Buckaroo enough—an' let that hold you! But what I started to say was that, if ever'body around was like Snake Stett—a lowdown sneakin' murderer an' thief; or like 'Pache Ord of the Rocker-O—plenty willin' to have such thieves the big noises in this country; why, I would be a dam' fool to let you-all do anything but kill yo'selves off to suit you.'

'But there's plenty folks in this country who want a show at lawful ways. Plenty! So you might's well make up yo' mind one way or other—to be outside the law with the likes of Snake, or inside it. You have got to make up yo' mind—an' you have got to make it up quick!'

Then it came back to him—what Snake had said about getting married. He forgot the honest citizens of the Culebra River country and their desire for law and order; forgot the help that he was to give them. For him, the biggest thing on his personal horizon at this moment was no more than a face. A cameo-clear, ivory-pale face, crowned by a mass of soft, dusky hair, with dark, level, temper-filled eyes; with scarlet, self-willed mouth.

'Hear you had another weddin',' he said with icy evenness. 'Snake an'—'Cilla.'

'How could the' be a weddin' without a preacher?' 'Pache inquired caustically. But Vern found something odd about his tone. 'You lugged off the gospeleer with you.'

'You—you mean he never married her?' Vern could not entirely control his voice and 'Pache seemed to stare hard at him through the darkness before he answered.

'I reckon you've heard one thing about me in this country,' 'Pache said slowly, somewhat contemptuously. 'That I never tell a man a lie, after tellin' him I'm *not* lyin'. An' that I don't break my word, once it's passed. So—Snake ain't here now. An' he never married my girl—if that's anything to you!'

'Any idee—that you'll gi' me—about where he went?'

'To his place, I reckon. Somebody dry-gulched his bunch, while they was a-comin' out. Three o' Snake's boys won't never smile ag'in. Snake was—well, some rattled, by that.'

‘He would be! He ought to be!’ Vern said grimly. ‘Well, I am goin’, now. You better be mullin’ over what I said: about the new day, an’ the new way. Maybe we won’t catch up with Snake, tonight. Maybe we won’t heel him at his place. But we are bound to corner him before the ball of twine’s rolled up. An’ when we do—well, either we’ll save the country the price of some rope, or he’ll come out with his paws star-grabbin’.’

‘I reckon I’ll lay back a spell; see what happens!’ Pache said comfortably, and went back inside.

Vern was halfway back to the posse when a slight figure darted out from the shadows of the house, coming toward him. Automatically, he jerked his pistol out as he whirled. Then he shoved it back in the holster. But his face was like brown stone.

‘Vern!’ Priscilla Ord almost whispered, looking up at him. ‘You’re after Snake? Of course you are. You would be!’

‘Kind of,’ Vern replied dryly. ‘Oh, kind of. Why?’

‘He’s gone out to the Snake. But—Vern! He’ll have anywhere from twenty to forty men, there. And I don’t think you can fool them—with Snake there—as you fooled this bunch here, tonight. Snake has brains. Plenty of brains. I know that you don’t credit him with much. You think he’s just a coward. But——’

‘Well, *I do*’no’ that I’d say that. I never thought about him, or talked about him, as a coward,’ Vern said judicially. It was surprising how easy it was to talk with her; how easy to be indifferent to her. ‘I have thought an’ said that he’s mighty careful who he shoots at—when he’s not hirin’ somebody else to do his shootin’.’

‘He has brains, though!’ she assured him earnestly. ‘You’ll have to be careful. It’s because he has brains that he’s the chosen leader of this band that headquarters on the Snake. Though he has killed a good many men, they say.’

Vern was gaping down at her, for she stood close before him, now, holding together a dark *mantilla* at her slim throat. He saw the gleam of the white nightgown below the *mantilla*’s fringe. So his coming—their coming—had waked her, and she had taken the trouble to get out of bed and come here, to warn him against Snake, the brainy!

‘I swear, *I do*’no’ what to make of you!’ he muttered. ‘You sound like you’re sore at Snake about somethin’. An’ just this afternoon, you was goin’ to marry him. He was a better man than a whole cowpenful like me. You

said it, yo'self! An' Snake hightailed out of town, when Drake let him out, to come an' marry you. Now——'

'I wouldn't marry him if he were the last man in the world!'

 she said tensely, yet quietly, moving closer still. 'You told me the truth about him, and I didn't believe it. But, now——'

It was too much for Vern. And not the least of his puzzle was the way he felt toward her. Here she was, friendly as he had hoped to see her; as he had pictured her; but with no idea that he would ever see her so. But he couldn't play up. Not a little bit.

'Hey, Vern!' Dud Blaze called from where the posse had been waiting. 'Coming?'

'Well, I'm glad you decided not to marry him,' Vern said heavily to the girl. 'For he's certainly a prize skunk any way you look at him. Now, I have got to light a shuck. We're goin' to hang Snake's hide on the corral bars, before we're done rollin' up this ball of twine!'

'I hope you do, Vern,' she said earnestly.

'Did I see somebody, talking to somebody, somewhere close to the house?' Dud Blaze inquired solemnly of the night, as they moved out in the direction of the Snake. 'Hey! Don't you be tickling my bronc'! He's an orphan and you mustn't pick on him. I'll teach him to bite you if you don't quit. Cut it out, you big idiot! He'll be swappin' ends all over Texas—— *Ah, hell!* You got him started, now!'

His horse immediately attempted to kick the invisible moon and Vern rode on, grinning, while Dud swore torridly and calmed his mount.

Dawn came. They looked at each other grimly, smiled a little—but no less grimly. Then looked ahead toward where the Culebra ran between its greener banks.

'Forty men, maybe,' Vern meditated aloud. 'An' we, fair sirs, *we* are just a tol'able fifteen...'

'Ol' Cass Furby comes a-ridin' up on us, an' sees Drake, we'll be jist a puny fourteen, right sudden,' Ody Gardineer said thoughtfully. 'Whut's the matter, Drake? Whut you makin' them noises liken to a dyin' calffer? Thought you never took stock in disemboweled sperits like the preachers call 'em? Me, I do'no' *whut* I believe—except in whiskey for colds.

'My pa was a pow'ful religious man. Deacon, he was. Used to trade hawses an' buy an' sell stock. He al'ays prayed a consid'able lot, to have the blessin's o' Heaven showered down on the righteous. No denyin' that it

helped him, too! I have see that man git up from off his knees an' go out an' skin the immoral hide off the toughest traders roundabout!

'Yes, sir! A pow'ful religious man. He kneeled down to pray so much that the toes o' his boots, they was turned up in front jist like sled-runners, an' he had to walk on his heels. Whut I'm gittin' at, *he* found authority for ghosts in Scripture, an' witches, too—like that ol' Witch o' Winder. I ain't sure he ever converted me. But likewise, I ain't sure he never!

'So I'm jist glad I have lived a pure life—an' never got mixed up with white trash as goes around a-stealin' gals... An' never got such as that knife-totin', .45-90-shootin' sperit a-tailin' *me* an' breathin' hot on my neck o' nights, an' makin' my immoral soul twist slaunchways an' anti-godlin' in my carcass, an'—— Whut's that? Yonder in the chaparral?'

Drake made more of the dying calf noises and jerked his narrow head to glare at the innocent chaparral, where Ody was staring tensely. A dun heifer moved there and Drake's gun jumped up and roared. The dun heifer threw up its heels and galloped off, and Drake looked sheepishly around at the grinning faces.

'My goodness!' cried Vern. 'Might think 'twas you, not Snake, that stole the girl!'

'I told you-all a dozen times that I do'no' a thing about Vingie!' Drake yapped angrily. 'An' I'm sick an' tired o' bein' hoorahed about it. I reckon _____,

With the distant roar of the heavy rifle; with the blossoming for an instant of the smoke-puff a long two hundred yards away, above the chaparral; Drake leaned forward to the horn of his saddle. The Colt slipped from his long, skinny hand. He slid sideways to the ground and, right foot caught in the stirrup, was dragged bouncingly for a couple of yards, until the toe pulled clear.

'Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!'

'Damn!' growled Vern. 'This business is gettin' on my nerves a-plenty!'

He whirled Pico and jabbed him with the hooks. They raced across the chaparral in the half-gray light of the dawn, with Erskine and some others of the posse trailing. Ody and Dud remained in the trail, looking somberly down at the body of the sheriff.

Vern came to where the mysterious bushwhacker had ejected the exploded rifle-shell. He leaned from the saddle and scooped up the brazen cylinder as he pulled Pico in. The others crowded up behind him and he flipped the shell to Erskine—then pointed:

‘See it! The trademark! Moccasin-an’-Stump track—an’ just the one. Scatter out an’ see if we can locate the gent, this time.’

They spread out fanwise and advanced in a wide front. But there was no further track that they could find. They came, within a mile, to a dry arroyo. Old Rawhide thought that he saw traces of a horse’s hoofs, but none of the others could see the prints and he was not too sure. So they turned back.

‘Funny!’ Vern said slowly. ‘Way things are goin’, it looks to me like Ord County had better hurry, if it aims to hang Snake! For Old Moccasin-an’-Stump is certainly a hard-workin’, stick-to-it-ive jigger.. An’ if he’s downin’ the small fry, like Drake an’ Bud Box an’ the others—well, I would figure Snake’s chances mighty slim.’

‘What’ll we do with—*him*?’ Erskine asked, when they came back to where Ody and Dud waited. ‘We can’t be goin’ into the undertakin’ business, with the work we got on.’

‘Bury him shallow,’ Vern decided. ‘They can take him back to town later on, if they want to.’

This dreary business over, they rode on and at eight o’clock had breakfast beside a tiny creek. Ody was conspicuously sober of face. For he thought it odd that when he was merely ‘hurrahing’ the sheriff, that .45-90 should come bellowing, to turn his jest into grimmest reality.

‘I jist do’no whut I *do* think!’ he grunted, reaching for more coffee. ‘More’n ever, I jist do’no. But if ever I have good cause to believe that hairpin is thinkin’ about me, I’m goin’ to start thinkin’ about the chances to make a fortune—an’ live to spend it—off some’r’s so blame’ far it’ll take fo’ dollars worth o’ powder to load the shell that would carry to me!’

