

Ernest Haycox



GRIM CANYON

A savage land where the .45 was law ...
and a fast draw was the last court of appeal



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Grim Canyon

Ernest Haycox

GRIM CANYON

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GRIM CANYON

CHAPTER 1

Throughout the day an undercurrent of excitement passed up and down the dusty street that bisected Burnt Ridge. As the night's soft shadows crept in from the prairie this excitement increased. All afternoon there had been a bustle of activity within the spacious quarters of Bill Beesom's Refuge—this at a time when Burnt Ridge invariably took its siesta. Something very extraordinary was on wing, something that drew riders from all parts of the country and filled the town as it had never been filled since that bygone day when Smoke Taylor went on trial for his life.

The word had gone out. Thus, even before the accustomed supper hour, the restaurant had done the peak of its business and all steps were turning toward Bill Beesom's Refuge until that palace of pleasure overflowed and spilled its customers back into the street, while the tobacco smoke and the hum and drawl of casual Western talk billowed rafter-high. Men winked portentously. Men rubbed shoulders who at a different time would have avoided each other as they would avoid the plague. The gleam of the forthcoming event lighted their eyes and they acted like a pack of school boys up to some solemn piece of deviltry. At Bill Beesom's command, riders went posting out of Burnt Ridge by the various roads, a sentry took station at each end of the street, and one especially reliable character stood guard at the saloon door. And finally Bill Beesom himself, a figure of influence and fame, cast a harried eye over the last detail, stepped on a chair and called for silence.

"Now, boys," he said, combing his cavalry mustache by way of introduction, "we got to have this go off like a shot. No bobbles allowed. When the loop falls it has got to land on its critter. Everybody remember his part. Meanwhile, some o' you boys go saunterin' along the street as if it was any other night. Jes' be casual, so's he won't git no idee till he steps inside

this joint. Minute he does, let go. Shoot the roof full o' holes. I got to have it re-shingled anyhow. Another thing—no drinks served till he gits here."

"Supposin' the dern train didn't come an' he had to wait over a day," murmured an unknown pessimist. "Wouldn't that be a bust?"

Bill Beesom grunted. "I been worryin' about so many doggone things I couldn't git irritated none if the earth was flooded. But if that train don't come, I'll kill the engineer when I see him. All right."

Those nearest the door strolled out to enact their little part of the drama. The rest waited inside for the climax of the innumerable riders of the sage who had drawn his farewell to a certain man. And the unusual feature was that this man boasted no titles, owned no ranches, and had built no railroads. He was nothing more than a puncher—just one of the innumerable riders of the sage who had drawn his forty a month as they did, eaten his bacon and beans cold as they had, endured the same miseries and performed the same reckless stunts. But he was now leaving the country forever, packing away his gear, shaking the desert's dust from his feet.

In fact, as far as the country was concerned, he would soon be as good as dead—for he was going to that remote and strange land known as the East.

The saloon door popped open and a sharp, sunburned face blinked against the light. It was one of the lookouts, and he spoke swiftly. "He's comin' in from the Ten Mile road, ridin' with Steve Nebo."

"Steve," someone muttered, "is shore goin' to feel bereaved."

"Get set," was Bill Beesom's brittle injunction.

Meanwhile, the object of all this attention rode quietly through the night with his partner, Steve Nebo, beside him. Neither of these men lacked ready speech. Neither was of a naturally solemn disposition. But tonight they had spoken no word at all for seven good miles. The lights of town blinked cheerfully at them. Their journey was drawing to a close—as well as the partnership that had lasted through fair weather and bad weather over a period of ten years. They were as alike as a pair of gloves; even in the darkness, this similarity was present. They rode with the same slouch, the same tilt of their Stetsons. It might even be said that they cast the same kind of shadow, there being less than an inch difference in their stature or five pounds disparity in their weight. The memory of their common fortunes and misfortunes through all this time seemed to weigh them down. Yet, as the lights brightened and the shadow of the corrals grew more distinct, Lin Jessup made shift to speak.

"I'll be back sometime," he said.

“Not while water runs or grass grows,” Steve Nebo muttered. His cigarette glowed brightly. A hand went up toward the starlit sky. “Nope. You ain’t that kind, kid. You don’t like to leave, but you’ll get back there and dive into business so hard you won’t think o’ this land. It’s your way, kid. You mix well an’ you stick a job through to the end.”

“Well, anyhow—”

“Oh, shut up!” Steve Nebo said gruffly.

“—I’ll be writin’ to tell you what stray brands I find, Steve.”

Steve Nebo was not to be deceived. “They don’t brand clothespins, Lin. So don’t write me a syllable, see. I don’t like to hear from the dead. What’s done is done.”

Far back, a coyote yammered, the echo floating faintly across the wings of darkness. “That’ll be in Eccles Canyon,” murmured Lin Jessup. His horse reared, then settled down to a tight rein.

“Listen to it,” was Nebo’s quick rejoinder. “You won’t hear such music any more.”

“That’s right, hang crepe. Remember the jam we got into near the mouth of that canyon two summers ago, Steve?”

“Yeah. An’ there’ll be lots more hell in the same place after you’re gone, kid.”

Lin Jessup stirred in the saddle. “I hate to leave. Honest I do. There’s goin’ to be a big fight in these parts someday. I’d like to be in it.”

“Breaks’ll be turnin’ yaller early this year.”

It was Lin’s turn to be fretful. “Hell, don’t you know any other tune?”

“Me? I can’t sing ragtime at a funeral, kid.”

They arrived at the street end and fell under the rays of a transient light. Both were tall men, willowy. Both were young. They mirrored still the surging vitality and the bubbling restless humor that an open life could give. It was indelibly stamped on their tanned faces, in spite of the tight gravity each maintained at present. Steve was a dark man, scorched by the sun, and his eyes flashed in the yellow beam. Lin Jessup, he who was saying good-bye, was fair, even to his corn-colored hair. Thus they traveled half the length of the street, noting here and there a clump of quiet figures. By the saloon they reined in and dismounted. Lin dropped a satchel to the ground.

“Well, let’s go in for a drink. Train had ought to be along pretty soon.”

“It’d be a better world without railroads,” Nebo said. He stared at the solitary figure at the saloon door with a glance of comprehension and then

stepped back to let Lin enter first. He knew of this night's celebration; it was perhaps the only secret he had ever refused to share with his partner.

Lin squared at the door, pushed it before him and stepped through into the blaze of lamplight. And as he did so, a hundred odd throats burst into the wild and free yell of the prairie. Up came all those gun arms and Bill Beesom's place roared and shook and cracked to the echo of a salute. It hurt physically, the report of that salute, and the powder swirled thick as a fog, stinging the nostrils. For a moment Lin stood, dumfounded, quite unable to fathom the meaning of these friends and acquaintances of his packed so tightly together. Yet before the sound had died and the powder had cleared, it came to him. A smile flashed across his lean face, and his gray eyes flickered with a gay recklessness. Steve Nebo stepped beside him, forgetting his gravity for a moment.

Steve struck him on the chest. "Fooled you that time, huh Lin?"

"The drinks—" Lin began, but Bill Beesom stopped him dead.

"The drinks, Lin, old horse, ain't on you. Now hush while we go through with our little ritual. Speakin' as constituted master o' ceremonies, I will now start the ball rollin'. I wish to say that this county has took official note o' the fact o' your departure. I wish further to say it seemed fittin' we should sorta celebrate that event—seemed like we'd ought to put a period to your career as a citizen o' the West. With that in mind, I will now call upon Jake Harper. Step on the table, Jake."

The designated gentleman fought his way through the packed ranks and with some evidences of stage fright, mounted the impromptu rostrum. In his fist he held a clipping of paper, and after clearing his throat of tobacco juice he began to read what was contained therein:

"Indian Butte County achieved national prominence through one of its distinguished citizens last week when word came from Providence, Rhode Island, that a Colonel Linton Jessup, wealthy manufacturer of that town, had died and left all his property to nearest kin. After great search it was discovered that said nearest relative was a man living right in the heart of our own glorious county, being none other than that lovable stormy petrel known as Lin Jessup, sometimes called 'Cyclone.'

"According to the will, Lin falls heir to a hundred thousand dollars and the largest hairpin factory in Providence. The will further specified that if no heir appeared in the office of that factory in person by September 7 of the current year, his estate was to revert to charitable institutions.

"Since it took some time to locate this heir, the deadline date comes nearer. Nevertheless, our new capitalist debated his fortune at mature length,

while finishing out the month as top hand on the Jughandle. However, Indian Butte's one and only hairpin magnate leaves east on the night local tomorrow, making the time limit by the skin of his teeth.

“Speaking editorially, we say that while there are other gentlemen who may be able to shoot better, ride faster, rope quicker, we can recall no one we more regret saying good-by to. Cyclone Lin Jessup stands alone. He has got into and fought out of more trouble than any man in the history of Indian Butte region. This county will seem a lot tamer—it will actually seem dead—when Lin pulls his picket. Lin, old scout, we'll miss you a hell of a lot.”

Lin Jessup's grin wavered and grew set. But he broke the tension by drawling, “Well, it's right in parts anyhow. Ten thousand was the sum, and it's a clothespin factory, not hairpins. Otherwise I'm branded, dewlapped an' turned out to graze. Boys, anytime you might be needin' clothespins—”

He trusted himself no farther. Bill Beesom took the floor again. He too held something in his hand, keeping it carefully hidden, and the silence seemed to grow tighter. Beesom cleared his throat and raked all angles of his establishment with a weather-eye.

“Shucks, what can a gent say? I had a speech, but wouldn't I be a sucker to make it? Listen, Lin, it kinda goes against the grain. It sure does. You aridin' a swivel chair an' makin' clothespins for trade. Here's a sensible advice. Collect your money, sell the damn factory an' come back. . . . No, I'm talkin' like a fool. You wouldn't play the game like that. But . . . now why didn't I stick to my speech? But listen. You won't come to this godforsaken hutch any more. You won't ever roll your blankets acrost a clay mudhole. You won't never sleep like you slept under this sky an' you won't never taste anything half so good as beans'n' coffee three o' clock of a pitch black mornin'. Well, we boys have got a present for you. Carry it in your upper left-hand vest pocket. Consider it a piece o' Indian Butte. Wherever you go, you got a sample o' what's behind you. It's—it's—here, dammit, take it!”

It lay in Bill Beesom's open palm; a heavy watch surrounded by a heavy chain. Lin took it, turned it over. The back side bore an inscription, and although the letters of the inscription were plain and the light of the saloon was bright, Lin Jessup found trouble in reading:

*“From the boys of Indian Butte
So-long, Lin.”*

Lin stared at it a moment. Suddenly he jammed it in his pocket and pivoted on his heel, seeing nothing. These were men he had worked and

sweated with, played and quarreled with. Never in their lives had they spoken a word of sentiment. Not until now. He turned about.

“Look here, you miserable, ornery collection of poorhouse wrecks! Why—of all the assembled flat-footed, barrel-bellied cabbages, you sure take the prize! I got a mind to walk out on you. What’s the idea o’ playin’ on a man’s feelin’s like this? It’s indecent. Hell—let’s have a drink!”

“A good idee,” Bill Beesom said. “It’ll wash the mush outa my mouth.”

This broke the tension. They turned to the business of refreshment. In a little while the atmosphere cleared and Bill Beesom took the ceremony once more in hand.

“Got to have a speech from the soon departed. Up on the table, Lin.”

Lin sprang up willingly, wanting to redeem his display of weakness. He grinned cheerfully and discovered he had absolutely nothing to say. Something still stuck in his throat.

“For the jewelry,” was his halting start, “I thank you. What a clothespin king needs with time, I dunno, but I’ll sure keep this ticker running sweet. Shucks, I don’t want to leave here. Maybe you don’t think I sweat a little blood makin’ up my mind. But it looks like the world is cryin’ for Jessup clothespins and I guess I’ve got to pick up the torch an’ hustle it along. I’m goin’ to keep the car windows shut from here to Omaha for fear o’ jumpin’ out. I’m apt to do something just that crazy.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” Steve Nebo said.

Lin grinned. “That’s a true sentiment, for sure. But you gents have me in a hole. If I was figurin’ on livin’ here I’d call you out for the no-account sons of Satan I know you to be. Since I’m goin’ a long way off an’ won’t ever have to put up with you again, why—why—” He stumbled and had to clear his throat. Then he threw his hands wide apart. “Why, boys, I sure love you like brothers!”

A laconic, sarcastic phrase cut across this like a knife: “Leave me out of your affection, Jessup.”

The crowd turned toward the door. Between the swinging portals, arms akimbo, there stood poised a giant of a creature. His shoulders rolled forward in heavy-muscled arrogance. His swart face glistened in the light. It was a face not to be forgotten, once seen; for it seemed to come to a point in a great broken nose and wide leering lips. The chin was narrow, the forehead narrower; and a slaty light poured out of eyes set close together. Conscious of the combined attention, the newcomer drew himself together.

“You can leave me out,” he repeated. “I can do without your brotherly affection.”

That evoked the reckless humor lying quiescent in Lin Jessup. He spoke soothingly. "Well, if it ain't brother Dunk Dalzell. Come to join my party, Dunk?"

"If I knowed you was here I'd of stayed away," Dunk retorted. He followed it up quickly. "Not that I'd ever back away from a gent with a low caliber muzzle like you."

"You're certainly in low spirits tonight, Dunk," Lin countered. "Ain't business well lately?"

"What business?" Dalzell snapped.

"I wouldn't be mean enough to speak it in public, Dunk."

Dalzell's temper rose like a piece of metal coming to red heat. He seemed on the point of sweeping the crowd before him and closing on Lin. But instead, he accepted the verbal challenge. "It's a blamed good thing you're runnin' away, Jessup. You been ridin' your hobby horse too high. In this country a man minds his own business. You never have."

"I guess I have dwindled your profits on certain occasions, Dunk," Lin suggested.

"Another loose statement," Dalzell said. "You're a man too free with your tongue. It hangs in the middle an' talks the wrong way."

"But never behind a man's back, Dunk." The smile faded from Lin's lean features, "And I never pointed my gun at a man's back, either."

As if moved by common thought, the crowd slowly pressed against the walls of the saloon until the two men faced each other down a lane. The room went utterly silent, for this was a duel of long standing and the knowledge of it extended to the four corners of the county. It had furnished many a camp fire with a night's topic; it had made many a man speculate upon the outcome. And on this night it seemed to those within the saloon that they were to witness the crashing finale to the long struggle. Dunk Dalzell's anger had reached the pitch of fury. He brought his shoulders together, his black face tipped forward. "Another lie, Jessup. If you want it now, you can have it now. Come out to the street."

In the long interval of silence all attention turned to Lin Jessup. He seemed to be struggling with something deeply buried in himself. But before he spoke, the crowd, knowing the signals of his temper through experience, foretold the answer.

"No, I guess not, Dunk. I'm not shootin' anybody on my last night." And he salved the climax with a little humor. "Anyhow, I'm reducin' the census by one in pullin' my ticket, so why should I reduce it another by killin' you?"

“Then sneak out!” Dalzell shouted.

“Your time will come, Dunk. You’ll die out in the hills, howlin’ like a wolf. And I’ll send a basket o’ clothespins to mark your grave. Happy days, Dunk.”

Dalzell raised his fist, attracting the crowd’s gaze. “Mark that gent,” he said hoarsely. “The only difference atween him and a polecat is that a polecat’s got a white streak down its back.” And with that shot he threw his massive frame around the lane and strode out of the saloon.

Lin’s humor could not be long suppressed. “In the line of sentiments, boys, we’ve had about everything so far. Now Steve an’ I have got a chore up the street. See you later.”

The two partners left the saloon and stood a moment in a corner of darkness. “What chore?” Nebo demanded.

“None. Let’s walk a minute while I cool off. Steve, if I stayed in there another five minutes I believe I’d chuck clothespins. Those boys get under my skin. It’s a sweet land. I won’t ever find a better.”

“You should of plugged Dunk,” Nebo grumbled.

“And then what?” Lin murmured. “Not tonight. Not ever, I guess. Something funny coming over me. Wait a minute. Look over by the hotel.”

They had arrived at a point directly opposite the hotel. Still in the shadows, they saw Dunk Dalzell slide through a patch of light and disappear somewhere down an alley between buildings.

“What’s that for? Dunk ain’t bashful.”

“No,” Lin replied. “But someone else might be. I told you. Look and pray.”

A second figure traversed the pool of light, moving swiftly. But in the moment’s interval the two partners had good sight of a cadaverous face and a flat-brimmed Stetson that was peculiar to one man of the county.

“Remy Cade.”

“None other,” Lin said. “You know what I know, Steve. But nobody else is in on the secret. One reason right there why I’d like to stay longer.”

Something like hope came to Steve Nebo. “You doggone fool, stay then. We’ll smash ’em!”

“It ain’t any of our business. Lord, I wish it was.”

Out of the near distance came the prolonged challenge of a train’s whistle. The daily passenger of the Empire, Indian Butte and Southern—a little feeder line that left the main transcontinental line at one point, made an ox-bow into the country and returned to the main road farther east—was

signaling for its halfway station. The partners turned and moved back to the saloon. The doors of Bill Beesom's Refuge swung wide before the emerging crowd. Lin got his satchel and patted his horse on the muzzle. For a moment he rested there and even then he had a strong touch of homesickness as the smell of saddle leather and the sound of the animal crunching on the bit came to him. "Take good care of that horse, Steve," muttered the new clothespin magnate. "This is worse than a toothache."

They aimed for the depot, arriving there as the antiquated engine brought its freight car and its day coach to a sudden, squealing halt. Lanterns bobbed through the darkness when Lin took his stand by the front vestibule of the coach. And for him at the moment the crowd became only a blur. He saw but two faces, those of Bill Beesom and Steve Nebo. Something funny about Steve's face. Looked as if his old partner was about to kill a man.

"I wish," Lin said wistfully, the echo of his words carrying across the deep silence. "I wish—so-long, Steve, so-long boys. So-long, Indian Butte!"

He gripped Steve Nebo's hand, blindly swung up the car steps, throwing his satchel before him. There was, at that instant, a sharp intake of breath and a woman's voice, saying, "If you please—" Lin Jessup caught the scent of perfume and dropped back to the ground. Down the steps came a girl, carrying her own bag and a purple parasol. The intermittent lantern light fell a moment upon a dark oval face and crisp black eyes. Dark hair ventured below a pert hat; she was gloved and tailored and booted trimly and the effect of it all upon the assembled crowd was to divert their attention from the departing Lin. The new clothespin magnate reached up for her bag and gave her a helping hand, the meanwhile murmuring an apology. "I'm sure sorry. It's so blamed seldom anybody ever comes off this train I figured—"

A flashing smile. "Anything might happen in the West." He felt the slight weight of her body on his arm as she dropped to the cinders. Seeing the crowd, she turned a more curious glance on Lin. "It seems you are going away. Well, good luck to you. Say hello to the East for me." Then she raised her voice to reach Bill Beesom and Steve Nebo.

"I'm Tamesie Lowell. How can I reach the Star L tonight?"

The conductor shouldered through the packed citizenry. "Board!"

It was a tribute to Lin Jessup that the crowd wrested its attention from the girl as the train began to move slowly along. Lin stood on the bottom step, the picture of a man thoroughly bewildered. A roar of guns sounded along the cindered walk, the engine whistling by way of answer. The town of Burnt Ridge passed, shacks and shanties, corrals and yard posts, until there was only a faint glimmering of lights behind.

Lin Jessup disappeared in the vestibule. A moment later, as the train settled into a steady gait, his satchel went flying through space on the far side of the train, closely followed by the clothespin magnate in person. He turned over twice and settled to rest in the rocky ditch with his stomach enfolding a discarded tie. The train whistled again and its lights trailed across the prairie, presently disappearing.

“Tamesie Lowell,” Lin muttered, testing himself for broken parts. “Tamesie Lowell.”

CHAPTER 2

Finding no serious abrasions, Lin Jessup rose and swept the circle of darkness with a comprehensive glance. Burnt Ridge glimmered a quarter of a mile down the track. The train had vanished. Night shielded him, for which he was devoutly thankful. He had done many an impulsive act in his life, but this latest seemed to cap and seal all others.

Imagine, he thought, a man o’ my nature runnin’ a serious business! Now what did I do that for?

He reached into his pocket for the gift watch and put it against his ear. Still ran, seemed sound. But, anyhow, he knew very well why he had deserted the train. The reason was Tamesie Lowell. He had never seen her before. In fact she had been taken East by her mother years and years ago, leaving old Buck Lowell forlorn and grim on the Star L.

Lin sat on a rail and soothed himself with a cigarette.

I can’t be accused o’ bein’ turned from any capitalistic designs by a woman, he reflected. No, sir. She’s pretty. She’s actually handsome. But it ain’t that. It’s Buck Lowell I’m thinkin’ about.

Buck Lowell was no more, of course. The old man had gone East a year back to die beside his estranged family, leaving the Star L under a superintendent. And there was the nubbin of the matter. The memory of Buck Lowell was bright silver to Lin Jessup. Buck Lowell had been his friend and counselor and for good or evil Lin could not stand by to see any of Buck’s kin suffer trouble.

An’ trouble there is sure to be, Lin Jessup thought. As a superintendent of the Star L, Remy Cade is a plumb good thief. Wonder if that girl is

figurin' on just a visit, or goin' to make a stab at runnin' it? In either case it makes me creep to think of her bein' in arm's reach o' Cade. It surely does. He's made a bird's nest o' that place. Nothin' else. If the county knew what all I knew, it would hang him. But it doesn't know. So, Lin Jessup, you precipitate fool, go back and keep a look on things. Clothespins can wait. Buck Lowell was good to me. I'll take care of his interests a while.

He got up, found his satchel, and limped along the ties, puzzling out a decent course to follow. The county supposed he had gone away; thus he could move about unobserved. It might throw Remy Cade and Dunk Dalzell off guard. Those two hombres were neck and neck in deceit and the appearance of the legal owner of the Star L might make them a little reckless.

Wonder if she telegraphed Cade she was comin'? Lin mused. I'll bet not. She's got the old man's nature, which is abrupt and brief. All right. Now to find Steve.

He reached the station house, now dark and silent. He tarried in its shadow and scanned the street. Everybody seemed to have adjourned to Bill Beesom's place. Not a half-dozen lights left in town.

Somehow, Lin thought, I ain't half as sorry as I ought to be about jumpin' my ticket. Where. . . ?

Shadows ahead, cutting across the street; hoofs striking metal rails. Somebody was leading two horses and swearing as if from physical hurt. The shadows stopped and a match flared toward a cigarette tip. Steve Nebo's face wavered in the transient light, as hard as stone, eyes glittering. Lin Jessup drew back, ashamed to catch his partner off guard. But as Nebo came on, Lin spoke aloud.

"Guess I'll take my horse back again, Steve."

Steve halted in his tracks. Lin saw his partner's shadow straighten to full six feet and remain immobile. "*Quien es?*" Nebo muttered.

"Well, if you don't know my voice by now, I'll not be tellin'."

Silence—the silence of a man pulling himself together from a shock. Nebo's words plucked at the darkness, "Yeah, the voice is familiar. But if it's a gent imitatin' Lin Jessup, I'll kill you!"

"The dead one has resurrected."

Nebo spoke plaintively, but Lin made out his partner's effort to be casual. "Kid, please don't ever do that again. What for?"

"Thought I'd stay over to watch Mister Cade and all."

“And a minute back you said it wasn’t none o’ your business. Sometimes, Lin, I don’t follow you at all.”

Lin Jessup came forward. “Where’s the girl now?”

“Eatin’ at the restaurant with Cade. . . . Oh, I see. Yeah. Well, my boy, I was present when Cade met her. It knocked him cold. Plumb stone cold.”

“Then she didn’t give him any warnin’. We’ve got to hear some o’ that parley. Come on.”

They left the horses by the station and crossed the dark street, aiming for the hotel. “She talks straight from the shoulder,” Steve observed. “Announced to Bill Beesom an’ me she had come to pick up the strings of her dad’s estate an’ carry on. I gather she’s all alone in the world. But what do you imagine she knows about runnin’ a cow ranch?”

“I dunno,” Lin rejoined. “It’s why I come back. Buck Lowell was my friend. We’ll have to assume some trouble, Steve.”

“I could lick any man’s army single handed this minute,” Nebo said.

At the side of the hotel, they reconnoitered. The porch was wholly dark and nobody sat in the scattered chairs. Inside, they made out three or four lounging boarders, but caught no sight of either Cade or the girl.

“Comin’ from the restaurant now,” Steve muttered.

Without further word, the two of them climbed the porch railing and thus masked by the darkness, waited. Cade’s gaunt frame appeared first in the patch of light streaming from the hotel’s open door. Then the girl stepped into view. Cade had his head tilted downward. He was talking quite earnestly to her.

“But, ma’am, you should have let me know in advance. Now the ranch house ain’t fit for a woman. Take a day or two to clean it up. Meanwhile you’d best stay here.”

“Mister Cade, I want to go out this very night.”

Cade shook his head vigorously. “No way o’ gittin’ there. I’ll have to send for a wagon. It’s right comfortable in this hotel.”

They passed into the place, arguing. Lin nudged Nebo. “Steve, you run to the stable and rent a rig—that buckboard. Get Ben Tinchley’s old army coat so’s I can put it on an’ sorta conceal myself. I’ll wait by the alley.”

Steve was too old a hand to ask questions. He hopped over the railing and vanished. Within five minutes he drove back with the buckboard. Lin slipped up to the seat and took the reins. “Now, you go into the hotel and tell Tamesie Lowell that old Happy Brand is drivin’ home and that she could get

a lift to her ranch from him if she'd want it. Catch on? Cade won't be able to see me in the dark. I can imitate Happy's voice."

Steve chuckled. "I give you credit," he said, and dropped to the street. Lin waited a decent interval and then drove slowly by the hotel. Steve appeared in the hotel door and called out, "Oh, Happy. There's a lady wants to go to the Star L. You're drivin' that way."

Lin stopped just beyond the rim of light. He had slipped into the borrowed overcoat and pulled up the collar. Thus concealed he waited as the girl hurried out, with Cade in stubborn protest. "Ma'am, I can't allow it. It ain't fittin' you should."

But Tamesie Lowell seemed to have some of her father's abruptness of manner. "I've come this far to see the ranch and I won't be delayed. Bring my bags, Mister Cade." Lin extended a helping arm and she sprang lightly into the seat. Cade followed with the luggage and threw them behind. Lin saw the superintendent's eyes trying to penetrate the darkness and identify him. Defeated, Cade strode off for his horse. Lin got under way, turned out upon the Ten Mile road and presently was beyond the station.

"It's very kind of you, Happy Brand," said Tamesie. "I hate hotels."

"Uhuh," grunted Lin.

Cade spurred up, speaking to Lin. "What's your all-fired hurry, Brand?" Without waiting for an answer he took up his argument with the girl. "Of course, ma'am, I'm glad to have you come. But it seems as if you might've sent me some warnin'. It's almost unneighborly."

"You'll soon learn I do things by fits and jumps," was Tamesie Lowell's reply. "I expect I'll never get over it—even managing Star L."

Cade's reply was sharply questioning. "Run it, ma'am? I thought you said it was a visit?"

"Both," said Tamesie Lowell. Lin Jessup noted how strongly she had the Lowell trick of biting her words. "For now on the ranch is my home."

Cade pondered on this for several hundred yards. The news must have hit him hard, else he would never have forgotten his suavity. "Pshaw, Miss Lowell. You want to leave managing to men that know how. I never saw an Easterner yet that did well with cattle."

"Well, if we're going to take off gloves," Tamesie responded sweetly, "I might point out you haven't done very well since my father died."

"The ranch was run down," Cade said gruffly. "I've had to build up."

"It was no such thing," Tamesie shot back. "Dad explained every figure to me, told me how absolutely every detail stood. I can recite you the beef

turn off of Star L for the past ten years. It is—or was—a prosperous ranch, considering conditions.”

“Seems to be all posted,” was Cade’s abrupt response.

“I am, as far as Dad could do it. Now, since we’re on the subject, why haven’t you continued to send me your monthly statement? I note you stopped it directly after dad’s death.”

“Was waiting to get proper orders.”

“You got them—two or three times. And didn’t answer them. That’s why I came. Now, Mister Cade, I have much to learn, but I’m not simple and I imagine we might as well face the one main fact before we even reach the house. That is the relation between us. You are the foreman. I’ll take every reasonable suggestion. But, of course, my decisions will have to be final—even if it wrecks the place.”

Lin struggled to repress a whoop. This was old man Buck Lowell over and over again. Never use two words when one would fit.

Remy Cade fell silent and after a time the girl returned to the attack. “I hope that is agreeable to you.”

“Your dad wouldn’t have put it that way, ma’am. He took my word in most all cases.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not,” was Tamesie’s enigmatic answer. “But is it agreeable to you?”

“Let’s not argue, ma’am,” Cade said evasively. “It ain’t fittin’ we should.”

Lin waited for the girl to pin Cade down, but strangely enough she abandoned the attack. And for the rest of the journey, which was some six miles, not a word was spoken between the two. When within hailing distance of the house, Cade suddenly spurred his horse and galloped ahead. Tamesie Lowell turned to her driver.