They mounted and rode on along the Culebra and came at noon to where the low, stone house was visible. Smoke came from the chimney and there were saddles hanging in the porch. Plenty of saddles. Horses were in the corral, too.

‘Scatter out an’ see if we can scare ’em into comin’ outside,’ Vern decided, when Dud asked for a campaign plan.

He rode under the river-bank’s shelter until he could send Pico scurrying up and on the level to the corral. He hesitated here. At first he thought to turn out the horses. But if they could capture the gang, or get them to surrender, horses would be needed. So he compromised by ducking low in the saddle and making the shelter of a shed close by.

‘In the house, there!’ he yelled. ‘You in the house!’

‘Who’s it? What you want?’ a voice answered from a window, but without exposure of the owner.

‘I want—Snake Stett, Lute Cane, Frio Jack, Cage Brinton, Bill Choice, Walt White, Escobar—an’ some others! This is Sergeant Dederick, the Ranger. You folks might’s well come on out, peaceful. It’s certainly yo’ only chance!’

CHAPTER XXV

'Where Did Snake Go?'

THERE was no reply to his ultimatum. He waited, his head turning so that he could see the house and see, also, that the others of his party had found good cover. They might not be able to storm that solid, fort-like stone ranch house, but certainly they could make it suicide for the garrison to come out!

'Make up what passes for yo' minds, in there!' he yelled after two minutes. 'I have got plenty other fish to fry. I am not goin' to waste time on five-for-a-nickel imitation bad men! You comin' out? Or do we have to poke under the bed for you?'

A rifle *whanged!* A slug rapped the wall of the shed behind which he sheltered. He had held his own carbine across his arm. Now, he jerked it up, to fire flashingly at the smoke-puff blossoming in the window. A yell of pain and fury attested the luck of that questing .44 bullet. Vern slid down from the saddle and put Pico inside the shed, out of harm's way.

From the other side of the house came a splattering volley. Erskine's men had taken the two shots for declaration of war. But they were too old at this business to fire blindly. The very raggedness of their firing proved that they had targets; each man firing to suit himself, at the target of his choice. Vern grinned shadowly as he squatted in the lee of the shed. Salty hairpins! Buckaroos!

There were plenty of men in the Snake ranch house! The firing from inside became deafening. And it was good shooting, too! They doubled up on Vern; one firing to draw his fire, the other waiting for him to show himself. He retired from his original position with a hole in his hat and a stinging burn on his right upper arm, to curse thoughtfully and consider ways and means.

Old Rawhide came crawling up to him and was nearly shot before Vern recognized him. The old-timer squinted at the stone house, with glittering black eyes holding a sort of humor. He spat and rolled his cud from one cheek to the other, then looked at Vern.

'Them clapboards on the roof are dry as a pilgrim in hell!' he drawled, and spat again. 'If we could heave some chunks o' fire onto the roof... Tell ye what: ye keep the ball a-rollin' an' le' me see whut I can figger out...'

He vanished and the battle went on during the afternoon. Vern heard nothing from the others of the posse. He wondered if any had been downed.

For his side, he fancied that some execution had been done. He had reason to believe that he had at least wounded two others, after rousing that first howl of pain.

Old Rawhide had not returned when from the rear of the house—which paralleled the river-bank, there sounded a sudden very heavy burst of shots. Vern jumped up and ran for the corral. Bullets dusted the ground around him and he nearly fell when one rapped the heel of his boot and knocked it off. But he gained the corral without being hurt and saw men running, toward the house and toward the river.

He dropped upon a knee and opened up on them. Two men almost at the bank of the Culebra went sprawling—but whether from his bullets or those of the others on the far side of the house, he could not tell. A man running for the house collapsed as if his every bone had melted. Another fell, but went crawling, with surges along the ground, toward shelter. They let him go—and when he was within twenty feet of the door, he came suddenly to his feet and ran like a rabbit.

But two men had dropped over the river-bank. Vern went on his belly that way, but looking backward jerkily, to see if any tried to escape from the side he had been covering. Downstream, a man's head popped over the bank's edge. Vern sent a bullet and another at him, but missed both times, throwing dirt into the fellow's face. And two shots rang in the bed of the stream, then two more. Then silence.

Old Rawhide suddenly appeared on the bank top. He lay prone and studied the situation, then reached over the bank and hauled up a large iron pot. Smoke came from it. As he ran bent over, toward the shelter of the corral, a tongue of flame licked up over the edge of the pot.

'Reckon we'll catch 'em!' he said grimly.

He had a square of green cowhide, with heavy thongs laced to it—a big crude sling. In the pot he had small chunks of dry wood, ablaze.

'Tallered!' he explained, with jerk of grizzled head toward the wood. 'I be'n skirmishin' around the place.'

He set a chunk in the green hide pouch of the sling and Vern held his nose ostentatiously. Old Rawhide grinned dryly and swung the sling with both hands. He let go and the blazing chunk went hurtling and whistling into the air and landed on the ranch-house roof.

'Tally one! Got to watch them fellers, though. They'll be tryin' to put her out! Give 'em hell if they do, Ranger!'

His second chunk fell short. But the third and fourth landed on the kiln-dry clapboards that made the roof. Vern watched, but nobody dared coming out, to try gaining the top of the house. A tongue of flame lifted like a snake striking, from the roof. It ran across the boards and lifted its scarlet head again. Another and another showed.

A fierce, furious yell came from inside the house. Vern and old Rawhide on this side, Erskine's men covering the other side and front and back, answered that yell as savagely—and with a note of grim triumph, too.

'I run onto two fellers, down in the river-bed—or, ruther, they run onto me,' old Rawhide drawled, now. He stared as the flames lifted higher; nodded satisfaction with sight of his work. Then he went on with mention of the men who had jumped into the river-bed, as if the matter were too unimportant to remark except in an idle moment. 'They took a couple *whangs* at me. But I was down behind a log an', when *I* opened up on them, they was *not* behind no log. Like shootin' fish, it was.'

Vern shook his head understandingly. He was out of the same hard rock as the old frontiersman. He was merely a later extraction. When a man came at you, a red, or brown, or white, or yellow man, showing intentions obviously homicidal, you did your best to stop him. And there was nothing in the mere killing of a man who needed to be killed, to discuss endlessly. It was a hard country and the hardest thing about it was its population. He whistled tunelessly and stared at the flames on the roof. He grinned faintly, remembering a couplet once heard:

'The flame that lit the battle's wreck
Shone round him o'er the dead!'

'Huh?' said Rawhide, gaping curiously.

'The flame that's lightin' *that* battle's wreck is goin' to shine round on some dead,' Vern said in part answer. 'That is, if that bunch in there don't show lots of judgment, soon!'

A little knot of men leaped now through a window on this side. Old Rawhide lifted his Winchester. Vern opened on the fugitives with no more than a twist of his carbine's muzzle. They dropped down and tried to return the fire. But Vern and Rawhide were sheltered and their aim was deadly. The remnant of the escaping men wavered, tried to return by the way they had come, then—lashed by the pelting slugs—gave up the effort.

They threw down their rifles; lifted their hands. Vern held his fire, watching them cautiously. Rawhide cursed them bitterly, for a crew of cowards who wouldn't fight, wouldn't give a man a chance at them.

‘Come on out—this way—an’ slo-ow an’ easy!’ Vern commanded them in stentorian voice. ‘Grab hold of yo’ ears an’ hang on for dear life. First hand I see droppin’ will be the signal: We will puncture you plenty!’

There was firing from the other faces of the house. Evidently, the rest of the besieged gangsters were trying to escape from the blazing furnace that the house had become. But as the men walked slowly, hands gripping ears, toward Vern and Rawhide, all firing ceased. Vern stood up and moved out from the stone shed. Such faces as he noticed among his prisoners were angry, or sulky. But Snake Stett, he observed instantly, was not here.

‘Collect their hardware,’ he grunted at Rawhide. ‘Take it an’ chunk it into the house. Let it burn up.’

Rawhide grinned wolfishly. He walked up to the halted men and, with rifle in left hand, began to unbuckle shell belts and let holstered pistols drop. When this was done, he made a second inspection of them, bringing to light three more Colts which had been masked by shoulder holsters. He gathered up all the weapons from the ground and carried them to a window; threw them in.

‘Now,’ he said sardonically to the eight prisoners, ‘if ye got any more hawglais on ye, ye’re welcome to ’em!’

‘Where’s Snake?’ Vern demanded. ‘Out front?’

They shrugged, looking one at another.

‘Do’no’,’ a sulky towheaded youngster grunted. ‘If yuh hadn’t set that dam’ roof on fire, we’d have shore showed yuh somethin’ about war, by God!’

‘Yeh?’ Vern said mockingly. ‘If the old Ma Duck hadn’t eat up the June bug, the June bug would have raised a family, they do say. Rawhide, will you see what’s doin’ around the house?’

But Erskine came around the corner now, grinning.

‘Heeled nine on our sides,’ he reported. Then he scowled blackly at the eight prisoners. ‘Where’s Snake?’ he cried.

‘Snake’s a long way from here!’ a dark and bitter-faced little man snarled triumphantly. ‘A lot smarter Smart Alecks than you-all will have to git up a sight earlier in the mornin’, to heel Snake. O’ course, that ain’t sayin’ you won’t *hear* from him—an’ plenty, too!’

‘Seventeen brier-breakers,’ Vern calculated aloud. ‘An’ Rawhide softened up two in the river-bed. That’s nineteen. We got three out back, that break they made. Twenty-two. Anybody downed in the house? Answer up

when I talk to you!’ he ended in a furious snarl directed at the towheaded and sulky boy. He took a quick half step toward the cowboy, fist lifting.

‘Three,’ the boy admitted. ‘Reckon we got some o’ yo’s, though, to help pay for ’em.’

‘Tim Harlan an’ ’Loysius Quick, from Ord, went out,’ Erskine nodded. ‘Gardineer’s got a burned neck. Five-six others got nicked. Hadn’t been we had fine cover, they’d have done more.’

‘Twenty-five accounted for, then,’ Vern nodded frowningly. ‘But I wanted Snake an’ Lute Cane an’ Frio Jack. Without them, this is just a tol’able round-up.’