“What’s the matter with Star L, anyhow?”

“What made you think anything was the matter?” Lin Jessup asked.

“I don’t know. But there’s something wrong. I’ve felt it since I left the train.”

“A woman’s sixth sense, I reckon,” Lin observed. “Usually right, too.”

Quite unexpectedly she laughed. The silver echo floated up and away, ringing like a bell against the night. Before he could ask the reason of it she shot another question at him. “By the way, who was that striking man leaving Burnt Ridge tonight on the train?”

“Lin Jessup,” the masquerader grunted, feeling guilty.

“Oh. My father spoke of him.” Then, as an afterthought, seemingly with no ulterior motive, she added, “Wasn’t he rather wild and reckless?”

“Totally depraved,” Lin sighed. They were within fifty yards of the Star L house. A light went out and flared again. Cade’s figure was framed in the doorway. Lin spoke softly. “Ma’am, ride up to the line of trees on the west buttes tomorrow at ten. I knew your father well. Better than any other man but one. And I’ll stake my cards on the Lowell name—anytime, anywhere.”

“It’s as bad as that, then?”

“Worse.”

“I’ll be there,” Tamesie said, with the true Lowell snap judgment. Lin drew in front of the door, keeping his face muffled by the overcoat. Cade stood a little inside, his cadaverous, predatory features illy set. As Tamesie Lowell dropped from the seat she murmured. “Thank you for the ride—Lin Jessup.”

Cade moved forward and took her bags from the bottom of the buckboard. “Get on, Brand,” he said.

Lin drove away, hardly drawing a breath until beyond the Star L corrals. Then the words emerged like an explosion: “I’ll be everlastingly damned! How in thunder did she know?”

He had not gone a mile when the drumming of hoofs warned him. A rider swept up and around the buckboard. Remy Cade’s voice rose and fell in angry accents. “Listen, Brand, you’re a meddlesome, consumptive wreck an’ if you ever expect to stay alive, keep out o’ my business! Hear that? What made you offer the lady a ride? I got a good notion to whip you down for a trick like that! When I want folks to come out to the Star L I’ll do the drivin’—see?”

Lin held his peace. Remy Cade leaned in the saddle. His quirt sang against the night and fell stinging against the collar of the borrowed army coat. Lin rose, arms spread wide, and launched himself from his seat. He struck Cade full on, carried that gentleman out of the saddle and down to the sandy earth. In the moment’s sharp struggle, Lin wrenched the superintendent’s gun free of the holster and flung it far into the distance. Then he stepped back.

“I’m not Happy Brand, *amigo*. Be sure your man is a cripple next time.”

“Who are you?”

“Presently you’ll discover,” Lin said. He got in the buckboard and drove away. Close by a solitary scrub pine, two miles farther on, he ran into Steve Nebo with the extra horse. It was an old meeting place for the partners and had been agreed upon before leaving Burnt Ridge.

“What next?”

“You rattle this rig back to town. Tomorrow I’m makin’ a proposition to Tamesie Lowell. If it goes right you got a job. If it don’t go right you got a job anyhow. Meanwhile, scout around and locate half a dozen reliable boys needin’ employment. You know which ones. I think we’re goin’ to want ’em. I’m headin’ into the buttes for some prospective news.”

“Business is pickin’ up,” Steve murmured. “Happy days.”

“Yeah. But this is the worst mess we’ve ever tackled, Steve. Somebody’s goin’ to die before it’s over.”

“Still an’ all—happy days,” Nebo said.

“Watch yourself, kid,” Lin warned, stepping into his saddle. “Cade’ll have a trailer on these wagon tracks. He’s anxious to know who borrowed Happy Brand’s handle.”

“More an’ more int’restin’. Say, Lin, how about clothespins?”

“Oh, shut up!”

Steve Nebo turned the wagon around, chuckling. “Well, it was a slick way to get a free watch.”

Lin veered west and galloped for the buttes, promising himself he would still make Providence, Rhode Island, after this affair was over.

He made a wide circle in the prairie and ascended the ridge by a precipitous and little used pathway. From the very beginning of the upward climb it was a rugged section, and the farther he went the sharper did the trail twist and turn, passing between high rock walls, dipping into deep granite chasms. An hour of this with never a straight stretch nor a level piece of ground; immense walls of blackness reached toward the sky, pools of impenetrable shadows stretched below. A stranger, being led through the trail, would have sworn that it circled around and around some remote pit. In a measure this was true, and presently the upward grade passed through what appeared to be a tunnel and dipped down. At this point Lin checked his horse and went forward on foot. A jet of orange light pricked the heart of the darkness.

He moved with the sure foot of knowledge, always angling toward the light. It grew, and as he turned an obstructing ledge, the glow of the fire played vividly against a sheer bluff. He saw three figures lying near the blaze and by this he knew that three others were not far away. Switching his course, he reached the level of the fire. On his stomach he crawled to within twenty yards and halted behind a rock. Farther he could not go, nor was it necessary. The circling walls formed a perfect sounding board that reflected the least whisper across the intervening space.

He had come on a shrewd guess. Within twenty minutes he knew he had been right. The rhythmic pace of a horse rolled into the circle and the recumbent men rose, retreating from sight. At the same time Dunk Dalzell's giant frame appeared out of the trailing shadows, arms akimbo. Dunk stood thus until Remy Cade rode to view and dropped from the saddle.

"What's up?" Dalzell asked.

"That woman was Buck Lowell's daughter."

"What about it?"

Cade gestured impatiently. "She's come to the ranch. Intends to run the place. Now ain't that a fine mess?"

Dalzell squatted by the flames, squinting into the very heart of the coals. "Couldn't last forever, could it?"

"She's got to go!" Cade snarled. "One way or another, she's got to leave the Star L."

"Now wait a minute," Dalzell said. "Don't always get so excited. Mebbe she's a blessin' in skirts. Look here—don't you figger mebbe folks are ketchin' on to our little game?"

"Only two men know it," Cade replied. "One's gone. The other is apt to be soon dead."

"I ain't so sure," Dunk Dalzell said. "It's bein' advertised some. But with the lady present—an' she not knowin' about cows—we can still use Star L range. With her around everybody'll think it's a square shuffle, but we'll still conduct our private affairs. Why, Cade, it's perfect!"

But Cade shook his cadaverous face, and even the ruddy firelight could not put a color on his bloodless cheeks. "She's got to leave that house."

Dalzell rose. "What's in that house yo're so all-fired anxious to get?"

Cade stepped back a pace. "Nothin', you fool. But it's been our headquarters."

"That ain't all," Dalzell said. For a long while he studied his partner. He could have smashed Cade with a single sweep of his arm and it appeared to Lin that the giant struggled against the impulse. Then the booming voice floated up. "I think yo're holdin' somethin' out on me, Cade. If I discover such to be the case, Lord find you a soft grave. Things has got to be fifty-fifty."

"It's been our headquarters," Cade persisted. "She's got to go. One way or another. I'm thinkin' we'll give the lady a scare. Another thing. Somebody run a stunt on me tonight." He told the story of the buckboard

and its unknown driver. “You trail them wheel tracks in the mornin’, Dunk. Don’t waste no time about it.”

“Sounds like Lin Jessup’s idee to me,” Dalzell said. “If I didn’t know he’d left the country. . . . How about Nebo?”

“We got to drop him, Dunk. He’s as dangerous as Jessup. We got to drop him.”

“Well, it’s high stakes,” Dalzell agreed. “I’m willin’. You dope it out. But, remember, don’t keep anything on the shelf from me, Remy.”

They said nothing more. Cade warmed himself a moment by the fire. Dalzell dropped to the ground, completely ignoring his partner. Presently Cade got a-saddle and rode away, his course marked by a distant echo for a good ten minutes. Then it died away. Lin Jessup retreated up the slope and found his horse, turning into another part of the mysterious well of night.

CHAPTER 3

Tamesie Lowell stepped from the Star L house and stopped, a catch in her breath. On this morning she knew for the first time the thundering glory of a Western dawn. Along the eastern ridges stood a sheet of rose-flame and the sun’s disk was like a war shield of yellow metal. The early morning mists had but a moment ago gone, leaving a touch of crispness behind. Westward, the tall buttes were turning from deep purple to streaks of raw color, and such was the thinness and clarity of the air that she felt she might reach out and touch those buttes. This was deception—that much she knew from her father’s tales of the West. But there was no deception in the pungent smell of earth and sage rolling in toward her. Tamesie Lowell, quite sensitive to beauty, felt like shouting at the top of her voice.

Now I can see why Dad spent his life here, she thought. But why did mother bring me away when I was so small? Oh, all the years wasted!

Going across the yard, she caught sight of a squat puncher and called to him. “Saddle a horse for me, please.”

The man appeared not to hear her. She had to call again. This time he stopped, a trace of uneasiness on his face. “Ma’am? Was you speakin’ to me? A hoss? Well, I’ll have to be askin’ Cade if he wants it.”

“What’s Mr. Cade got to do with saddling a horse?” Tamesie demanded.

The puncher grew unaccountably sullen. “He gives orders hereabouts.”

“So?” Tamesie murmured, pressing her lips together. This was no answer to give a Lowell on a Lowell ranch. “What’s your name?”

“Charley.”

“All right, Charley. I’m sorry, but you are going to have to take orders from a woman. Saddle me a horse.”

But the puncher remained obdurate. “I’ll have to ask Cade—”

As if in response to his name, Cade emerged from the bunkhouse, clothes flapping around his sparse frame. In plain light he was even more bloodless than she had supposed, even more cadaverous. His face resembled a skull wrapped by yellow parchment and when he removed his hat this resemblance was heightened by a glistening bald dome. He stooped as he walked, appearing to be in pious contemplation. Yet his fathomless eyes darted from girl to puncher, instantly comprehending the scene.

“Good mornin’, Miss Tamesie. Want to go for a ride? You should let me know when you ride. Dangerous for a woman to go alone. Charley, saddle up Bell an’ the blaze face. I’ll string along, ma’am.”

“I’d rather ride alone,” Tamesie Lowell said.

“Couldn’t think o’ lettin’ you do it, Miss Tamesie.”

“Mr. Cade,” Tamesie said, “I’ve never had a chaperone and I don’t need one now.”

“Couldn’t allow it,” Cade insisted. Tamesie saw a glance pass between the men. Charley walked off to get the horses, Cade meanwhile pursuing his topic. “I’m responsible for your safety—as long as you stay.”

Tamesie was too much of a fighter to let that last phrase go unnoticed. “Don’t harbor any doubts about my not staying permanently. And that brings us back to our conversation last night. You have yet to answer my question, Mr. Cade. Do you agree to accept my orders?”

Cade again refused to meet the direct challenge. “Your dad put a lot o’ trust in me, Miss Tamesie. Anyhow, it takes a man to run this ranch. Couldn’t think o’ lettin’ you ruin yourself. It’s occurred to me you might be better satisfied to live in town an’ jus’ visit the ranch now an’ then. It’s pretty poor out here for a woman. Too cold or too hot. Ruins your clothes an’ your skin. Now, I got a house in view—”

“I know it’s very stubborn, but I seldom change my mind,” Tamesie broke in. Pink color ran along her cheeks. “Another point. You must tell the men to accept my orders, Mr. Cade.”

“Well, they been used to me,” Cade drawled solemnly. “Sorta look to me. It’ll take time.”

Charley came up with the horses. Tamesie jumped into the saddle. Cade followed suit. “Which way, ma’am?”

“I have no idea where you’re going,” Tamesie said, “but I’m going off toward those buttes.” She pointed west.

“Them buttes is a good place to stay clear of,” Cade said. “Many a man killed thereabouts. But if you want we should take a look—”

He set his horse in motion. Tamesie remained perfectly still. Finally Cade circled back, with never a trace of emotion on his mask of a face. Charley was grinning outright. The danger signals flamed brighter on Tamesie’s cheeks.

“I insist on going alone, Mr. Cade.”

He only shook his head. “Your dad wouldn’t never permitted it. Might as well take that view, ma’am. I’ll run the ranch an’ do my best for you. Takes a man.”

Tamesie dropped from her saddle, eyes flashing. “Come to the house, Mr. Cade. We’ve got to fight this out.”

Cade ambled after her, throwing a subdued word over his shoulder to Charley. Tamesie marched through the door of the ranch house and waited for him to come in. Then she pointed about the great front room. “Mr. Cade, why did you let this house go to pieces? Why is everything topsy-turvy? Where is all the furniture that used to be here?”

“Your dad left it in bad shape, ma’am,” was Cade’s slow answer. And as if the quarters were strange to him, he followed her sweeping gesture. It was a large room, dominated by a massive stone fireplace. Antlers and horns were mounted around the walls and the floor was scattered with cured pelts. But from top to bottom, the place showed the mark of violence. The floorboards sprung to Tamesie’s light weight. She could see where nails had been pulled and boards raised. An old couch in one corner showed fabric ripped in a dozen places and a roll-topped desk opposite the couch—where she knew her father had kept his records—was broken along the paneling. Even the stones of the fireplace were loose in the mortar. Nothing had escaped havoc save perhaps an old terra cotta flowerpot that hung suspended from the ceiling by a tripod of baling wire. Yet, whatever flower or plant it once might have nurtured, nothing remained now save a few handfuls of packed earth.

“Don’t tell me it was like this always,” Tamesie said. “Dad gave me an itemized account of everything present. He told me exactly what I would

find. Every room in the house is as bad as this one. What have you been doing, Mr. Cade?"

"I see you inspected the premises right close," Cade murmured, staring over her head.

For once, Tamesie changed the subject, reverting to her question. "Mr. Cade, are you willing to work under a woman?"

"Why, shucks, Miss Tamesie, of course I'm willin'."

"Then it is settled that you will respect my orders as well," Tamesie said. "And tell the crew they must do likewise."

"Well, I wouldn't be exactly rash, ma'am. As to the ranch, I know best."

Once again, the sparring. Tamesie grew angry. "I'll always listen to advice. But that isn't the point. Are you or are you not willing to accept my orders?"

Cade fell silent and had to be prompted. This time Tamesie was bound to have him meet the issue. And at last he raised his head, seeming quite somber. "I can't promise that, Miss Tamesie."

"Then," Tamesie said, "I'll ask you to leave. Since I met you last night I've felt you wouldn't work with me. What I've seen here and what I know of the former condition of the ranch makes me believe we had better break our business relations. I'll have a new foreman tomorrow."

Craftiness came to Cade's eyes. "Who you been talkin' to, Miss Tamesie? What did that Happy Brand say to you?"

"Nothing that could interest you, Mr. Cade."

"I ain't so sure." For once he came directly to the point. "But you can't fire me, Miss Tamesie. I won't be fired."

Tamesie had considered just such an event and so turned to her next weapon. "Please ask the crew to come here."