They herded the prisoners together. The dark little Erby, who had been Vern’s guard at the Rocker-O, faced him cheerfully.

‘Looks like you been usin’ yo’ educated feet some more, Ranger! We’d shore have been money in the pocket if we’d downed you right off, on the Rocker-O.’

‘Where did Snake go?’ Vern asked him grimly.

‘Now, you tell me, an’ I’ll tell you,’ Erby shrugged, with sad face. ‘He’s the uncertaintest hairpin, Snake is! You never know where he’s gone till he comes back. That’s gospel.’

The others, in varying language, expressed the same complete ignorance of Snake’s whereabouts. Vern nodded with perfect understanding, at the end of the examination. Partly, they lied for loyalty’s sake. But it was a forethoughtful brand of loyalty, too. What he had done to hamper Snake, they regarded as lucky accidents and setbacks which were more irritating than serious. Even the losses they had suffered by official lead, they did not regard seriously.

‘Snake’s always come out top-dog,’ Vern thought. ‘An’ he did walk right out of Ord Jail with everybody in it. Can’t blame these fellas for figurin’ he’s able to take care of them the same way. They’d still laugh themselves sick, at the notion that I’m really goin’ to clean up this country; an’ that this is another long step in that direction. They think Snake will scheme somethin’ smart, an’ pull some strings, an’ they’ll whoop it up off again, thumbin’ their noses at me an’ the law.’

They were mounting the prisoners on horses from the corral when Vern looked up to see a Mexican boy sitting a horse on one side of the party. The quiet posture of the *muchacho* contrasted strongly with the lathered sides of his bay. The boy jabbed the horse with big rowels and sent it slowly over to Vern.

‘I bring a *carta* from *la señorita* Priscilla,’ he whispered, bending a little in the big-horned saddle to reach Vern’s ear. ‘She said that I might find you here, but—Body of God! I had no thought of finding you with the work already done!’

Vern took the folded paper that the boy handed him skillfully. He turned it over and over in big, dirty hand, eyeing it very calmly. What—he wondered—had ’Cilla Ord seen fit to write him? Again he had that slow wonderment which he had known the night before; that her apparent change in loyalty had come too late to mean anything to him. He unfolded the message:

‘Ferd Henson, of the Pitchfork, is moving about two thousand head of steers,’ she had written, beginning the note without salutation, ending it without signature. ‘Trailing herd north from his Pitchfork Number Two on headwaters of Culebra. Am certain Snake is going to take herd from Henson. Will, of course, have men enough to handle Henson’s outfit.’

Vern lifted his eyes frowningly from the scrawling lines, to stare thoughtfully at the waiting prisoners, all mounted, now. Could he trust this information? Trust her? There was always the possibility that this brand-new—and amazing—dislike for Snake, as she had expressed it for the first time the night before, might be nothing more than another play to trick him. He recalled the night in the hotel at Ord...

What if this were only a move to pull him—the only man in the country Snake had any reason to worry about—clear up to the ‘panhandle,’ the northern end, of Ord County, while Snake moved easily and successfully on some raid in the opposite direction.

He frowned down at the note again. He thought that he would have recognized it, for all its lack of signature, as her writing, even without the *muchacho*’s explanation of its sending. A schoolboyish scrawl, in which the final strokes of certain words—of ‘Snake,’ for instance!—were clubby, vicious little jerks of the pencil. Yes... it looked like her.

‘Erskine!’ he called, and when the little ex-sheriff stood beside him: ‘You know Ferd Henson, of course.’

‘Sure. Owns the Pitchfork. Two ranches. One’s on the Solito; Two’s on the Culebra nawth o’ this. He was in town last week. But I reckon Ferd’s on the trail, about now. He said he was goin’ to move a big bunch o’ steers off Pitchfork Two. Why?’

‘Would Snake try takin’ that herd away from him?’

‘Wouldn’t he, just! By—Gemini! Ferd was sayin’ to me he was glad you’d put a Spanish knot in Snake’s tail! Why——’

‘Two thousand steers... I reckon that’s where Snake headed, all right! How’d he manage a wholesale steal like this? I can *sabe* bunches of fifty, or a hundred. But two thousand!’

‘Vern! This outfit is just part o’ the thieves’ organization that stretches—oh, from hell to breakfast! Gangs like Snake’s interlock with twenty others, from Ol’ Mexico up to Wyomin’, they do say. S’pose Snake an’ his bunch lam Ferd an’ his trail-hands; take the herd away from him:

‘Well! They’ll run the herd up into that broken country, north o’ the Solito. They’ll bust it up into li’l’ bunches—heaps o’ li’l’ bunches. They’ll scatter them steers to hell an’ gone in fo’ directions; blot the brands; trade Pitchforks for other brands to other thieves; sell ’em here, the’ an’ everywhere. Simple as fallin’ down a greased pole, way they work.’

‘Wonder how many men Snake’s got with him?’

‘He wouldn’t need more’n twenty. Nor took more, I bet! Look how he left all this bunch here. We can collect more in Ord—an’ that’s as quick a way to head for the Pitchfork as any. Man! man! But I’d love to git a smack at Snake when he was tryin’ for Ferd’s stuff!’

‘Let’s hightail, then. We’ll leave old Rawhide an’ about six of yo’ posse to herd in the prisoners. We’ll hit straight for Ord—hellbent! Tell Rawhide, will you?’

While Erskine drew Rawhide aside, Vern went over to grin cheerfully at the sullen prisoners:

‘So Snake’s hard to outguess, is he, Erby? An’ none of you know where he went. Well, well, well! Me, I’m seventh son of three-four seventh sons. Tell fortunes while you wait. Look through tin cans an’ the bones in heads like yo’s—which is a sight harder, I tell you! Tin cans *did* have somethin’ useful in ’em once—an’ that’s more’n we can say for most of yo’ heads! Well, we find wanderin’ boys while you watch us, on short notice or no notice at all. What’ll you gi’ me, Erby, to find Snake?’

Erby laughed. But his dark eyes, Vern observed, were very alert, very watchful, entirely humorless:

‘Aw, go on, Ranger! Don’t hoorah us po’ boys because you got us heeled an’ hogged up. You couldn’t find Snake in a month. Where is he, if you’re so good at fortune-tellin’?’

‘Le’ me see!’ Ostentatiously, theatrically, Vern put a large hand over his eyes and assumed the mystic’s pose of concentration.

‘He’s—he’s on his way to the Rocker-O!’ he announced in a hushed voice. ‘An’ he’s lonesome! I can tell it, way he’s lookin’ around for li’l’ playmates. It’d be cruel to let him suffer from lack of young companions. We’ll go play with him, we will!’

‘I be damned!’ Erby cried in a tone of great amazement. ‘If you ain’t the *damnedest* Ranger I ever hear tell about! You can waggle yo’ feet educated, an’ you can read a man’s mind! How’d you guess that? *Por dios!* I know he never left a track——’

He whirled on the others, while Vern stared woodenly with set, triumphant grin.

‘He never guessed that! One o’ you dirty illegitimates told him! An’ when I find out which one, I’m goin’ to cut his dam’ gizzard out an’ flap it in his face! I——’

But one and all, some barely concealing their grins, his fellows cried out that they had not said a word about Snake and the Rocker-O. They had no idea how the Ranger had guessed where Snake was going. It was certainly funny that he knew. It beat all hell the way he found out.

Vern turned away, to mount Pico and join Erskine, Dud and Ody, with three Ord men. Until they were out of sight of Rawhide and the prisoners—now guarded entirely by Ord men—they loped across the range in a southwesterly direction—toward the Rocker-O. But once they could look behind them and see nothing over the chaparral, they changed course to a little north of west.

‘“Wee Willie” Hart, he’ll come along with us,’ Erskine grunted to Vern. ‘We ought to gether up nine-ten Deuce o’ Hearts men beside him—an’ Wee Willie, he’s a young army by hisself. Then I can collect ten-twelve salty men out o’ Ord. Vern! I am downright hopeful o’ this li’l’ scout. Mebbe we’ll git that chance I been huntin’, to smack Snake an’ scotch him once an’ for all!’

‘Can happen,’ Vern nodded. ‘When the time comes that I can knock that slick grin off Snake’s face, I’ll feel more like wearin’ one myself! I never was so *tired* of anybody in my life!’

CHAPTER XXVI

At the Pitchfork Herd

'WEE WILLIE' HART shifted his six feet six and three hundred pounds of bone and muscle in the vast seat of his specially built saddle—a saddle for which he had had to send to Sam Myres at Sweetwater, and which—he complained—had been ordered without proper allowance for his continued growth.

He lifted an arm like a cottonwood log, to gesture largely to northward. He and Vern rode in the van of a fast trotting bunch of warriors.

'Yon'r's the Pitchfawk's beginnin',' said Wee Willie. 'My line's that arroyo, yon'r, with the big pile o' rock on the bank. Dam' this kak! It's chafin' me all to hell. We cross that arroyo, Dederick, an' when we top out, we're on Number Two Pitchfawk. Ferd was aimin' to gether on this side, then make his hold-up at Hell Creek water hole.'

They came to the arroyo, sent the horses sliding on their tails down the Deuce of Hearts bank, crossed the dry, rocky bottom, and topped out on Henson's side. Vern's mouth had been set grimly since leaving Ord with seven men—who included young Tuck Brill the murdered doctor's son, and a cousin of Tuck's hardly older. Now, his lips tightened into a harder line as they came out on Pitchfork Range. It was like crossing the final boundary, he thought. Somewhere north of them was Snake Stett, with what should be a prize collection of his gangmen.

'Goin' to be hard luck, all right,' Vern thought moodily, 'if this time is not showdown! If we can just run onto him, with his crew, red-handed, we certainly ought to mop 'em up! Then we can put Erskine in, for actin' sher'f, with a good show to copper the election for sher'f, an' the juries'll dare convict the men we have arrested. Then——'

But he found no answer to that last. Rather, he found an answer that somehow failed to please because of its very normality! 'Then' he and Dud and Ody would ride back to X Company. They would barely arrive before a call would come, for Rangers to take some job that local officers could not, or would not, handle. They would go out, together or alone, on the detail, and daily put the State of Texas in danger of having to pay their funeral expenses. That was the ordinary, the normal, life of a 'horseback Ranger.' Some day, if Tandy carried out his threat to resign, the Governor would

appoint Sergeant Vernon Houston Dederick a Captain of Rangers... he would take the company... He looked around.

‘I said!’ Wee Willie Hart bellowed reproachfully, ‘I said, three times: we got a real fine bunch. Twenty-two all together. Well! If we cain’t clean the plow o’ any gang Snake’s got with him—or ever could round up!—then we better hightail back to Ord an’ git our names in for the Ol’ Ladies’ Wednesday Night Knittin’ an’ Sociability Circle.’

‘Can happen!’ Vern grinned. They rode on.

At Hell Creek water hole they found signs in plenty that Ferd Henson had carried out his expressed plan for rounding up the trail herd. The wide trail led north from the water, parallelling Hell Creek, which was a tributary of the Culebra. Vern and Ody, Dud and Wee Willie Hart, looked at the trail, then pushed on. All through the forenoon they rode. They nooned on the creek-bank, eating ‘bacon pies’ of bannock and fried bacon. They made cigarettes, filled pipes, looked lovingly to the hang of Colts and Winchesters, then rode on.

It was mid-afternoon when they came to the crest of a long rise in this scrub-studded plain. Far ahead, a dust-cloud gave away the presence of the slow-moving trail herd. Two hundred yards down the slope, in a tiny glade, they came to a dead man. He lay beside his dead horse, token—Vern thought grimly—that Snake had been before them, in the search for the trail herd.

They reined in to stare broodingly at the sprawling figure—a red-headed cowboy, with stubbled, good-humored face, grinning quietly even now, as his open blue eyes looked sightlessly up at the wide arch of the sky. Wee Willie Hart cursed in a soft monotone that was out of all keeping with his great bulk—and the set fury of his face.

‘Red Todhunter!’ he finished quietly. ‘A good boy. A damned good boy. Best braunc’ rider in all West Texas. A Hand, any way you took him. Used to ride for me. I’ll settle for Red, with Snake!’

Vern hauled out his glasses, to study the scene ahead. The powerful lenses brought the drag of the herd and the men riding there pretty plainly to him. But, dust-wreathed as they were, he could not make out the faces of the drag riders. The swing riders, too, showed as mere hazy joggers on the herd’s flanks. He put away the glasses. Mechanically, then, he pulled the carbine out of his scabbard:

‘That’s a hell of a big herd to try to surround,’ he meditated aloud. ‘Reckon we can split up into about four bunches, to come at ’em point, swings an’ drag, at about the same time?’

‘Yeh,’ Erskine nodded, staring tensely ahead. ‘If you want, Vern, I’ll take five o’ the boys, an’ we’ll hightail off to one side, an’ come roundin’ back when we git ahead o’ the herd. We’ll open up on ’em, an’ all hands’ll be lookin’ our way. Then, when you-all hear us smokin’ ’em up, you can charge in. Where’ll you be, Vern?’

‘I was just wonderin’, Vern said slowly. ‘I’ve been tryin’ to figure out where Snake’ll be.’

‘Drag, likely. Though, o’ course, he might be ridin’ point.’

‘Well, I’ll take the five you mentioned, Erskine. You take four an’ ride with us. But when we come even with the swing riders on this side, we’ll drop you an’ yo’ bunch. We’ll go on an’ circle around, to get ahead an’ come back at ’em. Dud, you an’ Ody an’ three more, you ride off to the left, same as we go to the right. Breast the swing men on that side. Come in when you hear us *whang* away at ’em. But stay out of sight until then.’

He turned, then, to Wee Willie:

‘Now, Hart, if you’ll keep the balance of these gladiators ready to mop up the drag—workin’ up the sides afterward, an’ takin’ care of anybody that comes projeckin’ back this way, that’ll about fix us up, seems to me.’

He and Erskine and their respective commands turned to the east and rode off through the chaparral for a mile. Then they turned north. Presently, Vern brought his binoculars into play again. He put them away after a long study of the herd’s flank. He grinned at Erskine and that fierce little warrior leaned forward a trifle against the horn.

‘*’Sta bien!*’ Vern shrugged. ‘Just pace ’em, now, until you hear us come to the party. Then charge in.’

He led his bunch—three men of Ord and two of Hart’s Deuce of Hearts cowboys, reckless, grinning youngsters, these last—to the northward. When they were past the point of the herd, well past it, he swung them in a short arc and headed straight for the van of the steers.

There was no use trying to conceal their coming. For there was nothing but low scrub, in this region. Nothing to cover a man on a horse from another mounted man. So they licked the quirts back and forth or raked their horses with the rowels. They came at the frantic pounding gallop of the componies’ utmost speed.

The little brutes of the Deuce of Hearts men seemed to double like jackrabbits. Their eyes walled white; their nostrils flared out with *hough! hough! hough!*—of panting breath that blended with the drum of hammering hoofs that sounded like faraway thunder. Vern grinned suddenly, ferociously.

There was something, always, in the charge that roused him. He wanted to yell like a Comanche. There was not a man anywhere ahead who could match him. He *knew* it. He always knew it, horseback, charging.

Evidently, the others were lifted, too. They leaned forward, grinning savagely. They held their Winchesters high overhead and leaned a little forward, as if they could not get to the point riders quickly enough. The two Deuce of Hearts cowboys suddenly raised their voices in shrill, spine-crinkling yell. Vern caught the infectious yell at its peak and added a deeper note. The two Ord men yelled:

‘Yaaaaiiiiiaaaah! Yaaaaiiiiiaaaah! Yip-yip-yip-yaaaaiiiiiaaaah!’

The point riders had halted abruptly. Now from the dust about them came the ragged bellowing of several guns—Colts and long guns, both—blending in a rolling, heavy detonation. A horse turned a somersault almost at Vern’s side, one of the Ord men catapulting from the saddle to fall heavily and lie motionless, at the end of a sort of human pinwheel spinning.

Vern yelled shortly, jerking up his hand. His men flung themselves from the saddles, the well-trained horses stopping as they felt riders’ legs lifting from off stirrup leathers, fairly sliding on their tails. Vern shoved his carbine across saddle seat, standing sheltered by Pico. The others modeled upon him. They played the deadly Winchester music as rapidly as they could press triggers and work the levers.

Vern had seen Snake Stett’s high-crowned *sombrero* in that group ahead. Now, he saw the rustlers disintegrate, but with a final splattering of shots. They were pushing back into the milling steers. Vern saw the danger. He yelled again:

‘Up you go an’ after ’em! They’ll lose us—they get into the herd! They’ll be all over, like the hairpin that ate the dynamite. Up! Up an’ get ’em!’

They went into the saddles—mostly without touching stirrups. They swung the quirts or rowelled savagely, going after the thieves. It was hard to see, in the dust raised by the scattering steers and by the churning hoofs of their own racing horses. Vern fired once without getting his carbine clear up to the shoulder; fired at almost pointblank range and saw a man come sideways out of the hull. Of the dozen-odd his party had first attacked, he thought hardly four could be left. But one of the survivors, he was pretty sure, was Snake.

Back through the frightened herd they pushed as fast as they could drive the horses. They came at last to that *mêlée* staged by Ody and Dud, their

followers and the swing riders of Snake's rustlers. It was nearly blind fighting, with the steers panicking off in all directions. In the wreathing dust-clouds a man fired at another man and saw his target vanish—but whether from his bullet, or someone else's, or whether hurt at all, there was no way of telling.

Nor did anyone wait to see. It was whirl out of the path of a stampeding steer! Twist toward the face of a strange rider! Snap a shot at him—two or three, if time and necessity were there! Dodge another steer and on again!

Vern came, watery-eyed from the dust and smoke, back to what had been the drag of the herd. But the Pitchfork steers had broken so that the herd had no semblance of order. Mostly, they seemed to be galloping heavily toward their home range. As he came near a group of men, a sound much like a bull bellowing smote upon Vern's ears. Almost, he grinned, even in the tension of the moment. For he saw Wee Willie Hart, reins and a Colt in left hand, another Colt in his right, charging down on a close-locked knot of men.

'Yaaaaiiiiiaaaah! Yaaaaiiiiiaaaah! Yip-yip-yip——'

The Deuce of Hearts cowboys were still yelling shrilly, somewhere over in the dust-cloud. But their yipping was punctuated with shots. Nowhere, look as he might, could Vern find Snake. He lifted himself on his toes in the brass-bound hoops of the stirrups. A man materialized beside him like something from a stage magician's trick. It was that black-haired and dark-skinned two-hundred-pounder, Cage Brinton, whom they had held in Ord Jail after arresting him in Paradise.

He yelled savagely at sight of Vern. He rode straight at him, but Pico spun away and gave Vern time to lift his pistol. He let the hammer drop, but the firing-pin clicked on an exploded shell. Cage Brinton fired almost pointblank, his Winchester held Apache style across his lap. Vern whirled Pico 'on a dime' and charged straight at Brinton.

The big man tried to spur out of the way, to get another shot, then changed his mind and slammed another slug at Vern. It missed—by how much or how little Vern could never know—as Brinton's first shot had missed. Then Pico went twisting in to side the other horse. Vern leaned from the saddle and flung an arm around the outlaw. He got arm about Brinton's neck and forced his head back. His left hand groped to the butt of Cage's left-hand Colt. He jerked at it, while Brinton fought against Vern's throttling forearm and tried to shorten his carbine, get the muzzle against Vern's body. The Colt came up, first. Vern ramméd it into Brinton and let the big hammer fall.

With the muffled roar of it, Brinton jerked convulsively. He went limp against Vern, who let him go. He fell sideways and Vern, with a quick glance at him, kned Pico away from the sorrel and looked about him, once more searching for Snake.

Then, from somewhere in the east, there sounded a shrill, somehow fierce, chorus of yells. Vern scowled, facing that way. The sound was too distant, he thought, to come from any of his party. They should all be right around here, anyway, mixed in the scattering remnant of the herd. He charged down on Wee Willie Hart and his battle.