Cade went to the door and raised a shout. Presently the Star L punchers, some ten in number, were assembled inside the room.

Looking at them, Tamesie was not much reassured. Outside of her father she had never seen a man of the range until she had stepped from the train. Unconsciously, she measured these ten up against the picture of Lin Jessup as he stood on the car steps; also against Steve Nebo. And the contrast was startling. She had a moment of discouragement, even as she briskly addressed them.

"I have asked Mr. Cade to leave Star L. He refuses. Being a woman, I can't throw him out, but from this time on you will not accept his orders as foreman. There will be a new one on the ranch tomorrow. Is that clear?"

The heavy silence following sent a small stab of fear through her. There they stood, ten ungainly figures, hands hooked into low gunbelts, taciturn and grim-eyed. When she tried to meet their glances they fell away. Plainly, she had lost this fight. Cade, almost grinning, spoke up.

“You see? These men work for me. They take *my* orders. So I guess I ain’t fired a while yet.”

“Then you all must go,” Tamesie said flatly.

“Not until I say so,” Cade shot back with unusual energy. At this point he disclosed himself more than he ever had before. He said, more slowly, “I’ll run the ranch, ma’am.”

Tamesie measured him. She made her voice stay level. “You mean—I’m a prisoner on my own place?”

“Wouldn’t put it that way,” Cade drawled. “You’re free to go back East or to live in town. But I’ll run the Star L. It’s my business.”

“Must I have the sheriff out here?” Tamesie demanded, doubling her small fists.

Cade only shook his head. She couldn’t make out what kind of an emotion passed across his colorless face, yet she clearly understood that he was as much as saying she would never reach the sheriff, or that if she did it would do her no good. So closely was she watching the man that she failed to observe a new figure standing in the doorway. When the newcomer spoke, he startled her as much as he did all the others.

“I reckoned trouble to come,” he said. “Cade, you skeleton of a crook, I’m in on this deal.”

To a man they snapped around. Lin Jessup lolled in the doorway, the picture of graceful indolence. A sawed-off shotgun tilted forward, covering the group. A piece of a smile skittered across Lin’s face. Excitement flashed and glittered in his gray eyes like a storm warning.

“I’ve herded some o’ you whelps before. I’m doin’ it again. Now, the lady says vamoose. One by one, step out here while I draw your stingers.”

“By God, you stay clear o’ this parley!” Cade shouted. “Get off this ranch before I grind you to cinders! It’s the last time I’ll warn you!”

“March out,” Lin said, withdrawing from the doorway. “You know my style by now, Cade.”

Cade swung to the girl. “Ma’am, do you understand what he’s doin’? That man is a renegade!”

Tamesie Lowell smiled. She said, “Lin Jessup is my new foreman. If you won’t take my orders you’ll take his.”

Cade stared at her. "So you been listenin' to him, uh?"

"No," Tamesie replied sweetly. "I have just made him foreman this minute. He seems to be capable."

"March out," Lin Jessup repeated, grinning at Remy Cade.

A sawed-off Greening was a nasty instrument. Moreover these men knew Lin Jessup. Their ranks wavered. The man nearest the muzzle of the gun walked slowly through the door, elevating his hands. Lin tallied them, removed each holstered gun, lining them together in the yard. Cade followed last, his emotion sweeping a bilious yellow to his face. Lin nodded toward one of the crew. "Go saddle horses. Bring back a gunnysack. Shake the dust, now." Stepping back from the disarmed crew, he began to eject shells from each revolver.

Cade waved his skinny arm. "This is the last time you meddle, Jessup! Fair warning!"

"Fair?" Lin snorted. "Remy, you never did a fair act in your life. Don't be sentimental. All I want is for you boys to get off Star L. I misdoubt if you stay off long, but that's my worry. We'll sweep the barn clean even if it gets dirty again. Only, if you come back you'd better make it in a hurry and after dark. From now on Star L is going to be a legitimate brand. Sure sorry you've got to lose a lot of nursed stock. In case I can't identify original brands I'll call on you for help."

"More than one way to skin a skunk," Cade said.

"That's right, Remy," Lin agreed. "But all ways is odoriferous."

Up came a string of saddled horses. Lin made a gesture with his arm, at which the peremptorily discharged crew mounted. "Now," he went on, "just so there won't be any legal complications, I'm puttin' your empty guns in this gunnysack. You can sort 'em out and fill 'em again after you leave us. *Adios.*"

The sullen Charley retrieved the laden sack and threw it across his saddle. Cade tarried for one last threat. "You signed your own warrant, Jessup."

"See you in Eccles Canyon some night," Lin said. "Now travel."

They galloped away, Lin watching them until the dust of their progress was only a blur in the south. Then he turned toward the girl. "Reckon I'll apologize for buttin' in. I got worried up on the ridge an' thought I'd better sneak down here. Cade ain't a man to trust very far."

Tamesie had a moment of weakness. A woman's weapons seemed singularly futile in this land. "Now what are we going to do?"

“We’ll have six or seven good men on the job before noon,” Lin said, and his smile broadened. “I’m a great hand to smell difficulty. So I had Steve Nebo look around for assistance.”

“Come inside,” Tamesie said. “I want you to know something.”

Remy Cade and his men traveled swiftly away from the Star L, never stopping until the house was lost behind the curve of the prairie. Dipping into a dry wash, he raised his hand and brought them to a sudden halt. Charley silently distributed the guns, hurling the gunnysack as far away from him as he could. After they had loaded the empty chambers they waited for the ex-superintendent to announce his will. He seemed to be quite long in coming to a decision; so long, in fact, that the sullen Charley spoke up.

“Let’s go back now. He’s only one man, Cade.”

“It’d be a fight,” Cade mused, turning the proposition over in his head. “If it leaked out we was pluggin’ bullets toward a woman, I don’t misdoubt that the county would get sore.”

“She won’t leave,” Charley insisted. “It’s now or later. Why give up so easy?”

“Who’s givin’ up?” Cade snapped. “Shut your mouth. Mebbe we got to do it in the long run. But first we’ll try other means. Right off, Lin Jessup’s got to be disposed of. Next place, neither o’ them two can leave that ranch. Not unless I got my eyes on ’em. Charley, you stick here till it goes on dark. No, leave your hoss here an’ inch back to the house. Pot Jessup when he steps into sight. Better go along with him, Pete. When you get that took care of, let me know. But see Tamesie Lowell don’t try to git away. If she does I’ll settle with you boys and no mistake—”

One of the crowd had climbed up to the rim of the arroyo. He broke into Cade’s orders. “Dust comin’ up from Burnt Ridge way.”

The party crawled alongside the lookout and waited until a squad of horsemen appeared in front of the dust. Charley moved uneasily. “Suppose Jessup went an’ got help? I’ll bet a hat it’s Steve Nebo. Yeah, it’s Nebo’s big hoss. I reco’nize it.”

Cade stepped back to the bottom of the arroyo. “Spread out. If it’s Nebo we ketch him right now. By God, the Star L ain’t goin’ to have no help!”

“Make it a fight?” Charley questioned.

“If they start one,” Cade muttered. He removed his sombrero and rubbed his head until it turned red. Charley began to swear and never stopped until

the oncoming group was near enough for him to identify each man. Nebo. Ed Paris, dam' his fool heart! Lee Larelle. Benbow Collins. Zip Shugrue. "You bet they're aimin' fer Star L. Them fellas are all the same liver."

Charley began to swear again. Remy Cade put himself in the center of his line, reaching for his gun. "Wait for my shout. Hold it, Charley. What the hell ails you? Never swapped lead before? All right!"

Nebo and his four followers were within revolver range before they saw the Star L horses standing in the deep arroyo. That checked them, but directly afterward Cade and his men sprang into sight. Nebo started for his gun, halting the movement when he saw a rifle bearing down on him. He would have taken chances with a revolver, but that solitary rifle decided him to be peaceful. He dragged on the reins, stopped in a billowing of dust, hearing Cade's brittle challenge.

"High up! Don't make no false moves whatever! Now climb down!"

"In plain daylight," Nebo said, aggrieved. "We don't owe you nothin', Cade."

"You bet," Cade replied. "I'm seein' to it you won't, either. Vacation for you boys. Unload 'em, Charley."

"What's the rub?" Nebo demanded. "We run into your beef transactions? My, my, Remy, but you get yellower every day. Listen, we're mindin' our own business."

"At present," Cade said. "But you was on the road to cook up somethin'. Well, it'll be a wet an' dreary day afore you ever reach Lin Jessup at the Star L. Now climb back to them saddles."

"So Lin's there, uh?" Nebo grinned. "An' musta kicked you off. Well, he's a swift worker. I'd figgered to meet him along the bench." Still amiable, he stepped into the saddle and, along with his partners, was herded slowly away from the arroyo. "Haze 'em to Eccles Canyon," Cade ordered. "Hold 'em till you hear from me. Charley an' Pete, I want you to stay here for that other chore."

"You're gettin' bolder," Nebo observed. "Must think you got this county tied in a double bow knot, Remy. But you ain't. I'll be enjoyin' a pretty sight afore long—your legs tryin' to reach the earth an' your soul aspirin' for the sky. An' both will be plumb impossibilities."

"Go on," Cade snapped. "Get movin', dammit."

But the insouciant Nebo had a last word even as he was fogged along by his captors. "This is your fatal error, Cade. You should of played it safe. Dead is a long time."

“He said somethin’,” sullen Charley grumbled, watching the group dwindle across the prairie. “Cade, I never knew you to be so reckless. That ranch house ain’t worth fightin’ for. It’s blamed poor poker you played. We can do without it.”

“Nobody gets to that house and nobody leaves it,” Cade said angrily. “You boys sneak back there. Drop Jessup. Drop him, understand? Keep the girl on the premises. I’m goin’ to Burnt Ridge.”

He climbed into his saddle and rode toward the town, feeling not at all pleased with himself. The girl and Jessup had forced his hand. They had made him abandon his accustomed caution. They had broken through his false wall of legality. In that hour he had burned his bridges and committed himself to plain outlawry; a fact which, once spread abroad, meant his ruin. But he consoled himself with the knowledge that he was playing for high stakes. Nobody knew how high, not even Dunk Dalzell. It wasn’t only the matter of using the Star L as a rustlers’ harbor. It was something of infinitely more value inside the house itself.

“Have to work fast,” he grumbled. “Git it an’ leave the country. Let Dalzell an’ the rest of ’em hold the sack.” He repeated that phrase over and over again, trying to conceal the uneasiness he felt at having the security knocked from under his feet. In front of Bill Beesom’s Refuge he added another equally abrupt phrase. “Where in hell could Buck Lowell have put it?”

In the Star L front room, Tamesie Lowell unfolded her story to Lin Jessup. And when she finished, Lin rolled a cigarette in profound silence, his eyes sweeping the big room shrewdly.

“An’ so that explains why Cade’s ripped this place from top to bottom. Looks to me like he even dug a tunnel under the sills from the outside. But he ain’t found it yet.”

“What makes you think so?” Tamesie inquired.

“He’s a cautious critter, is Remy. Never likes to put his foot down except on solid ground. Now Dunk Dalzell would as soon fight as he would draw breath. But Cade ain’t built that way. If he’d found what he was after he’d let you come. He’d been as pleasant as a June bride. An’ he’d of skipped the country for his health. The fact that he’s throwin’ his whole pile of chips into this thing means he’s makin’ a last desperate play to control this house until he uncovers the secret.”

He smoked over the problem. Tamesie, not ordinarily given to depression, drifted with the silence feeling quite fortified to have him around. The specter of open lawlessness she had seen for the very first time shook her more than she cared to admit.

Yet Lin Jessup seemed to be doing no worrying at all. Trouble sat lightly on his shoulders. He even grinned at some passing thought, and the girl, watching the outline of his boldly chiseled features, wondered how he ever got so much of a reputation for cold recklessness. He had not appeared to be very concerned when he faced Cade's men with a single gun, yet it seemed significant that they had not argued very long with him.

"Now let's go over this again," Lin said. "It sounds just like Buck Lowell, but it's a pretty strong story to believe. How much money did he hide here?"

"He didn't tell me exactly," Tamesie replied. "But from what he hinted, it was enough to cover some notes falling due this fall. And it was always his habit, he explained, to keep enough cash around for paying the men and buying extra cattle. Also, he'd just turned off better than four hundred head to market. I know it's more than twenty thousand dollars. He admitted that. Dad was a very secretive man, even with his family."

"I can understand that. He never put any trust in banks. He told me so himself. But why didn't he take it East when he left here?"

"Because he had his last attack in Burnt Ridge and he was afraid to ride back to the ranch. Afraid he might die before he saw me. So he just got on the train and came East." She hesitated. "And I suppose it does seem queer he wouldn't tell me where he'd hidden it. But—Dad was very sick. I don't want this to go any further, Lin, but his mind just seemed to collapse. Once in a while he pulled himself together and talked. The rest of the time he was under a kind of hallucination. He seemed to think he was being watched by his enemies. That will have to explain it."

"That would be Buck Lowell," Lin agreed soberly. "He had plenty of enemies, too, Tamesie. Any fighter has enemies." And at that Lin's eyes gleamed with humor. "Speakin' from experience. All right. There's twenty-some thousand dollars cached around this house an' Remy Cade knows it and wants it. How that mummified turtle caught on to the secret I dunno. Prob'ly by hearin' rumors an' studying your dad's habits. It was plain knowledge in this country anyhow. But Remy ain't found it, which means he'll be back. You bet."

"What are we going to do?" the girl asked plaintively.

“Meet trouble as it develops,” was Lin’s prompt answer. “I sent Steve Nebo off to enlist a half-dozen men we can depend on. You see, I figured you’d need help one way or another. Wasn’t just expectin’ to have you give me this job, though. Ain’t that snap judgment on your part?”

“I’m taking my father’s estimate of you,” she reminded him.

“God bless Buck Lowell.” He frowned. “Say, how did you know it was me on that buckboard?”

She colored a little. “From the gold band ring you wear. I saw it when you got on the train.”

Lin chuckled. Being a man with quick nerves, he could sit down only so long. Rising, he ranged about the room, kicking at the floor boards. “Well, it’s just a ring, Miss Tamesie. I ain’t married.”

The color deepened on her cheeks. “That was uncalled for, Lin Jessup.”

“All right. Consider it unsaid. Just my way of throwing my hat in the ring.”

Nobody could long resist the man’s humor, not even Tamesie. “You *are* reckless.”

“Uhuh. Well, Nebo was to meet me on the bench. But he’ll prob’ly see my tracks and follow back here with the boys he’s picked up. We’ll have a crew this afternoon.”