A man came from that milling press of figures, low over the saddle horn, charging upon a wide-eyed, rocketing horse. Frio Jack! Vern jerked up Cage Brinton's Colt, which he still held. He lined it instinctively upon the coming man. The hammer clicked hollowly. It was empty. Cage had saved one shell—to ensure his own death, as Fate had written his fortune.

Frio Jack went past like a tornado without a glance at Vern, who let him go. He was more worried about those newcomers than about the like of Frio Jack escaping temporarily. Before he reached Hart, the fight about the huge man was over. Vern yelled warning to the Deuce of Hearts owner:

‘Somebody comin’! More of Snake’s outfit, at a guess!’

Hart, with Tuck Brill and his young cousin and two more grimy, panting men, whirled to face the east. Even in the uproar about them, there came plainly the thuttering drum of racing hoofs. Men materialized, came closer, closer still. Fifty yards away they slid their horses to a halt to stare.

‘Ferd Henson!’ Wee Willie Hart bellowed. ‘Ohhh! Ferd! Come on up! Where the hell you-all been?’

Ferd Henson, wizened, stooping, looking like a part of his big buckskin, pressed a heel against the big horse and came galloping to them, four riders following.

‘The sons o’ dogs jumped us ’way back yon’r. Downed Red Todhunter first crack. I seen the’ was too many by twenty or more, for us to fight. So we hightailed. We hung to the edges a spell, to see what they aimed to do. Then we fogged it to git help. But Federico, yere, he swore he could hear shootin’. We come back to see, an’ when we made out it was a fight——’

Wee Willie told him shortly of the blow that had been hit. Then they moved together to check results. When they could take stock, Vern and Erskine and Hart tallied thirteen dead, of Snake’s raiders, with seven more so badly wounded that they had not been able to escape.

On his own side, Dud Blaze had lost his horse and had a deep bullet furrow in his thigh, in addition to two knife slashes. That Ord man who had been thrown, as Vern charged the point riders, had a broken arm and a sprained ankle. Two more of the possemen from Ord, who had fought at the Snake, were dead, and a third had a bullet-hole in his shoulder.

The Deuce of Hearts was short two cowboys killed and two more of Hart's men were wounded, one shot through both thighs. Of the Ord men who had joined with Tuck Brill and his cousin, one was dead and another had lost an ear.

'Five wiped out,' Vern summed it up grimly. 'To down thirteen of his hard cases.'

'We hit 'em a lick like they never dreamt anybody'd ever dare to do,' Hart nodded. 'I told you, comin', Ranger, that we had a fine bunch! I been in heaps o' fights, in this country. But this is the biggest an' the best I ever see.'

'But Snake an' Lute Cane got off—an' Frio Jack!' Vern grumbled. 'Along of four-five others not so important. One of his fellas says there was Snake an' about twenty-four or -five more. Funny! Out of that bunch that broke jail with Snake, we can count out every last one but Snake, Cane, an' Frio Jack! Well! Let's scatter out, an' squander around, an' see if we can cut their trail. They'll maybe head for the Snake, not knowin' it's burned down.'

Erskine, Ody and Dud joined Vern. The others stayed to tend the wounded of both sides. The four of them spread out and rode at a running walk, hunting for a trail that led south. It was hard trailing, through all the pounding the back-trail had been given that day. And if the fugitives' trail were not cut pretty quickly, it would be necessary to wait until morning—or head somewhere on a guess.

'Hey!' Ody Gardineer yelled suddenly, from where he rode leaning and staring at the trail floor. 'Two men turned off, right here. Headed to the east. I'll take 'em for a while.'

Vern rode on, watching the trail mechanically, but occupied chiefly with his thoughts. Grimly, he kept picturing Snake Stett. It was hard, somehow, to get the outlaw leader out of his mind. He found it odd that, now, when he knew that Snake was on the run, a beaten, a discredited, general, not only on the defensive, but actually toppling from his pinnacle as head of all the outlaws who had terrorized the Culebra River country, he had only a savage satisfaction.

He had expected to be excited, thrilled, when this moment came; when he could look at Snake and know that he had beaten him. He had promised

himself in the very beginning, in Shamus O'Hara's store, that he would break Snake's power, finish Snake. Then laugh at him. And now, he had no desire to laugh! That puzzled him.

Another picture came, but not to displace Snake's. He could see Priscilla Ord, slim and lovely, boyish, and yet very much a girl, as he had seen her in one place, one mood, and another. She *had* told the truth, in that note to him. And, so, he admitted that she had told the truth at the Rocker-O, when she said that she hated Snake. Except for her warning, this terrific blow would not have been struck. And yet——

Suddenly, Vern saw the tracks of several horses turning out of the trail. They were pointing eastward. That way lay the blackened shell of the stone house by the Culebra, the house on the Snake. He looked fiercely that way, then beckoned the others with the scooping arm-motion of the Indian, while he leaned far out of the saddle. They came at the lope as he straightened and kned Pico off to the side.

'The rest of the bunch,' he grunted, when they came up to him. 'Reckon it was a stall—a couple turnin' off, first, to attract anybody trailin' 'em, then the rest went the same way. It'll be 'way into the night when we hit the Snake...'

CHAPTER XXVII

Showdown!

THE trail of the seven men—as it became before dark—led on past the house at the Snake. Vern, with Erskine, Dud Blaze, and Ody Gardineer, came cautiously up to the ruin in the night. They prowled about like so many great cats. Nowhere could they find signs of life. They squatted by the wall and smoked or dozed until the first gray light. Then they ate and fortified themselves with coffee.

‘Paradise is my guess,’ Vern said after breakfast.

He rode in grim silence. Ody and Dud snarled at each other as they went, laboring desperately to discover some promising subject of mutual disagreement. But Vern hardly heard them. He watched the trail—growing cold, now. He wondered if it would turn off to the Rocker-O. That would be west a little.

How many times Snake must have turned his horse toward the Ords... For he had been two, three, perhaps four, years in the country. Nobody seemed to know just when he had arrived, or from what place he had come. But he had quickly made himself felt on the Rocker-O. Say that he had come to the Culebra River three years back...

Vern pictured 'Cilla Ord as she would have been, then. A hard-riding little boy-girl, just at the age to be captured by Snake's swing and swagger, his knowledge of a world as foreign to a Texas youngster as Europe or Asia. And Snake had captivated her. No doubt of that! She had come fairly to worship him, as rumor had it more than three or four other women of the land had done. Vern thought of Molly, the dance-hall girl. He grinned twistedly. He had been so certain, that afternoon of the jail-break, that he had fooled her—and it had been he who was fooled, by Snake, through her.

But he thought, also, of Vingie Furby. The poor kid! She had been too pretty and too easily taken. He wondered where she was, now. Nobody seemed to know anything of her, past the time when she was going from hand to hand at the Snake. His face hardened as he thought of Snake and 'Cilla Ord. *She* was lucky that 'Pache's place in the country, his power, had kept Snake within bounds. Else she would have gone Vingie's way.

He looked up jerkily when Erskine, now at his stirrup, was moved to interfere in the latest argument between Dud and Ody—on the topic of the respective characters of the men ahead.

‘Lute Cane,’ Erskine said judicially, ‘he’s a mighty dangerous man. He’s sneakin’, an’ he don’t like to take no chances. But he’s just as poisonous as ary copperhead you ever see! But if I was pickin’ the man out o’ them fellas ahead that I would ruther buck, I would pick ary one before I teamed up with Frio Jack! Yes, sir! Frio’s one o’ them sulky fat men, sulky red-heads. I do’no’ just why it is, but somehow when a fattish red-headed man is mean, he’s plumb mean! Lute Cane, *he* don’t want no part o’ Frio Jack. An’ I don’t rightly believe Snake does!’

‘What do you reckon Frio an’ ’Pache Ord fell out over?’ Vern grunted as they rode on. ‘You know that ’Pache kicked Frio off the Rocker-O.’

‘About ’Cilla, I would guess. I have see ’em in Ord a time or two. Frio was certainly makin’ up to the kid. He was crazy about her. An’ that proves what I was sayin’—or kind o’ proves it: If Frio was scared o’ Snake, would he have showed his likin’ for the girl Snake claimed, aimed to marry?’

They rode past the point where the fugitives, if intending to make the Rocker-O, would normally have turned off. They rode on toward Paradise. In the hour following noon they reached the little town. The first man met, at one end of the town close to the little jail, shrugged blankly when Vern questioned him. If Snake and his bunch were in town, he knew nothing about it.

‘Well?’ Dud Blaze grinned cheerfully. ‘What’s to do?’

‘Make the rounds!’ Vern answered grimly. ‘He’s certainly here unless he’s headed straight through an’ out—which I don’t believe. Let the six-shooters ride loose, though...’

They scattered. Vern rode on along the street until he swung down before the store of Shamus O’Hara. That warlike Irishman appeared instantly in the doorway. He grinned cheerfully enough at Vern, albeit a trifle tight-lipped.

‘An’ I do be dom’ glad to set eyes on ye, friend!’ he greeted Vern. ‘Snake an’ his crew, ye’re huntin’. Well, ye’ll find ’em in Dallas Jenny’s, the kit an’ caboodle. Like the curs o’ the alley they really be, they come sneakin’ into town with tails between their dom’ legs. Snake has gathered unto hisself it’s a half-dozen, I reckon, o’ the town’s leadin’ bums.’

‘An’ where’s Ery Tricker?’ Vern demanded. ‘At the jail?’

‘Ah, now! It’s sad! It’s dom’ sad! Poor Ery! He hath gone where the woodbineth twineths not an’ the purty li’l’ birrdie singeths no moreth in the morneth... ’Twas day before yisterday, I remember as clear as—as if ’twas tomorrow. Ery, he was by chance headin’ north an’ faith! ’Twas the

domnedest collision he had! Ah, me... With a .45-90 slug that chanced to be travelin' south, whilst he was travelin' north. *Tchk! Tchk!* An' the weather bein' so fearful hot—or will be soon—we had to put him in Boot Hill right off.'

He looked shrewdly at Vern; shook his wise head slightly:

'What's it, m' lad? Ye have smacked Snake the domnedest lick ever he dreamed could hit him. Ye have him on the run. The boys are turnin' to look close at him—an' think some, it might be. But—ye're not lookin' happy!'

'So Cass Furby got Ery Tricker—or whoever's handlin' Cass's estate got him,' Vern meditated, ignoring the personal question. He could hardly have answered it, anyway. He could not recall that he had ever felt so weary, so uninterested in life. 'Well, he got Drake, too, while Drake was ridin' with us...'

'An' now, where away?' O'Hara inquired.

'Dallas Jenny's. Talk to Snake,' Vern shrugged.

He got back on Pico and turned him. And he saw Shamus O'Hara reach inside the store's door and draw out two objects very dissimilar. One was a curling cow's horn, the other his lever-action shotgun.

Vern shrugged indifferently and rode on toward the dance-hall. Then a resounding blast from that cow's horn turned him in the saddle. He stared narrowly at the men who came quickly from doors up and down the street—as if they had expected the resonant blast of O'Hara's horn. But when he turned back to the dance-hall, he noted that nobody had appeared in the door of Dallas Jenny's. Over the long building seemed to hang a sinister sort of quiet.

He came out of the saddle, looked flashingly at the hang of his holstered Colt, then at the unbuttoned condition of his shirt front. He walked across the planks of the sidewalk toward the open door. There was a window close to it. He leaned that way and looked through the opening. Snake Stett and Lute Cane, hands on pistol butts, were standing by the main bar. They were watching the door steadily, tensely. Frio Jack was farther down, his elbows hooked on the bar's top. Frio's hat was low over his greenish eyes. His heavy face—still pale from that wound Vern had donated him on the day of arrival in the country—was sulky, but without any trace of worry. He seemed to be watching Snake and Lute Cane.

Ody and Dud came running around the corner of the big, barnlike place. Erskine was at Vern's elbow, now. On the street, men were standing here and there as Shamus O'Hara was standing—as if awaiting something. There

were men who looked one way, and men who looked another. Some who Vern knew to be citizens of the O'Hara type were staring very hard at certain individuals who were at least in sympathy with Snake Stett, if not actually aligned on his side.

'Well?' Erskine grinned. 'We go in smokin', Vern? They're waitin' for us, a' right: Paws on their hawglais...'

'Reckon,' Vern nodded. 'It's showdown an' Snake knows it. He is cornered. He's got to lie down or fold up!'

But a wild yell came from somewhere at the rear. The group at the bar whirled toward the back of the dance-hall. He and Erskine took advantage of that momentary turn to cross the threshold. Vern stumbled on the end of a broken plank, as he lifted his voice in a yell to Snake, Lute Cane, and Frio.

Vern came to his knees, his Colt-armed hands slapping the floor. Snake whirled back, face twisted malevolently, his hands jerking to the pearl-handled guns. It was as fast a draw as Vern had ever dreamed of seeing. In the split second when he was trying to straighten, get his own pistols up, he paid flashing tribute to Snake's speed. His own best certainly would do no more than match it. And he knew that he was too late, now. Snake's Colts were leveling on him as he jerked his hands up. Snake's right-hand gun roared and the black hat jerked from Vern's head. He was still trying to get a shot in when the second slug fairly scorched his cheek.

The hammer of his .45 dropped. But Snake had already jerked spasmodically as a heavy rifle roared in a dusky corner. Out of the corner of his eye Vern saw a gaunt, bareheaded old man lifting up over a table in that corner. A long rifle was in his hands. He fired again at Snake; fired a third time, a fourth. Snake crumpled and, as he was falling, Vern's shot struck him. He slid to the floor as if there were no bones in his body, bending at neck, waist, knees.

Lute Cane, crouched by the bar, had a gun in each hand. He was like a cornered little wolf. But his wizened face, Vern decided as he turned his Colt that way, was more like a side-winder rattlesnake. The white-haired man shifted his aim as Vern did. He and Vern and Erskine, all were shooting at Cane at the same time. The little man loosed two shots into the floor, one from each pistol. He fell back against the bar, seemed almost to roll down it, and dropped across the rail.

They stood gaping then one at another. It came to Vern suddenly that he had forgotten Frio Jack. And where had Frio got to, during that tense period of forty seconds' shooting? Ody and Dud, with some men of the town, burst through the rear door, now. Dud Blaze yelled at Vern:

‘How’s it going? We met a couple of hairpins who were—well, indiscreet! They’re waiting for us, outside...’

Out from his dusky corner came the tall, white-haired man, now. He moved with odd shuffling and thumping. Vern, staring, nodded to himself. Moccasin and stump. He had guessed it. He had an idea that to this weird figure he owed his life. For that rifle talking in the corner had thrown Snake off balance just the shade needed to make him miss.

He watched the old man. So did the others. They stared as he came over to stare briefly at Lute Cane, but long at Snake. At last he looked up with glassily bright black eyes, facing Vern, but looking blankly at him. His lips moved in the tangle of his beard. Part of the muttered words were audible only as intonations, a singsong. He reminded Vern of the old Hebrew prophets with his jabbering of Old Testament texts, his parson-like choice of words.

‘Them that walks the paths o’ the bloody an’ lustin’, they will come to doom... or doom will come to them... huntin’ ’em out when they lay down to sleep... or when they stand up in the mornin’... an’ so it was! So—it—was!’

His voice trailed off into vague mumblings. Erskine shook his head, as if to rid it of some fog. He came quickly over and put out his hand. Vern thought that the little ex-sheriff was as bent on touching the old man, experimentally, as on taking his arm. For Erskine wore an expression of unbelief.

‘Cass Furby!’ he shouted. ‘*Por dios!* Cass Furby!’

The old man turned slowly to him. As slowly, he put up a hand and took Erskine’s wrist, removed his hand and let it drop.

‘No,’ he said thickly, but distinctly. ‘Not Cass Furby. I am not Cass Furby. *He* is dead. He died—a long time ago. They buried him. You saw him buried. But out of his coffin come a critter bent on vengeance; sent to bring the flamin’ sword. The coffin lid was pushed up; the dirt, it was flung back; so’s this instrument o’ vengeance could come out an’ go about his mission. Gone, now! They’re all gone that carried off that pore child an’ made her a plaything in the house o’ the abomination——’

Then he whirled with a speed that was incredible, moving that drooping, ancient body. His eyes burned insanely:

‘One is yet to kill! One—an’ the last one—that stole my girl! He was here! I seen him! Frio Jack——’

He took a quick step toward the back door, then stumbled. Erskine jumped and caught him as he began to fall with head drooping on his chest,

the heavy rifle clattering to the planks of the floor. Vern had moved, too. And he had an inexplicable feeling of fear. He had not had it so, even in that moment on the floor when he was trying to get his guns to bear on Snake—knowing that he could not lift them in time.

He saw instantly how Frio had vanished—through a half-open door in the wall at the end of the bar. He went racing through it. There was a dusky passage, with light at the end of it. It led him to the open ground behind the dance-hall and to a hitch rack where several horses were tied. The thing which caught Vern's eye, instantly, and deepened his uneasiness, was a hitch rope dangling from the crossbar of the rack. Someone in a hurry had slashed that rope in two; cut a horse loose.

Dud Blaze was on his heels. He, too, stared at the hitch rope with complete understanding. Vern went at the run to the rack. He looked up and down the horses and picked the best one mechanically. He ducked under the crossbar and caught up the stirrup leathers on the saddle that horse wore. He held them out against his arm, found the length nearly enough his own to serve. He jerked the hitch rope loose, caught up the reins and mounted.

Dud Blaze had copied almost Vern's every motion. He put hand on saddle horn and mounted like a cat. They backed out of the row of horses and Vern looked once at the ground to see the direction in which moved those hoofs from the vacant space at the rack.

Dud was siding him closely when they came to the town's edge. Imperceptibly, almost, he nodded, when past the last reeling house of Paradise Vern lifted his hard face and looked out across the chaparral, toward the Rocker-O, and shook the reins slightly. The horses jumped into a long lope.

'I take it that you're taking Erskine's opinion—of Frio Jack,' Dud grunted. Vern nodded grimly, face set forward.

'Yeh. An' I'm takin' what he said, about Frio's makin' up to the girl, to put with what I already knew about that.'

CHAPTER XXVIII

‘—*Buckaroo!*’

THOSE horses, ridden into Paradise by some of Snake’s men flying from the trail herd of Ferd Henson, and the battle, were splendid animals. None of Snake’s men rode anything but the finest horses in that country, save by accident. And they had had some rest at the rack behind Dallas Jenny’s.

Vern pushed his fast and Dud paced beside him. Vern kept his eyes up. He ignored the trail entirely. Dud mumbled something about Frio Jack, and tried to catch a glimpse of the varied hoofmarks on that road. Vern jerked head about to him.

‘Oh, likely this is just a fool notion of mine,’ he said with loud carelessness, over the hammering sound of the hoofs. ‘Likely, he caught his horse there an’ he turned himself into a dyed-in-the wool emigrant. He knows the game’s up, in this country, with Snake an’ the others gone.’

Dud nodded, staring narrowly at him. Vern, catching that understanding stare, swore viciously.

‘What the hell’re you goggin’ at me like that, for? That’s the way it looks to me an’ I don’t see a thing to make me change my mind, either!’

For he was the more worried with every yard the horses covered. He remembered the calm efficiency with which Frio Jack had knocked Priscilla Ord’s horse from under her, that day when he had first ridden into the tangled affairs of the Culebra River country. He could see as vividly as if he had witnessed it, the scene on the Rocker-O which must have preceded that act into which he had thrust himself: The moment when ’Cilla, resenting Frio Jack’s attentions to her—and, perhaps, his sneers at his leader, Snake—had gone to her father, and ’Pache Ord had kicked Frio off the place.

‘An’ when I came on ’em that first day,’ he muttered to himself, with sardonic laugh at his own innocence, ‘I thought it was somebody tryin’ to wipe out somebody else! An’ all Frio was up to was downin’ her horse so’s he could walk up an’ laugh at her an’ carry her off. My, my! There were a thousand things I didn’t know about this layout, that day!’

They pulled in on a rise, to let the horses breathe. Dud made a cigarette with flashing twirl of paper and tobacco in slim brown fingers. He looked sidelong at Vern, tossed the tiny cylinder into air, caught it between his lips and grinned suddenly.