At this point Tamesie Lowell made a Lowell decision. “All right, Lin. Everything is in your hands. I surrender the ranch to you. I won’t give you any foolish orders and I won’t interfere. Just consider me as a piece of the furniture until this is all settled. I do want you to know I’m not here for any treasure hunt. If we never find the money I won’t be awfully worried. You see, my mother hated this country. She took me away to make a musician of me. Lin, I’m the world’s poorest pianist, but her heart was set on it and I just labored along. She died right after father.”

That was the story. Lin nodded gravely and Tamesie’s voice added a swift, almost explosive phrase. “But this is where I belong! I love it! I won’t ever leave!”

“Bein’ a good Lowell, you wouldn’t,” Lin said. “Believe I’ll mosey over to the bunkhouse.”

It was cool inside the room and along the porch. Beyond, the land lay sweltering under a hot sun. Heat waves quivered up from the ground and a haze trailed like a gauze curtain against the horizon. Lin stepped through the door and out to the yard. He had gone perhaps twenty feet when something struck his attention and he turned to speak to Tamesie who had come to the

porch. At that moment the sultry stillness was broken by the muffled report of a rifle in the near distance. Lin's body, half twisted, seemed to waver. He threw his arms forward and sagged, falling like a sack of meal.

Tamesie Lowell screamed. She ran out toward him, crying, "Lin—Lin!"

He turned his head slightly. "Get back in the house," he said.

"I won't. You're hit—"

"Get back in that house before the sucker takes another shot. He didn't hit me—it's only an old dodge. Go on!"

Tamesie wavered. The echo came once more, a bullet ploughing a furrow between her and Lin Jessup's prone figure. She ran for cover, but even then she refused to go beyond the door. Instead she stood by the porch support, trembling. Lin spread himself quite flat on the ground and inched backward. The unknown ambusher out beyond must have seen this movement, for a third bullet brought up a jet of sand less than a foot removed from his body. Hard upon this, Lin squirmed about, rolling over and over, his yellow hair afire in the hot sun. At the porch steps he rose and fell inside the flimsy shelter of the porch rail.

"Get in the house, Tamesie. I ain't hurt. I just want to spot this jasper if I can before he takes another shot at me."

CHAPTER 4

Tamesie leaned against the door jamb, fists doubled together. Lin, casting a swift glance at the girl, saw she was trying to bring her nerves together and get control of herself. The color came slowly back to her cheeks. Black eyes flashed. Lin spoke gently. "Good girl. The first sound o' lead comin' your way is mighty hard on the constitution. After a while you won't mind it."

"Have you been shot at before?"

"Lord, I'd think it was a poor season if somebody didn't send me them kind of compliments." He grinned, but Tamesie felt he was being light-hearted only for her benefit. Dust powdered his face and sweat ran across his forehead. Flat on his stomach, he stared across the shimmering ground. "That gent is a good quarter-mile away. Must be in the depression over near the road."

"Cade?"

Lin shook his head. “Cade’s got no stomach for this kind of work. He prob’ly sent one of his men—”

A neat round hole flicked into the bottom step of the porch. Lin’s gaze swept the earth’s surface, backward and forward, and finally came to rest. Tamesie drew inside, oppressed by the ensuing silence. Nothing moved out there; it was deadly still. She heard only the pounding of her own heart and Lin Jessup’s slow breathing.

“A good five hundred yard,” he muttered. “Now, is it one man or is it the whole outfit? Tamesie, you better see all the windows are locked.”

She went quickly through the house, glad to have a chore that occupied her attention. Then minutes later when she returned he was inside the big room. “Let’s go upstairs. You keep a look around the back of the place.” In a corner of the second floor he squatted by a window and once more painstakingly searched the ground. Tamesie called from across the hall, “I don’t see anything.” Then she heard a jingling of glass and ran back to Lin’s station. He had broken a pane with the muzzle of his gun and was taking a long, steady aim. At that instant she understood why Cade’s crew had walked meekly away from the ranch. The face resting along the butt of the gun was bleak, intent on destruction. Tamesie turned away as the room filled with the roar of the discharge. Lin moved back, murmuring softly.

“I’m a big fool for tryin’ to reach him with this pea shooter. But I can see the sucker plastered out there. Don’t see anybody else, though. All right, Tamesie. He’s got the bulge on us until it gets dark. Then I’ll take a little still hunt.”

“Lin, you might be killed.”

“I might, but I don’t reckon so.”

Tamesie decided she was entirely useless and went down the stairs to the kitchen. It was past noon and time to eat, even if they were besieged. A half-hour later she brought up an impromptu meal and they ate by the observation post.

“Point number two—you can cook,” he said over his coffee cup.

“What was point number one?” Tamesie asked, on her dignity.

“You got courage to burn.”

“You’d better wait until you discover some of my faults before you make rash proposals,” she said. “He who leaps without sight always buys a bad bargain.”

Then she smiled at Lin Jessup’s embarrassment. He turned quite red and deserted her for the window. “Don’t you think I’m so presumin’ a fool,” he

said, “even if I talk wild.”

“I like you better a little rash, Lin.”

The afternoon rolled slowly on, the eastern rim began to glow under the sun’s last long rays. Lin Jessup patrolled from room to room, watching all angles of approach. Tamesie, for want of a better thing to do, made more coffee. That and a can of plum pudding was their supper. “Steve Nebo,” Lin said, “should have been here some time back. He’s run into a jackpot.”

“But he couldn’t know you were here.”

Lin knew his partner better, and said as much. “He would’ve found me. That’s Steve. No, he’s run into grief. I’ve got to locate him.”

Of a sudden it was dark. And Lin, abandoning his long vigil, went downstairs and crept out a rear door. “Tamesie, you lock yourself in one o’ those rooms. Don’t move even if you hear a burst of shots. But if it happens Cade an’ his party come trampin’ in, you crawl out of a window and drop off the porch roof. Make straight down the road for town.”

“Can’t I go with you?” she asked wistfully.

Lin shook his head. Before he vanished in the shadows she touched his arm, saying gently, “Be careful.” Then he was gone. She turned upstairs and went to the darkest corner she could find, her fists tightening as the dragging moments passed.

Lin circled the house, struck off at a tangent and crept into the prairie. After a while he dropped to his knees, aiming at the spot where he had last seen the ambusher. It was wholly black, with that peculiar density of a Western night without a moon. About three hundred yards from the house he stopped and put an ear to the ground. Nothing to be heard. The fellow had either retreated or was playing possum. A hundred yards more and he reached the depression. Now, it should be only a little way along this—

He brought out his gun. From this point he moved a foot at a time, raising and lowering his knees, stretching his arms ahead. Afar, a coyote sent its weird, unforgettable challenge up to the dim stars. A piece of a wind touched his cheeks. And he thought he heard something move directly across his path. Move and stop, and move again. Lin sank flat, listening.

A grunt, a soft intake of breath. After that a shadow wavered against the velvet pall, grew larger and quartered toward the ranch house. It vanished and then appeared again. The man was moving uncertainly. Perhaps the long wait and the darkness had touched his nerves. Lin stretched to his knees, got to his feet and sprang ahead. The shadow grew solid.

Lin plunged ahead. His gun barrel swept downward and grazed an arm. Breath exploded in his face and a fist struck him fair on the lips with

stunning force. He caught at that fist, trying for a hold, but he was sent spinning. The shadow retreated. Then the fathomless depths of the universe were shattered by a gun's voice. Dull flame ran across the strip of space, the breath of powder touched him. Lin Jessup swung his shoulder sidewise, firing point blank. After that the silence seemed to deepen. But the unknown's shadow dropped lower by inches. Suddenly it merged with the ground. Lin heard a swift and labored intake of breath. Then a voice croaked, "I was a fool to pull Cade's ches'nuts out the fire—"

The man was dead. Lin started to bend over, then was warned by the sibilant scraping directly in his rear. He turned. Halfway around, he met an oncoming body and went down in a wrestler's lock. The second assailant seemed to be all feet and legs. Lin rolled over and over. He wrenched an arm free and hammered at the base of the man's neck. It brought a mutter of pain; it loosened the fellow's hold. He heard a fist strike the sand beside him and, whipping every muscle to his will, he broke clear with a series of twisting, painful surges. His opponent was overset, a black, catapulting mass in the gloom. Lin aimed and struck. The barrel of his gun lay across flesh and bone—and there was no more resistance.

Lin braced himself on his elbows. Groping, he captured the man's weapons. Then he relaxed, aching in a dozen different spots.

"All right, come back to earth," he muttered.

The figure stirred. Lin crawled to his feet and placed the muzzle of his revolver against the man's spine. "Come on back. You ain't dead, but you ought to be."

"Charley—"

"Your partner's finished. Get up."

"Jessup?"

"You ought to know. Rise an' march."

The unknown one groaned. "Damn, I'm blinded. They's a sluice o' blood runnin' down my face. It's a knife you used on me, you dirty rat!"

But the pressure of the gun was against his back and Lin's arms were pulling him upright. So the man stood erect, swaying. Lin pushed him ahead, marched him across the prairie and to the ranch house. At the porch, Lin called to the girl and presently she came down, lighting a lamp. Lin shoved his captive into the room.

"Pete Sabin, uh? Well, Pete, I always knew you to be crooked, but I didn't figure you'd ambush a gent."

Pete wiped the blood from his face. "Talk ahead," he grumbled. "You won't be on top long. You're marked for a bullet."

"Where's Cade?"

"Town, I guess. An' that ain't all, either, Jessup. Your partner an' his party is bein' took care of, see. Oh, I guess your day is about finished."

"Where's Steve Nebo?" Lin pressed.

The captive remained glumly silent. Lin stepped back a pace, and the yellow lamplight flashed against his eyes. "Of course, Pete, if you're goin' to be stubborn—"

"Up in the canyon," Pete confessed reluctantly. Then he roared, "You devil, you'd torture me! When the time comes I'll burn your eyes out with my cigarette! You wait!"

Lin turned to the girl. "Tamesie, there's a lot of gear in that closet beside the fireplace. Will you find me a rope?"

Tamesie obeyed. Lin unwound the lariat she gave him and dropped a noose around Pete Sabin's neck. He led the man upstairs to one of the rooms, tied him to a bed and stuffed a gag in his mouth. "Sleep it off, Pete. I'll be back later."

Downstairs he faced Tamesie. "Nebo's in trouble. I've got to see what I can do. We can't hold this ranch alone. I'm blamed if—"

"I am going along," she broke in.

"But Tamesie—"

"No, sir!" was her swift answer. "I'd go mad if I had to stay here by myself. You'll have to put up with me."

He considered it gravely. There seemed no other way out of the tangle. If Cade came in the meantime and found the girl, the man probably would be in a frame of mind to kidnap her. "All right," he decided. "But it's going to be a tough night, I'm afraid."

Her small, compact shoulders rose and fell. "I don't care."

Lin went to the closet and rummaged out an old saddle. Then he stepped across the yard, slapped the gear on an extra horse from the corral and came back. Tamesie swung up. Together they rode away from the Star L ranch house.

"We're desertin', in a way," Lin said. "But we've got to have Nebo and whatever help he's raised. If Cade trapped 'em, it means most of the crew is up there, so the ranch ain't in much danger for a few hours. And even if Cade does come back while we're gone he won't find the money—seein' as he's hunted for it so long anyway. It's a gamble we've got to make."

Her hand fell on his shoulder. "I've got all my confidence in you, Lin."

"That helps," he said, and looked solemnly up to the dim stars. Life was like a jigsaw puzzle. Who would have thought, one short week ago, that he'd be riding across the Star L by night with Tamesie Lowell by his side—with Tamesie Lowell putting herself in his hands?

It grew crisp as they drew nearer the buttes. The wind freshened. Tamesie felt it, but she set her teeth and kept silent. Once, when Lin broke a long silence to ask her if she felt warm enough, she answered, "I'm all right." The man immediately pulled his mackinaw from the back saddle thongs and made her wear it.

"You mustn't worry about me," she protested. "We've got so many other things to consider. I don't want to be a burden." Nevertheless, the rough, heavy folds of the mackinaw comforted her. It smelled of tobacco, of wood-smoke; and when she tucked her hands into the big pockets she discovered an odd assortment of objects—staples, a pouch of tobacco, pliers, a length of rolled wire, keys. The things an outdoor man would carry with him.

She had no idea of how long it took them to cross the prairie and start up the side of the buttes. In the East, time had been the very essence of her life; the hour hands of the clock marked her duties and her engagements, regulating her being. Out here time slid along unnoticed, unimportant. An hour was nothing, a day little more. The West lived on a long swing, measuring its tasks by seasons.

But as the grade grew sharper, Lin went ahead and they traveled Indian file, turning and twisting until the girl lost all sense of direction. She felt masses of rock bulking alongside. She was aware of a great barrier rearing its opaque shadow above them. Lin's voice floated back to her, subdued yet astonishingly clear. "There's two ways of gettin' to the heart of this pile. One leads into Eccles Canyon from the south. A sort of alley openin' right off the prairie floor. This is a back entrance. Nobody ever uses this trail—too long an' too rough. You all right?"

"Of course. Don't worry about me. Where are we going?"

"You'll see in a minute."

Something closed about her. Cold air scoured against her face and she heard the slight drip of water. Reaching out, she touched the jagged edges of rock. "Bend low," Lin murmured. And then they were beyond the tunnel and the girl saw, far down, a flickering point of light. Lin Jessup had stopped; he was speaking just above a whisper. "Dunk Dalzell's camp. He's in fifty-fifty with Cade, though the county don't know it. Think Nebo's down there. You wait right here till I come back. There's a little shelf ahead where you can

draw off the trail. Don't stray, even if you hear trouble brewin' below. It's dark and you're absolutely safe."

She felt a gun being pressed into her hands and she protested. "You're giving me your gun?"

A soft chuckle rose and fell. She could see nothing of him, but she heard a twang of excitement in his answer. "Lord, Tamesie, I'm weighted down with artillery like a Mexican bandit. That gun came from your dad's gear closet. All right, so Lin Jessup sneaks forth. I like to pull stunts on Dunk Dalzell—makes him so doggoned mad. It ain't a pleasure to fight with Cade, because that walkin' mummy won't swap slugs openly. Dunk will. He's got a liver."

Tamesie had a moment of nerves as she heard him drop out of the saddle. She wanted to hold him nearby a moment longer. But she fought the impulse and clenched both small hands around the butt of her weapon. A foot scraped across the rocks and then all sound of the man faded. For an instant it was as still as death; but presently the night filled with alarming echoes and mysterious shapes wavered about her. She thought she heard someone approaching from behind and she drew her horse closer to the side of the cliff. . . .

Lin Jessup lowered himself along the side of the canyon, following the path he knew so well. Once more he skirted the promontory and saw the canyon walls reflecting the blood-glow of the fire. Fifty feet farther down he stopped, inspecting the figures wrapped in blankets by the blaze. Six, he counted. Well, six was the number of Dunk's own gang, yet if Nebo and Nebo's men were being held captives hereabouts it was likely a part of the former Star L crew would be likewise on hand. Of them he saw nothing; nor could he find a trace of Steve Nebo.

Probably they were back in the shadows. The canyon walls made a convenient shelter to the west side of the fire where Dalzell's outfit could repair in time of storm. Lin abandoned his search and began to circle the bowl until he reached a spot that balked travel. He had to drop to the floor of the canyon and take his chances. So he crawled on, past the final protecting boulder, and found himself less than fifty yards from the blaze. Flat on his stomach, he inched over this floor to gain a refuge somewhere near the cavern. The firelight fell just short of him.

A horse whinnied somewhere deeper in the darkness—somewhere near the canyon's end. And he made out the jingle of bridle chains. It was, he knew, Dalzell's habit always to keep a part of the horse band saddled against emergency. Lin tucked the fact in the front of his head and pushed forward

another five yards. Abruptly, he heard a familiar voice drawing through the darkness, "Say, you got one too many tucks in me. Loosen up this rope afore I bust an artery."

Lin laid his head flat on the sand. Nebo was just a few yards removed. Evidently there was a guard nearby. Presently this guard spoke, seeming to be still farther along the ground. "You ought to be glad it ain't worse."

"Yeah?" Nebo jeered. "That's a kind thought. I'll live to see *you* buried with yore socks on."

"Shut up. I got no palaver for you."

Lin heard his partner moving restlessly. This brought a quick warning from the guard. "Stop it! Won't do you no good to roll around."

Now, how was he to tell Steve of his presence? Lin studied the matter over and over until a happy thought arrived. Steve knew of the gold band ring on his third left finger. Sure. . . . He rose on his knees, advanced a matter of feet. Steve was softly cursing and by that Lin placed his partner's exact location. He raised his left palm and let it drop on Steve's face, the ring pressing against Steve's cheek. He felt his partner's muscles expand. Then he brought the hand away and ran it along the rope binding his partner by arms, shoulders and feet. And as he reached for his pocket knife, Steve spoke casually to the guard.

"What's the idee o' havin' us all scattered sep'rate like this? Where's the other five boys?"

Lin Jessup grinned. Steve was talking this way to tell him how things stood. The guard, apparently trying to get in a little sleep while on duty, spoke irritably. "For the love o' Pete, Nebo, hush! They're all picketed out like you. We ain't takin' no chances on havin' you loosen each other's knots, see?"

Lin's knife slid through the body of the rope, even as Steve Nebo cleared his throat to cover the sound "Well," Steve grumbled, "I don't see why I got to lay out in this draught. Put me with the rest of 'em. They're by the cave, ain't they?"

The guard swore roundly. He seemed to be rising from his blanket. In that moment of suspense, Lin drew his gun and waited. Nebo, though free to unwind himself from the rope, never stirred. The guard was moving toward the fire, body silhouetted against it. At the blaze he squatted to light a cigarette. Lin murmured into Nebo's ear, "Stick here while I—"

"Good work, kid," Steve breathed. "I been thinkin', all the aft'noon. They got hosses saddled an' tied to a pole rack against the west rock face. Twenty more loose head jammed against the end o' the canyon, held by a

rope thrown acrost. Cut the rope, Lin. Stampede 'em into the fire. I'll do the rest."

Lin had brought two extra revolvers. One, from Buck Lowell's gear closet, he had given to the girl. The other was Pete Sabin's, and this he now passed to Nebo, retreating as the guard came ambling back. A short distance away he rose to his feet, reached the west wall of the canyon and groped along until he struck one post of the hitching rack. Bridle chains jingled once more; a horse stepped nervously. Lin skirted the rack and walked into the narrowing end of the canyon. Voices rose behind him. He heard Dunk Dalzell challenging:

"Lazear, that you? What's all the movin' about? Anybody by them horses? Lazear!"

Lin reached the rope barrier. His knife slashed down, the rope parted. This affair was beginning to warm up. Dalzell, he saw, was walking away from the fire, his immense frame outlined in the blood-glow. So he ran back to the rack, fumbled with a rein's half-hitch and threw himself into somebody's saddle. Dalzell challenged again, his words booming from wall to wall: "Who's that? Lazear!" The horse whirled to the spur, racing into the canyon's end and on through the loose stock, spreading confusion. Lin drew his gun and fired at random, adding a high-treble yell. That yell woke the echoes. Of a sudden the shadows swirled with milling horseflesh. A thunderbolt was launched as the loose stock raced away toward the canyon's mouth. Dunk Dalzell's frame bobbed like a cork in the light and vanished. Men screamed into Lin Jessup's vision and were lost in the midst of the careening stock. Nebo's voice sang upward along a weird harmonic scale—that was his cry of battle. And a gun report crashed across the wake of his yell. Then other guns broke in until this natural sounding board seemed to disintegrate under charges of dynamite. Lin galloped directly toward the fire which, trampled by the fleeing horses, was a glowing blur on the ground.

"Come on!" he yelled. "We got 'em trapped! Close that outlet, Sheriff! All right, scramble along the rocks! We got 'em boxed!"

This was for Dunk Dalzell's benefit only. The rustler renegade flung the challenge back into Lin's face. "Jessup, you die! If it's a thousand men with you—you die! Stand out an' fight it! Stick fast, boys!"

Lin veered back toward the tethered horses. Somebody was near the rack, breathing hard and fast. His brittle cry struck Lin like a blow. "Who's that? Lin? All right, all right! Zip Shugrue, Lin! What next?"

"Stay here. Got a gun, Zip?"

“Nope. Wait—hold on. Yeah. Here’s a rifle in this joe’s saddle boot. Happy days! I’m m’self onct more!”

“Pump a few shots into that fire. They’re collectin’ near it.”

Nebo raised his cry, near at hand. Lin answered. Bullets smashed against the cliff; Dalzell was organizing his fight like a shrewd veteran. It was getting hot by the rack, for a fact. But Nebo seemed to have done his chore successfully. He reached the rack, glowing and bubbling over with the wrath of vengeance. Once aroused, Steve Nebo’s mind worked like a machine and he was utterly lacking in caution. “All here? Collins—Lee—Paris—Zip? Now, by Jum, we pay our debts! Lin, let’s ride! Ride ’em down!”

They were in the saddle. Lin Jessup vaguely saw them, heard them. Beyond the scattered fire he saw a flickering, purple row of flame jets, like the electric glow of fireflies. Lin gathered the impression that Dunk Dalzell had got his men spread out from wall to wall; six of Dunk’s own men, and probably as many ex-Star L punchers. The odds were two to one. Not bad, but there were too few guns among Nebo’s party to make it a decent scrap. He could afford to have none of his saddles emptied tonight. It must be cut and run, up the precipitous path he had traced earlier. Tamesie Lowell was up on the rim waiting, the Star L undefended. The ranch must see the showdown, not Eccles Canyon.

“Follow me,” he said. “Up the slope.”

“By Jum, let’s scorch this stew!” Steve yelled.

“Hold it, you idiot. We’ve got our own stew to watch. Follow me!”

He galloped across the canyon floor and forced his mount along the rock-strewn side. “Can’t make it with these brutes,” Steve muttered.

“Got to,” Lin said, dismounting. “Haul ’em if no other way.”

He fought through and around the massive stones. Hoofs struck fire, saddle leather groaned. Dunk Dalzell had caught the maneuver and was lifting his guns, meanwhile bellowing like a gored bull. Bullets twanged past the fugitives, spat and ricocheted against the rock formation.

“Let him shout,” Lin said. “It’s his fight tonight. Come on, come on—can’t you boys lift a horse, dead weight?”

“They make critters too damn heavy!” Steve panted. “Just one round, Lin! Let’s stop an’ go back!”

“Not in the books. Budge them brutes. We’re halfway.”

The loose rubble snared them, went sliding down the incline. Dunk Dalzell seemed to have followed a few yards and then stopped; the volleying died a little and fell behind them. Lin twisted and turned, pulling on the

reins. His horse, lunging upward, knocked him aside, bringing the whole party to a halt. They stopped for a breathing spell, went on, stopped and went on again. The cold air crusted the salt sweat, and the dim stars seemed infinitely remote. They stopped again and then fought yard by yard along the last steep slant. Lin felt the pathway beneath his feet and led his horse aside. One by one the laboring men gained the top and dropped to rest.

Silence, below. The scattered embers of the fire winked out.

“No more,” Steve Nebo said, the breath whistling through his windpipe. “Never no more. Guess I got to cut out them sawdust cigareets. It’s awful!”

Lin walked along the trail. “Tamesie.”

No answer. He reached his own horse. Then a dozen yards farther, discovered the girl’s horse, riderless. “Tamesie!”

Somebody came running down the trail, regardless of the yawning chasm. The girl’s voice struck through the darkness. “Lin? Oh, Lin!”

She collided with him and Lin put a supporting arm around her. “What’s the matter?”

She was trembling, yet trying to command herself. “I heard somebody coming, just after you left. I slipped down and crawled away. There *was* somebody right near. I heard a horse turning on the rocks. I—I must be an awful coward. But it was a man, and he stayed within ten yards of this spot all during the fight. Just a minute ago he went back.”

“It sounds like Cade,” Lin muttered. “Always on the edge of a fight, but never in it. Well, we better hustle back to the ranch. I got a feeling in my bones we won’t be none too soon.”

He led Tamesie to her horse and lifted her to the saddle. The rest of the party fell in behind. They wound down the trail, through the tunnel and at last gained the level prairie.

Tamesie drew beside Lin. “Was anybody hurt?”

“Not any of our boys—yet.”

“One o’ Dunk’s hired hellions got punctured,” Steve Nebo offered.

“How do you know?” the girl asked.

“I punctured him,” Steve said.

“And I started all this,” she said. “It isn’t worth it. No, it isn’t.”

“Don’t think that for a minute,” Lin made haste to say. “This has been brewin’ for a long while. The time was ripe to call Cade’s hand. Don’t you be sorry for none of ’em. They’re all free, white an’ twenty-one. Likewise, they know the difference between right an’ wrong. And they ain’t much sorry, either. Why, Dunk loves to scrap.”

“So do I,” Nebo said. “But I’m off this climbin’ stuff. It’s ruined me.” Then he laughed and the echo of it made a queer muffled pattern in the shadows. “Lin, you must’ve been awful excited. Here you had a good hoss waitin’ for you up on the trail an’ you took all the trouble to lug another critter four hundred feet skyward. Must love hoss flesh.”

“Blamed if it didn’t slip my mind,” Lin chuckled. “Say, where is that other horse?”

“I cut the saddle cinches an’ let him roam.”

“Naughty, naughty. That wasn’t brotherly, Steve. Dunk won’t like it at all.”

“I’ll send him a bouquet, with regrets,” Steve said.

“You won’t need to send it far, I’m thinkin’. He’ll be on hand to receive it, personal. The sooner we reach the ranch house the easier I’ll feel.”

They galloped eastward.

Dunk Dalzell stood by the wreck of his camp fire, calling roll. They were all present and unharmed save one. That one happened to have been the guard set over Steve Nebo. He lay on the ground while a mumble of pain and outrage seeped from his lips. Dunk stooped, running a heavy hand over the man’s head. “On the coco, huh? What’d he do—belt yuh? Well, you careless fool, it’s your own fault. I’d ought to end your mizry.”

“I got a slug in my shoulder,” the fellow said.

“Should of been in your head,” Dalzell growled. He rose and went tramping into the darkness, his path luridly marked by the things he said. “This comes o’ Cade’s foolishness. What’d he want to trap Nebo for, anyhow? An’ what’d he want to wish them jaspers onto me for? By the slinkin’ Judas, I never heard of a man bein’ so damned foolish an’ premature! Any half-wit might know you couldn’t kidnap six men permanent. An’ he runs off an’ lets me handle the mess! Where is that yaller fossil now? Where is he?”

“Went to town, Dunk.”

“Went to town,” Dalzell mimicked. “He’s always slidin’ away from trouble. The more I think about it, the worse it smells. He’s too dam’ interested in that ranch house for any good use. Well, he won’t hang the sign on me—no he won’t! If I ketch him at it he’ll drop!”

The rest of the crowd stood silent. Dunk Dalzell, in this kind of humor, was not a man to bother. They heard him rumbling in the distance; presently he returned. “How many saddles we got left?”

“Seven horses on the rack, Dunk. But they’s them saddles we took from Nebo’s crowd.”

“Couple you boys round up some o’ that loose stuff. Enough to ride. Let the rest slide for tonight. Well, don’t stand there with your thumb in your mouth! On the prod!”

A part of them moved off. The injured man on the ground spoke between breaths. “Goin’ to let—Jessup get away with it?”

“No I ain’t,” Dalzell said. “It’s one hell of a mess Cade got me in. Now I’ve opened myself wide for trouble. Them boys will spread it. I’d like to get my han’s on Remy Cade’s hen-sized windpipe! But Jessup’s fooled me jus’ once too often. I’ll pay that debt if it puts me out o’ the county. Where’s them hosses! Sift around, you dumbwit! You been dead on your feet all night!” He lifted his voice and blared down the canyon. “Where’s them hosses?”

He poured the lees of his temper on their heads for a good ten minutes, until the riders came back with a handful of the stampeded stock. “Saddle up!” he roared. “I’ll show you rabbits how to make a fight!”

They scattered. The injured one broke in plaintively, “How about me, Dunk?”

“You’ll die or you’ll live. Damn if I care which. Come on—don’t be creepin’ like a bunch of angleworms!”

Somebody brought him a horse. He mounted and waited impatiently for the rest to come up. “Now, listen. We’re ridin’ for the Star L. They’ll get dug in ahead of us, so we’ll have to boost ’em out. That house burns, see? It burns like a torch! Right down to the last cinder. I’m settlin’ with Jessup for good.”

“It’s kind o’ reckless, Dunk. County’s apt to put in an oar.”

“Well, it’s too late now. Cade made a big mistake in the first place. Never knowed him to be so foolish. I’ll finish the proposition. If we got to pull freight we’ll have somethin’ to show for it. They ain’t got more’n seven-eight in their crowd. We’re fourteen all told. That’s ample to do it in a hurry, providin’ some o’ you rabbits will quit squealin’. Come on.”

He rode down the canyon with the injured one’s last cry in his ears. “Hey Dunk! I’m dyin’! You ain’t goin’ to leave me alone?”

“Die,” muttered Dunk Dalzell. “It’ll be a new experience for you.”

It was exactly three o'clock in the morning when Lin and his party approached the Star L corrals and stopped. The girl was half asleep in her saddle, but as the men stepped to the ground and started forward afoot she roused herself.

“What’s up?”