‘We’ll put a spoke in his wheel, old-timer!’ he said reassuringly. ‘We will that! I agree with you, that he’d hardly head for the Rocker-O. Distance is what he wants an armload of. But if he did, with notions about Priscilla Ord, we’re too close on his heels for him to get away.’

He scratched a match and put the flame to cigarette end. He drew in and blew out a great cloud of smoke and watched it go upward. His eyes narrowed amusedly. He did not look at Vern.

‘She’s a—mightily pretty girl; and she has plenty underneath that prettiness. Loyalty—look how she stuck by Snake until he showed himself for exactly what he was. Bravery—not a whole lot of girls would have owned nerve enough to slip out to that shed and crack the guard over the head and let you out, the way she did. That took nerve and plenty of it.’

‘What?’ Vern yelled incredulously. ‘Cilla laid that guard out? *She* let me out of that shed?’

‘Well, I was the one who went out, you recall, to look for the guard. I found him tied up like a Christmas package. And I was curious to know who had done the rescuing. You thought Ody had done it. I knew you thought that, for you were so surprised to learn that he’d been with us all the time. So I scratched a match or two and looked. *Her* footprints were all over the place. She knocked him on the head, cut you loose, steered you outside, then went back and tied him.’

‘She—she did that, for me!’ Vern said softly, staring at Dud blankly. ‘She did it...’

He shook his head marvelingly. His mouth twisted as he thought of her. What a girl! And certainly, she had proved that all that talk about marrying Snake had been nothing *but* talk. And she was at the Rocker-O, now; she would be there when he came. She couldn’t hold him off, any longer—and he knew that the indifference he had felt had been born altogether of hurt pride. He grinned and gathered up his reins.

‘Dud! You have been a dam’ nuisance to me, it’s just a heap of times. But I forgive you, now. Even a child like you has got its uses an’ I feel big-hearted, right now. So—pour the glue bottle into that saddle seat. You’re goin’ to ride like the Devil was on the hull behind you, an’ if you fall off, nobody is goin’ to stop to pick you up!’

He put the hooks to the big horse and they went down the slope at pounding gallop. Vern did not slacken pace until he saw ahead of them the ‘big house’ of the Rocker-O. Nor did he slow, then. They came into the yard of the place like quarter horse riders finishing a race. Around the house,

sending up a dust-cloud as they turned the corner shortly, they came tearing and flung the horses back on their haunches. Vern dropped off and—stopped short, to stare.

Priscilla Ord sat in a great handmade rocker on the front gallery. There was something white in her lap. A needle and a length of colored thread was in lifted right hand. She looked up calmly at them and rocked gently.

‘How do you do, Miss Ord,’ Dud Blaze greeted her smilingly. ‘Sergeant Dederick—you’ve met the Sergeant, I think—wants to see Mr. Ord on—on business, I suppose you’d call it. He wants to ask him if he can——’

‘Dud,’ Vern said grimly, ‘will you kindly go away from here? An’ if you have any doubts about whether you’re far enough away, or not, keep on goin’! I haven’t got a bit of business with Mr. Ord. My business is—— Well? Are you goin’, or——’

Dud nodded gravely and turned his horse. He yelled shrilly and sent the tall sorrel thundering toward the corral. Vern let the split reins drop and came slowly across the space between until he stepped up onto the gallery. He leaned against a post above her and watched silently. She poked at the linen with the needle. He waited. At last, she looked up at him slantingly:

‘It’s too bad that my father isn’t home. I haven’t any idea when he’ll be back, either.’

‘Yeh,’ Vern said, almost absently. ‘Funny to see you doin’ that—embroiderin’. I never expected it of you.’

‘No?’ Her voice was placid, incurious. ‘Well, I imagine that there are a good many things about me that you don’t know. Not,’ she hastened to add in indifferent tone, ‘that it makes any difference.’

‘You think not? ’Cilla, everything an’ anything about you makes a difference to me! But you’re right: There are plenty of things I don’t know about you. But I’ll find ’em out! I have got a lot of time to find ’em out.’

‘I hardly think’—she poked the needle into a tiny flower and drew it out, looked at the result, jabbed again—‘that you have much time. You see, I’m leaving for San Antonio, soon.’

‘Nice town. I won’t mind bein’ there.’

‘Just for a short stay. Then—New York, Philadelphia——’

‘Why, that’ll be the same as an education, for me!’ He nodded earnestly. ‘I’ve been a better man in every way, since the trip to Chicago!’

‘And that’s just the start,’ she continued, as if she had not heard. ‘What’s the use of having money, I ask my father, if you don’t spend it! So I think

I'll go on across, to London, Paris, Berlin——'

'An' Vienna!' he cried. 'You'd not want to miss seein' the place where the li'l' sausages started on their Round-the-World trip. You're dead-right, 'Cilla, about everything. Money's no use until it's spent. I've worried about that bunch of reward dollars in the bank, for ages. An' you're plenty old enough, now, to see places. An' it's time *I* was gettin' about. First thing I know, I might be too old. We'll have a lovely time, hon'.'

'We?' she said, and looked up at him.

'You don't think you can shake me, now, do you? After you have proved _____,

'I haven't proved anything!' she said quickly. 'I wrote you that note, about Snake, because after thinking things over, I decided that I'd been silly—childish. After all, we have a great deal invested in this country. Snake has to go—he and all his kind—before our investment is safe. Too, I learned that, far from being the Sir Walter Scott knightly soul he'd seemed, he is really just a cowardly thief with a polish. You were right about'—for the first time the calm voice shook a little, but she tightened red mouth and went on instantly—'his personal responsibility for Vingie Furby and—other things.'

She faced him levelly. He watched with the beginning of a small frown. She seemed older by years, almost overnight. She had been a tomboyish youngster; now she was very much the young lady. Perhaps it was because she had put her hair up, coiled the long braids in a loose knot at the nape of slim, round neck. And the flowered dress gave maturity to her.

'Let's don't talk about anything else—personal,' she commanded, rather than suggested. 'Because——'

'Because why?' he said roughly. 'You can't do that! I know how I feel an' I'm not quittin' the fight until I know how you feel. You slipped out to the shed, yonder. You knocked that guard on the head. You let me loose when I was waitin' for the rope an' the cottonwood. Are you tellin' me, now, that it didn't mean anything?'

'Of course it meant something! It was through my silliness that they caught you! I couldn't have slept again in my life, if they had—had hurt you! I pay my debts!'

'I told you, that day on the trail——'

'That day has gone—and so have a good many more. There's no use—no reason to talk about it. But, because you're so persistent, I'm going to tell you something I hadn't expected to say—after I learned the truth about

Snake, I—oh, I suppose it was a sort of reaction from that. But I remembered what you had said, on the trail. I wondered if I didn't like you a great deal. I decided to find out. And so I tried to be nice to you. But you had changed, too. And all I needed was to see that. Funny!

'Funny? You're tellin' me that the way I feel makes no difference? That you don't care a thing about me?'

'Oh, no! I like you. I admire you. I have confidence in you. I will pay you the compliment of saying that, for this very difficult job, no better man could have been chosen. I believe that you will eventually clean up this country; run Snake out, or kill him, or arrest him——'

'We'll be goin',' he grunted. He took off his hat and held it at his knee. Sight of the bullet-snagged crown made him think vividly of Snake. 'Tell yo' father, when he comes—if he hasn't heard by then—that we mopped up the tail-end of the more prominent scalawags, in Paradise. Snake's dead. But I reckon I can't claim him. Vingie Furby's father shot him in Dallas Jenny's. An' Lute Cane an' three-four others. Only one who got away was Frio Jack. So——'

'Snake's—dead?' she repeated incredulously. 'Cass Furby killed him?'

Her face was very white, her mouth very thin. The hands on the embroidery shook. Then she caught herself.

'It—it was—fitting, I suppose. That her father should kill him. But—but we knew him so well—knew the pleasant side of him—it's a shock—even though I knew that it would surely come——'

'So, we're apt to see a lot of business done in trunk-buyin' an' dust-raisin', Vern went on. 'I won't see more than the first of the emigratin'. For I'll be goin' back to the company. So——'

He smiled at her and showed her the bow that his father had brought from Tennessee. He straightened and, turning slightly, saw Dud Blaze hunkered beside the corral. Dud saw Vern looking at him and ostentatiously lifted both arms and stretched and yawned.

'That's a signal. You might say, it's a token.' Vern's drawl was whimsical, gentle, as he spoke to 'Cilla without looking her way. 'Yon' handsome young man, he's anxious to be on his way. He thinks it's time for work. Well—he's right, as he often is. I have been mixin' work with day-dreamin'—with Wish-it'd-Happen... Now that I have been shown the foolishness of that, I'll not be burro-headed. I'll not have to be shown but once. Good-bye!'

He stepped off the gallery, keeping wide back carefully to the silent girl. His hat was at a precise angle over one sandy brow, now. He smiled fixedly, as he looked around for the big bay he had ridden out from town. It had walked around the house, toward a patch of grass. He followed and hummed to himself; began to chant softly, clearly:

I'll git up in my saddle, my quirt I'll take in hand;
I'll think of you, Mollie, when in some far distant land.
I'll think of you, Mollie, you caused me to roam—
I'm a rebel soldier an' Dixie it's my home!

A sudden shrill yell turned him toward the corral. Dud Blaze had jumped up. He was running toward Vern, holding a pistol in his right hand, muzzle skyward, the forefinger of his left hand stabbing out toward the house.

'Look out! Look out!' Vern made out his cry.

Automatically, without understanding, Vern reached over to the butt of his Colt. He drew it smoothly, quickly, as he turned again to stare at the corner of the house.

Frio Jack, on a tall buckskin, rounded the corner. He had his carbine up and he fired instantly. Vern let the hammer drop and the buckskin crumpled, bullet in head.

Frio came off the horse like a cat. He flung the Winchester. Vern twisted, dodging it, but his second shot went into the eaves in consequence. Then Frio was on him, flinging an arm up about his neck, getting pistol from scabbard with the other hand. Vern twisted to bring the Colt to Frio's body. Frio snapped the barrel of his .45 up and it lashed across the side of Vern's head. Vern felt his knees buckling. He clung desperately to Frio, who now tried to push him off.