“Just takin’ out a little insurance against surprise,” Lin said. The six men deployed, inspected the outbuildings and crept toward the house. Nebo ran across the porch and slid through the open door. Presently lamplight gushed through.

“All right, come ahead.”

They converged upon the place and went inside. Lin motioned toward the stairway. Zip Shugrue sprang upward, doors rattled to his exploring arms. “You’ll find Pete Sabin tied to a bunk in the corner room,” Lin called.

Zip Shugrue grunted and proceeded with his search. Lin appointed Benbow Collins to take care of the horses and also to take station out beyond the corrals for a while. The girl, he saw, waged a losing fight to keep her eyes open, so he made her lie on the couch, spreading his coat over her.

“I don’t want to sleep,” she protested drowsily.

“You won’t miss anything,” Lin assured her. “Rest while you got the chance. Tomorrow’s another day.” He hadn’t much more than finished the sentence when she was quite lost to the world. Then Zip Shugrue came down the stairs with the captured Pete’s gunbelt as a trophy. “I’ll be needin’ this,” he said. “Where’s the gun?”

“Nebo’s got it now,” Lin said. “That’s our first problem. Well, the meeting will come to order to discuss ways an’ means. Three revolvers on hand. One rifle. But there’s just a few cartridges in the magazine of the rifle. After which it’s useless to us. That leaves us with only those three revolvers and not too much ammunition.”

“Considerin’ the state o’ my temper,” Steve Nebo broke in, “I don’t need a gun. My bite would be fatal.”

“Well,” Lin said, “there is one more gun and belt out in the prairie which we can get.” Whereupon he explained his fight with Cade’s two men and the death of Charley. “I got hold of his gun and threw the blamed thing twenty feet. We’ll have to locate it. And we’d better pack Charley to the bunkhouse.”

“Listen,” Steve interposed, “whatever makes you think Dunk Dalzell will tackle us? That’s a pretty strong move, even for a renegade like him.”

“Well, wasn’t it a pretty strong move for Cade to kidnap you boys? Same idea. If they’ll do that, they’ll try to polish off the job. They’ve gone too far to back up.”

“I don’t get it at all,” Steve muttered. “I sure don’t. It was a wild stunt for Cade to pull. What was the need of it? He don’t have to use this house to rustle cattle. Him an’ Dunk were plumb safe. Nobody had a speck of evidence on ’em. Now, what with all this shootin’, they’re both in a jackpot. Awful queer.”

Lin was silent a moment. Yet, he had never kept a secret from his partner and it was no time to start such a habit. So he decided to reveal the lure that had caused Cade to upset a lifetime habit of caution. “It’s like this, boys. Somewhere in the house is a sum of money exceedin’ twenty thousand dollars. There’s the honey they want.”

“Oh, shucks, that’s a fairy tale,” Steve objected. “Said yarn has been percolatin’ through the county better’n a year, but nobody believes it. Jus’ a fairy tale.”

“Nope, it’s dead truth,” Lin countered. “Old Buck Lowell told Tamesie.”

Twenty thousand was so great a sum that Nebo, at the moment, couldn’t comprehend the significance of it. His practical mind went directly along its accustomed track. “All right. If that’s cold truth, you get the money on deck an’ wake the girl. I’ll ride into town with both. This ain’t no place for a lady and her millions.”

“There’s a slight hitch,” Lin Jessup said, grinning. “She don’t know where it is.”

Nebo’s cigarette drooped. Ed Paris looked to Lee Larelle and Lee stared dumbly at Zip Shugrue. Nebo removed his cigarette with unwonted care. “Well, I’ll be damned,” he said blankly.

“I guess that explains all this feverish activity,” Lin went on. “Cade got wind of it in some manner. He’s ripped this joint from rafter to foundation. Don’t it look wrecked? But he ain’t found a red cent. And he’s makin’ a play to keep the house until he does find it. Maybe he thinks Tamesie knows where the money is located and he wants to hold her from walkin’ away with it.”

Nebo wasn’t listening. He was doing sums on his finger tips, a remote expression flickering in his gray eyes. “Forty dollars a month is about five hundred a year. Ten years is five thousand. Forty years is twenty thousand. Yeah. If I worked forty years, played no cards, drank no liquor, ate like a

sparrow an' bought no hosses, I'd make twenty thousand dollars. And that's the amount cached away on these premises. Totally buried like an old dog bone. Left in a house filled with thieves. My gawd, what a—"

"Buck Lowell's way," Lin said. "He never trusted banks after the Burnt Ridge National went bust. You bet Dunk Dalzell will pay a call. With Monseer Cade stringin' along."

"It sounds like a book," Steve grumbled. "All I got to say is we'd better find that chicken feed before they burn the house. Twenty thousand dollars of cinders won't help nobody."

Benbow Collins poked his head inside the door. "Listin, Lin, I don't mind standin' herd on a lot o' damn dark shadders, but it makes me nervous not to tote nothing more deadly than a collar button. How about a gun?"

Lin unbuckled his own belt and passed it to Collins. Benbow wrapped the armament to his body with somber relief. "If I don't have a ballast o' forty-five cartridges it makes me plumb giddy around the hips. Shadders git awful pers'nal to a unarmed gent."

"This weapon situation is sorta aggravatin'," Steve Nebo agreed. He scanned the room with a weather-eye. "Worst comes to worse I guess we can throw them fireplace stones or chuck the flowerpot at Dunk. Lin, I don't mind fightin'. Not at all. But it cramps my individuality to be worryin' about that money and also the lady."

"Now we're eye to eye on the subject," Lin said. He went to the door. At that hour, the darkest of the night, he could see absolutely nothing. Going out to the yard he dropped on his stomach and rested an ear against the hard packed earth. But the underground-telegraph was silent. Well, it might be a false alarm. Possibly Dunk Dalzell had put a curb to this headlong temper. Nebo came to the door with a suggestion.

"If I didn't know you so well, Lin, I'd suggest sendin' one o' us to Burnt Ridge for a little reinforcement."

"It's our fight," Lin replied. "Anyhow, I ain't any too sure of that new sheriff." He headed out into the prairie. "Stick to the place, Steve. I'm goin' out to find Charley an' lug him to the bunkhouse."

Somewhere beyond the bunkhouse he caught the faint echo of a board squealing. "Benbow, that you?"

Benbow Collins answered, "Yeah, I reckon it mus' be. Somethin' damn funny. . . ." The words trailed off. Several yards farther on, Lin heard Collins swearing doggedly, plodding right through all the known combinations of rugged blasphemy. Lin reached the depression and worked along it to approximately the point of his fight. He found Charley's lumpish body and

then, on his knees, he made a painful circuit until he discovered the gun he had thrown away during the fight. Back to the dead Charley he went, appropriating the man's belt. Charley was a heavy creature, as difficult to handle in death as in life. Lin fought the man's bulk and got him on a shoulder, aiming for the bunkhouse. The light of the ranch house wavered in the deep fog. Eastward, the first strip of dawn broke the wall of black and Lin breathed a devout thanks.

Of a sudden Benbow's voice sputtered and rose. "Lin—hey, where you at now?"

"Over here."

"No. It ain't what I make—" An interlude of silence. Something crossed the saffron beam from the house. Crossed and disappeared. "No!" Benbow yelled. "What in—"

A shot beat along the fog, and at that signal, figures strained against the light of the house. Feet pounded on the porch boards. An angular silhouette stood in the doorway. Benbow challenged again, but his words were overborne by the familiar boom from Dunk Dalzell's throat. "Go on, you rabbits! Walk in! Walk in! Jessup, where you standin'?" The guns began speaking and the figures at the door sagged down, half across the threshold. Lin dropped his burden and raced toward the house, at the same time seeing a party of Dunk's men make an inward sally. The backwash of the ensuing fusillade rolled along the yard. Nebo stood in view for an instant. There came a woman's scream. Somehow the door was shut and Dunk Dalzell raged at his crew like a man gone stark mad. Lin kept his fire, running around the corner of the house. It sounded as if the porch were being ripped up, plank by plank.

At the corner he raked the porch with a brace of shots. That stopped them; it scattered them and broke their attack. Spurs jingled on the packed ground. "Cut him off!" Dalzell shouted. "It's Jessup. Circle the shebang!" Each word marked him nearer. Lin saw the renegade's great figure dimly in the sifting twilight. He fired. The man veered and faded to nothing. Benbow's shrill challenge rose over by the bunkhouse. "Come an' get it, you clay images!"

Well, Steve Nebo was doing nicely. Window glass cascaded on the porch roof. Somebody fired steadily through an upstairs opening. It seemed that Dunk's men were withdrawing a little way, though the volume of their guns swelled and roared.

Here, here, Lin chided himself. What are you trying to do, Jessup?

He had been trying to get inside the house. But now it occurred to him that he might play a better part out here for a minute. So he retreated, made a wide detour of the yard and arrived at the rear of the bunkhouse.

“Benbow,” he whispered.

Benbow seemed to be crouching by the corrals. “Huh?”

“I’m goin’ to set fire to the bunkhouse,” Lin said. “That’ll put Dunk’s boys in the light.”

“I’ll hold the door,” Benbow Collins said. “Go ahead.”

Lin was already inside the place. He ripped the straw mattresses off the bunks, piled them in a corner and dropped a match. Benbow fired three times, each explosion tumbling over the other. A part of the renegade’s outfit was running this way. Lin jumped out of the doorway and joined Benbow.

“I got a fella,” said Benbow cheerfully. “Jus’ beyont you.”

Then both of them ducked. A streak of flame flashed near the corrals, right at their backs. Lin fired from his knees, scrambled aside and closed in. Somebody sighed, then moaned faintly.

Lin scrambled forward and thrust his revolver into the wounded man’s ribs. “No tricks,” he said, but the warning wasn’t needed.

The man had sprawled full length at the foot of the corral bars. Lin retrieved the gun and ripped the cartridge belt free, strapping it about himself. Benbow seemed to be having trouble over by the bunkhouse, but Lin regretfully left that individual to fight his way clear. The windows of the bunkhouse were already reflecting the pyre of mattresses. In a little while the whole yard would be aglow. And Dunk Dalzell was making another attempt against the house. Lin ran along the yard and reached the back porch. He climbed the railing and threw himself on the shingles. He heard a door slam, and when he reached a window the pane shattered against his face.

“Easy there—it’s Jessup,” he called.

“It’s lucky you spoke. Was about to send you a heavenly ticket.”

That was Lee Larelle, breathing quite fast. The whole house shook. Nebo’s voice rang up the stairway, and Lin, hearing the brittleness of his partner’s warning, understood instantly that the attack was perilously close to breaking through the meager defense. He smashed the window with his boot and raced below, Lee Larelle just a pace ahead of him. The lamp in the room had been put out, but the growing blaze at the bunkhouse sent its red rays across the yard and partly illumined those in the room. Zip Shugrue stood by one window, Nebo at another. The girl had taken shelter

somewhere out of sight while Ed Paris, without a gun, stood at the fireplace and held a pair of tongs. When Lin passed him a captured gun and belt, Paris seized them like one who had been pardoned from the gallows. “Now lemme die in glory,” he said prayerfully.

“Watch it!” Nebo shouted. “Here’s hell rollin’ in on wheels!”

“And hell will go back on a shutter!” roared Shugrue.

The upper panel of the front door split. The triangular end of a stick of cordwood crashed through. At the impact, both hinges broke and down came the barrier. Several of Dunk’s men reeled inward, stumbling aside from the line of fire. Lin stood to shoulder with Ed Paris, directly in the center of the room, firing as if at gallery targets. The flame jets crossed each other and such was the reverberation of that tight savage duel that the place rocked like the heart of a volcano. Zip Shugrue seemed unable to express the whole of his wrath with a gun. He struck at them with every barbed word he knew. He poured the facts of their outrageous history upon their heads as they twisted and wavered and fell and retreated. Nebo flung his fighting yell across the crowded space.

Lin said, “Haul around, Ed. They’re comin’ in a back window.”

He was mistaken. They had crawled on the front porch and were running along the hallway above. Down the stairway they jumped, guns speaking as they came. Lin stepped into the mouth of the stairway. Powder stung his eyes and the hot wake of flame touched his cheeks. One of that descending party lost balance and came smashing onward. His body struck another and thus two of them piled up at the very feet of Lin Jessup, one never moving, the second rolling flat and spreading his arms across the floor in token of surrender. Lin started to kick the man’s gun away when a third fellow cleared the stairway at one bound. He hit Lin so hard that the gun was jarred from his fist. He went staggering back, tripped on his spurs and fell. He got to his knee and was struck again, pinned down by the full weight of the other man’s body. Thereafter, Lin lost the current of the general fight. He grimly struggled to right himself. He wrenched clear, half rose and was knocked toward a corner. Flat on his back, he raised both feet and struck his opponent full in the pit of the stomach. As the fellow doubled over, Lin pulled himself upright and started to close in. The man’s gun came bearing around and Lin, throwing his arms forward, suddenly struck the suspended flowerpot. It had been a wholly unconscious move—the terra cotta pot had never entered his mind. Yet it served his purpose providentially. He broke it clear of the suspending wires and in the same sweep carried it onward and down against the other’s head. He saw the pot crack in a dozen pieces. He saw the dirt pour out. . . .

It was curiously silent in the room. He heard Dunk Dalzell's voice in the distance, pouring wrath on his crew. But they were fleeing across the yard, on through the glare of the burning bunkhouse and into the protecting shadows beyond. Nebo spoke wearily. "It's a pity this house ain't burnin'. Mebbe that'd end the blood spillin'. Well, they're goin'!"

Hoofs drummed the ground and faded. One by one the men inside the house sat down. Lin counted five of Dunk's crew along the floor. Two were dead—unmistakably dead. The rest seemed to be in no critical shape. Not even the fellow he had stunned with the flowerpot. That flowerpot, now—He reached over and drew a square packet out of the dirt.

"I believe I'm pinked," Zip Shugrue said. "I sure believe I am."

"Where?" Nebo demanded, coming up.

"Arm's plumb dead. Oh, well, it's small potatoes, considerin' the mess."

Lee Larelle went up the stairway and came back. "Thought one of 'em was hidin' there. That Pete gent is still tied to his bunk. Guess they've gone for good, huh? Well, daylight's comin'."

"Where's Tamesie?" Lin asked in a flat voice.

The door of the gear closet opened and the girl stepped out. She was trembling, and at the sight of those lying still on the floor her face went dead white. "Oh, it isn't worth it, Lin! If I'd known, I wouldn't have come here to cause it!"

"Your comin' made no difference," Lin said. "It was bound to happen. Bound to."

"What you got in your hand, Lin?" Steve Nebo asked.

Lin turned a square packet over and over between his palms, studying it with narrowed eyes. "It came out of the flowerpot," he said slowly. Then: "I reckon it's the money Buck Lowell hid."