He felt himself twisted about and foggily guessed that Frio was making him a shield against Dud's fire. He heard the .45 bellow close beside him. But he felt no pain. That shot had been fired at Dud, then. He lifted sagging hand, trying once more to put Colt muzzle against Frio. The barrel of Frio's Colt descended upon his wrist. The bones of his arm ached with the blow. His hand was numbed so that he could not tell, even, if he had dropped his gun.

He tightened the grasp he had on Frio's body; hugging him desperately close. He worked his foot forward, got it behind Frio's leg and heaved. They went sprawling to the ground. Frio's Colt roared and roared again. Flaming pain seared Vern's side. It shocked him out of the daze which had gripped him. He twisted and saw Frio's gun arm rising. He let go his left-handed grip. There was now, strong in his nostrils, the smell of burning cloth. He

lunged across Frio and caught the lifting arm between his teeth, bearing it down, holding it against the ground. But Frio, with a savage sound, half snarl, half groan, rolled desperately and came on top. Vern's clawing left hand got under his shirt. He closed his fingers on the butt of his second Colt in the shoulder holster. He tugged and twisted against Frio's weight, trying to get it out. He clamped his jaws harder on Frio's arm.

Then Frio was pounding his face with left fist and he could not jerk his head away rapidly enough to avoid all the blows. He let Frio's arm go, came half-erect with a twist and plunge that sent the other sprawling. He heard Dud's Colt bellow as he halted, on his knees, with the gun out of shoulder holster. Frio fell back. His hand lifted, bringing up the gun which—it seemed—he had never dropped. But it sagged without a shot. Dud streaked over and kicked it out of the laxing fingers.

'Well!' Vern said thickly. 'It—it looks like—Erskine read him—about right! He's the—battler—of the bunch!'

He got shakily to his feet and swayed there. One eye was closing. His head throbbed. His mouth was puffing. Before his eyes the wall of the house swayed dizzily to left and right. He recalled the horse toward which he had been going. He moved around Frio. He did not see that he walked in the wrong direction. The ground seemed amazingly uneven where before it had been level. He lifted his feet high to keep from stumbling over the rolls of it. Then he fell forward and his chin struck something hard with tremendous force. There was no pain to it, but a weariness that seemed to grip his whole body made it seem useless to move. It was not unpleasant—particularly. So he sprawled on the gallery's edge. The world seemed countless miles away from him. Nothing mattered. But a snarling voice disturbed him. It crossed all that distance. It irritated him as a mosquito's humming might have done.

'Let him alone! Let him alone, will you? I'll take care of him. By myself. What's he to you?'

'Everything!' an equally waspish voice answered Dud Blaze. 'You let him alone. I'll take care of him. But—you can help! Go to the kitchen. Ask the cook, or one of the maids, for water and a towel. His shirt's burned off him. He's scorched——'

Dimly, then, Vern knew that he had to get up. He moved a little, shifting until he drew knees up under him. Then an arm went around him. There was a little crooning sound close to his ear—like the voice of a little girl talking to her doll.

'Darling! Let me help you! I thought you were killed. I thought he must surely kill you before Dud Blaze could get to you—or I could get back with

my pistol——’

The arm tightened. Against his swollen face a smooth, soft cheek was pressed. He turned and sat upon the gallery’s edge. He stared at ’Cilla, now close beside him. Slowly, he put up his left hand to hold hers.

‘Your pistol? What would you have done with a pistol?’

‘Killed him! Shot him, anyway! He would have killed you——’

‘An’ you’d have shot him, you bloodthirsty li’l’—tiger kitten! Just for me—when you said you didn’t care a thing——’

‘I reckon you were right, ’Cilla,’ Dud Blaze admitted judicially, from behind them. ‘He wouldn’t *let* me do that sort of thing for him. Let’s get to the repair work. Here’s the water and towel and bandage and hundred-proof turpentine. Let me take a look... *Hmmm!* I don’t see a lot of use trying to mend him. Cheaper to turn him in and draw a new model...’

They moved Vern to the chair where ’Cilla had rocked. She washed the gash made by Frio’s pistol barrel and bandaged it. Dud went inside at her direction and came back with one of ’Pache’s shirts, to replace the torn and charred shirt Vern wore. At last, Dud vanished with pan and rags. His voice came to them from the back of the house, a high, clear tenor:

‘The first time that you kill a man,
It makes you kind o’ ill.
You git so hot you need a fan—an’
Then you take a chill.
The second one, he ain’t so bad—
Although it’s painful, too.
For killin’ always makes you sad
Until you killed a few!

‘But when you killed a score o’ men
You’re gittin’ used to it.
The twenty-first you butcher, then,
Don’t bother you a bit.
After that she’s purty tame;
You hardly stop to think.
For killin’ men is just the same
As takin’ of a drink.’

‘He—killed Frio?’ she asked softly, from the arm of his chair, dark head jerking toward the sound of singing.

‘You’d know he had—by the song—if you knew Dud,’ Vern nodded. ‘He is a—peculiar little hairpin, Dud. He picked up that song from the *buscaderos*—the outlaws, you know—on the Border. It’s because he *does*

mind, a whole lot, that he sings about not mindin'... If Dud could just fight all day long, without anybody bein' killed, he'd be happy.'

He looked up sidelong at her, moving sore neck carefully:

'I was goin' away,' he said slowly. 'But——'

'And I was going to let you!' she told him. 'But——'

'“But——” For both of us. That *must* prove somethin'. You're a mulish li'l' bitsy jaguar kitten! You'd let me go——'

'Mulish! *Mulish!* You call me mulish! When you went swaggering off—to show me you didn't care—singing that—that damned “Jack o' Diamonds”!

‘I'll think of you, Molly,
When in some far distant land!’

She jumped up from the chair arm. But she was on his left side and it was the right arm which was still numb. He caught her sleeve, pulled her back and down until her head was on his shoulder.

She was lying, so, when the tramp of hoofs came from around the corner of the house—the corner opposite that around which Dud had taken Frio Jack, to cover him with a tarpaulin. Vern looked up at Erskine, Ody Gardineer, squat Shamus O'Hara and 'Pache Ord. 'Pache glared at the two in the one chair. Dud Blaze spoke from the doorway. 'Pache ignored him.

'What's—*this?*' he grunted truculently.

'This?' Dud answered. 'Oh! *That!* Well, Mr. Ord, I take great pleasure in introducing to you the new riding manager of the Rocker-O. He'll keep the frazzled end of the Culebra River thieves a little beyond the throw of their longest, stickiest ropes. He is not a handsome man, we admit! Right now, he's even homelier than usual. But he *is* a good, hard-working boy. I can vouch for him: *I* used to know him when he was in the Rangers!'

'That how it is?' 'Pache demanded.

'That's *ex-act-ly* how it is!' 'Cilla nodded vigorously.

She straightened and slid over the chair arm to the floor. 'Pache flung up a hand as she moved toward him. He began to back his horse away from the gallery. There was something like a grin at the corners of hard, beard-stubbled mouth.

'Ne' mind the rest!' he said quickly. 'I ain't arguin'. All the arguments I ever win with women was win by givin' in right in the beginnin'. A' right, men! Come on an' put yo' hawses in the c'ral. I reckon yo' names'll show

up in the pot, come dinner time. An' we'll take life easy till then—for the first time a Culebra River man's been able to do it for many's the day.'

The others nodded, grinning. They turned their horses. 'Pache Ord's lean shoulders seemed to shake slightly. He leaned a little, to Shamus O'Hara. He said something and O'Hara nodded, turning to look back at the gallery. He spoke to 'Pache and 'Pache's answer came, in part, to Vern and 'Cilla:

'—A dad-burned *buckaroo!*'

THE END

ZANE GREY'S NOVELS

May be had wherever books are sold. Ask for Grosset & Dunlap's list.

ARIZONA AMES
SUNSET PASS
THE SHEPHERD OF GUADALOUPE
FIGHTING CARAVANS
WILD HORSE MESA
NEVADA
FORLORN RIVER
UNDER THE TONTO RIM
THE VANISHING AMERICAN
TAPPAN'S BURRO
THE THUNDERING HERD
THE CALL OF THE CANYON
WANDERER OF THE WASTELAND
THE DAY OF THE BEAST
TO THE LAST MAN
THE MYSTERIOUS RIDER
THE MAN OF THE FOREST
THE DESERT OF WHEAT
THE U. P. TRAIL
WILDFIRE
THE BORDER LEGION
THE RAINBOW TRAIL
THE HERITAGE OF THE DESERT
RIDERS OF THE PURPLE SAGE
LIGHT OF WESTERN STARS
THE LAST OF THE PLAINSMEN
THE LONE STAR RANGER
DESERT GOLD
BETTY ZANE

ZANE GREY'S BOOKS FOR BOYS

ROPING LIONS IN THE GRAND CANYON
THE RED-HEADED OUTFIELD
KEN WARD IN THE JUNGLE
THE YOUNG LION HUNTER
THE YOUNG FORESTER
THE YOUNG PITCHER
THE SHORT STOP

GROSSET & DUNLAP, PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK

NOVELS OF FRONTIER LIFE
WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE

May be had wherever books are sold. Ask for Grosset & Dunlap's list.

THE BLACK TOLTS
BEYOND THE RIO GRANDE
RUTLEDGE TRAILS THE ACE OF SPADES
THE VALIANT
THE FIGHTING TENDERFOOT
TEXAS MAN
COLORADO
JUDGE COLT
THE FIGHTING EDGE
GUNSIGHT PASS
TANGLED TRAILS
THE BIG TOWN ROUND-UP
OH, YOU TEX!
THE SHERIFF'S SON
A MAN FOUR SQUARE
A TEXAS RANGER
BRAND BLOTTERS
BUCKY O'CONNOR
MAVERICKS
BONANZA
RIDGEWAY OF MONTANA
WYOMING
A DAUGHTER OF THE DONS
THE HIGHGRADER
THE DESERT'S PRICE
IRONHEART
ROADS OF DOUBT
TROUBLED WATERS
CROOKED TRAILS AND STRAIGHT

GROSSET & DUNLAP, Publishers, NEW YORK

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 *Buckaroo: A Tale of the Texas Rangers* by Eugene Cunningham]