"In the flowerpot?" Steve Nebo breathed. "The most conspicuous darned place in the whole house? Well, I'm billy-be-damned!"

Lin offered it to the girl. She shook her head. "I can't touch it—now. There's blood on it. Keep it for me."

Steve Nebo's practical mind resumed its accustomed track. "What to do now? Think they'll be back?"

"It was their last play," Lin said. "My bet is they'll fog the county in a hurry. Yeah, it was their last play. Dunk Dalzell is done. And Cade—"

"I'd like to know where he keeps hisself," Nebo grumbled.

"Any place but where the shootin' is," Lin told him.

There was a moment's silence—the silence of men weary and a little dispirited. The tide of reaction flowed in. Lin moved toward the front door. A pace farther on he was arrested by a flat command.

“I’ll trouble you to put your hands up, Jessup.”

It fell unexpectedly. Not a man was in a posture of defense. All guns had been returned to holsters or laid aside. Still, the reaction possessed them and not until the second and sharper order did they obey. Remy Cade appeared in the corner by the couch. How he had gotten there or how long he had been there none of them knew. Nevertheless his gaunt frame stood to view and his cadaverous face, yellow and emotionless, passed from man to man and came to rest on Lin Jessup.

“All o’ you line up by the wall,” Cade said calmly. “And you’re dead wrong, Jessup, when you say I’m afraid o’ trouble. I been in this room since you come back from the buttes. I figgered the lady knowed where this money was hid. I see now she didn’t. Still an’ all, it’s been found, so jus’ drop it on the table as you pass by. Get to that wall—all of you!”

As they fell into place Cade scooped the packet into his free hand. “Miss Tamesie will ride a distance with me,” he said. “No, I’m not kidnappin’ her. But don’t none o’ you move out o’ this room till I send her back. That’s for my protection—”

“Cade,” Lin said, “you can’t go far enough and you can’t go fast enough to be free of me. I’ll follow you right to the rim o’ the earth.”

“You’ve always meddled in my affairs,” Cade said, quite unruffled. “I’ll let it pass. If I was a meaner man—but I ain’t. Jus’ remember, I always git my way. Without bein’ forced to kill. Now, Miss Tamesie—”

Tamesie had her courage, and she understood clearly what her part must be. So she moved across the room. Cade backed from the rear door, shielded by her body. His final warning came flatly, surely. “Don’t follow me. Not till I send the lady back to you.”

CHAPTER 6

Dawn flamed over the eastern peaks when Dunk Dalzell caught up with the fleeing members of his band. He had been the last to leave the scene of action. He had taken the last shot at the house. He had poured the last hot

word across the yard. And now, as he circled the men and brought them to a halt—milling them in the manner of cattle—he was in the frame of mind to wreak his temper on whatsoever crossed his path. His left arm hung straight downward and there was a drying crust of blood on his sleeve. Nebo's last bullet had touched him.

Mutiny stirred in his men. He saw it at a glance. For the first time, they had refused to see a fight all the way to a finish. They were good stout men, too, but they were oppressed with the same fear that Dalzell himself had felt during the last twenty-four hours. That took the edge from his wrath. He spoke a little more calmly than was his custom.

“Well, you're a nice bunch o' rabbits. You got licked.”

“It's too much,” one of the more forthright members complained. “We boys never figgered to stage this kind of an affair. Now, listen Dunk—we ain't a-blamin' you as much as we blame Cade. He started this mess. But we was sure fools to tackle that ranch house. It's no go. They's a limit. This means the rope. Understan', Dunk? It means the rope for every damn one of us.”

“We coulda had that house,” Dalzell insisted.

“Yeah—an' then what? How long do you suppose the county'd let us keep it? No, sir, it was a fool play. We'd oughta stuck to plain rustlin'. They's five boys back there, a couple dead. An' nobody knows what happened to Charley or Pete. Mebbe they're dead, too.”

“An' you're goin' to take it, huh?” Dalzell sneered. “Runnin' off like a pack o' whipped dogs!”

The spokesman protested. “Now, Dunk, don't get on the prod about it. Won't help you none at all. We're through. We aim to scatter an' put this state behind us.”

“All right,” Dunk agreed, changing his tune. “Let's go.”

But the party failed to fall into the accustomed pace. Once more the spokesman issued the decision they had arrived at.

“We ain't ridin' with you Dunk. That's all over.”

Dalzell looked him in the eye.

“So I ain't good enough for you gents any more?” he asked ominously.

“The halter is plumb tight around your neck,” was the spokesman's blunt reply. “You're marked. We boys ain't goin' to make our bargain any the worse nor it is. The gang is shot. That's final. If you got a grudge against Jessup an' Nebo, settle it yourself.”

Nothing is so irrevocably gone as lost authority. And Dunk Dalzell for all his hard-headed temper, understood it then. No longer was he the overlord. He commanded nobody but himself; the night fire in Eccles Canyon was extinguished. And as he rested in the saddle, a taciturn giant, wrestling with this new situation, the rest of the party rode quietly away and left him alone. Finally, when they were but small shapes in the distance, he turned west toward the buttes.

It was just as well. His own appetite for battle had been glutted. The farther he rode the more clearly did he see how he was marked. He never had been a lawful man; more than one notch could have rightfully been placed on his gun butt. But always these killings were under cover, or else protected by the code of the land. The fight at the Star L was different. It transgressed too far, and he well understood that from now on the desert would not be wide enough or the hills secret enough to give him protection.

Riding thus with the stark and bitter truth nagging at him, he raised his eyes to see a solitary horseman angle out of an arroyo and cut westward ahead of him. He recognized the angular and stooping figure in the saddle instantly and it evoked a great explosion from his throat. Down went the spurs. His mount leaped forward, cutting the earth at tremendous strides. He gained half the interval before the fleeing Cade turned to see him coming up. Instantly the cadaverous one stopped and came to a stand. Dunk Dalzell scarce waited to get within hailing distance.

“Where *you* been all this time?”

Cade shook his head, never stirring. His features, in the clear morning’s air, were as yellow as parchment and just as devoid of expression.

“Answer, you skull-faced sheep or by the Judas I’ll put you in a pine box!”

“I been tending to business affairs. Where’s your men?”

“Gone to hell, where you suppose? Cade, you never was a rash man till that Lowell girl got on the scene. Then you lost all good sense. I’m thinkin’ you’re workin’ me for the drinks, Remy. Well, it won’t go. You’re goin’ to give me a plain story here an’ now—”

Cade looked about. His eyes swept the rim of the prairie, then came to rest at a point directly behind Dunk Dalzell. The eyes narrowed. Cade’s head moved slightly. “That some o’ your men comin’ up, Dunk?”

Dunk Dalzell turned. There was a flat echo—and Remy Cade galloped onward toward the buttes, never sparing a glance at the figure on the ground.

At noon Cade had passed the rugged buttes and was on the brink of the river that marked the county line. He had traveled in haste, for he too was

bent on erasing himself from the land in which he had spent the greater part of his life. It had been a cautious life, a life of petty trickery. Cade was the kind of gambler that counted the white chips and took his small profits; or at least he had done so up until old Buck Lowell had put him in charge of the Star L. Even then, with great profits in sight, he still had cloaked his illicit transactions and walked with false humbleness. Yet, being a petty gambler, the suddenly discovered knowledge of a fortune hidden in the house had upset his balance, and when the time of trouble came it had made him desperately foolish.

Something of this passed through his mind in the morning's flight; for Cade was cold blooded enough to perceive his own weaknesses. The paramount fact was, however, that he had won. Scattered through his pockets were the bundles of paper bills ripped from the packet, money he intended should carry him to the farthest end of the earth. He knew just where he meant to go and just what subterfuges he would use in getting there. From this time onward the name of Remy Cade would be erased; nor did he ever intend to make the mistake of returning in future years to the scene of his crimes.

He stopped at the river ford and let the horse drink. His attention, roaming up and down the graveled margin, fastened upon what appeared to be fresh hoof tracks. Once more he scanned the surrounding country and for a long while he studied the little bluff on the opposite side of the water, debating the advisability of riding to the next ford before crossing. Somewhat irritably, he decided to pass the stream at this point, realizing that when time and caution conflicted he was forced to choose on the side of time. He had carried the girl a good two miles before letting her return, and he felt he had kept an appropriate distance between himself and Lin Jessup, always understanding that nothing would keep that puncher from pursuit.

I'd like to make a halt an' settle with him, Cade thought. But that was only for private satisfaction. He was glad to be away. A stand-up fight was not at all to his liking. So he pushed into the water and crossed, quite slowly reining the horse upward to the crest of the little bluff, all nerves seeming to collect in a bundle. Over there was the safety he sought.

"All clear," he said aloud in his dry voice. "What am I worryin' about?"

Something moved in the extreme corner of his vision; his elbows flew up at the sound of a voice. "Step down, Remy."

Lin Jessup rose from the sagebrush. The sun gleamed brightly along the barrel of his gun. Sweat and dust coated his face, yet Cade's anxious eyes sought and found no hint of intended violence. "Step down," Lin repeated.

“I’ve waited here till my back is roasted plumb to the marrow fat. What was you debatin’ about over yonder, anyhow?”

“Still poppin’ into a man’s business,” Cade said mildly.

“You thought you was takin’ a short cut across the buttes,” Lin said. “But I don’t reckon you know the trails as well as I do. Why, Remy, didn’t I say the world wasn’t wide enough to keep me from followin’?”

“Quit playin’ with me,” Cade said less calmly. “What you goin’ to do?”

“Well, it’s a foolish stunt, but I’m goin’ to take you back and let the county hang your bones up in the air.”

“Hang?” Cade studied him warily. “Hang for what? I did no killing. You know that.”

“I’m inclined to believe it,” Lin said, grinning broadly. “But you’re up to the neck with Dunk and his bunch. You was in the fight and you’ll share some of the blood. Try to convince a jury different. Won’t that be aggravatin’, though—hung for mischief you didn’t do. Still, it won’t really be a miscarriage o’ justice, Remy. You planned that party.”

“I planned nothing of the kind,” Cade said. The current of his life seemed to be sinking down into remote depths. The emotion faded from his words. “Dunk Dalzell is responsible for the attack. I—”

He stopped. Lin Jessup prompted him. “Go on. Or don’t it sound convincin’? You’ll have to make a better speech than that to save your hide. Oh, but you won’t, Remy. You’ll never live to spend a penny of that twenty thousand. And by the way, how did you know it was cached in the house?”

“My business,” was Cade’s brief answer.

Lin swept the sky with his free arm. “Did you ever stop to think what a sweet world this is, Remy? Smell the sage. Look at them clouds. Off yonder is a thousand miles to ride in of a sunny day and a creation full of fresh air. Ever think what a comfort it was to squat beside a camp fire on a cold night, or drink a hot cup o’ coffee at three o’clock of a roundup mornin’?” The smile left Lin’s features. “Remy, you fool, what did you want to go crooked for? You’ve traded all this for a stinkin’ brimstone pit in hell.”

“Fine preachin’,” Cade droned. “Maybe I’ll go there—but I’ll be a strawboss by the time you come, and I’ll see you ridin’ a saddle o’ fire to the end o’ time. Hear me!” All the while, his arms were plastered to his sides, fingers extended and rigid. As he spoke, his head began to rise and by the time he had finished he looked directly over Lin Jessup’s head to something beyond. A glitter of emotion sliced through his lids. His lips parted to the grimace of a smile.

“It’s my turn now, Jessup. Watch your back!”

Those rigid fingers trembled against his bony legs. Jessup’s face veered and became a silhouette against the glare of the day. Cade’s right elbow whipped to an angle. A gun rattled up from a holster. And there he was, a tall man bent in the shape of an arc with a yellow skin stretched across points of bone. There sounded a double blast, followed by a moment of shocking silence. Remy Cade’s hat flew off, and the sun glowed on his bald head as he went down.

“My mama told me about that trick before I quit suckin’ the bottle,” Lin drawled. “But I give you a play, didn’t I? Easiest way, Remy. Better to die by lead than to hang. Sorta stigma connected with a knot under the left ear. Let Dunk do the hangin’.”

Cade twisted his face into the last living expression he could manage. His chips were all in. He had nothing to fear but the specter of death—and in the twilight of his career he seemed not to fear that. He spoke with a burst of energy. “Dunk is dead. I killed him. Never say I lacked the courage to stand up, Jessup. I’ll be buildin’ a saddle o’ fire for you—”

Lin marched solemnly across the desert to a distant depression and got his horse. Returning, he built and smoked a cigarette.

Tamesie, you poor kid, he thought. A baptism o’ blood. But it had to come, and I ain’t sorry to’ve helped end it.

He took the bundles of money from Cade’s coat pockets and tied Cade to the horse. Crossing the river, he started home. At twilight he reined before the bunkhouse with his burden. Nebo was alone, the rest of the crew having posted off on varied errands. And to Nebo, Lin told the short tale.

“Well,” Steve breathed, “that wipes the county clean, except the six-seven that Dunk led by the nose. They’ll be acrost the line by now an’ hustlin’ for parts unknown. Damn, but it seems peaceful on these premises. Me, I sent Lee Larelle for the sheriff an’ coroner.”

Lin walked toward the house. He found Tamesie in the kitchen making a supper from all the odds and ends she could find. And though the fighting and the blood spilling had sorely troubled her, she appeared gravely happy in her surroundings. Lin laid the money on a table.

“They’s a note stuck in between those bills,” he said.

Tamesie dried her hands and drew a long sheet of paper out of the packet. Lin watched her eyes go racing across the scrawled writing, watched her press down hard on her nether lip. Then she met his eyes.

“He needn’t have ever doubted!” she cried. “Read it.”

Lin obeyed:

“My dr daughter. I am putting this money in the flowerpot because its so clost under a man’s eye he wouldn’t think of looking there. But a woman likes to dig around flowers an I think you’ll find it after a little.

“I said there was a treasure hid in the house. Well, to back up my word, Im puttin the sum of money here. Buck Lowell has been called a crazy galoot. Maybe I am. I always got a lot of fun out of bein thought a little wild in the coco. Whats livin for if not to drag a little dust? But Tamesie, when I said there was a treasure buried—I didn’t mean this money. The treasure is in just livin out here. I always wished you could come an stay. But your mama wanted you should be a musician an I figured maybe she knew best. Since you last wrote an told me you didn’t like music I hatched this idea. I aint got a great deal longer to live. I was afeered you might come here, git discouraged right off an pull freight. But if I could git you to stay six months I knew you wouldn’t ever leave. So I rigged this treasure idea, hopin youd have a long search for it an by that time the West would sorta git you. Its a great land, Tamesie. God made it special.

“As for the money, it aint but a drop in the pitcher. Im rich plenty. An I have got it rigged with a lawyer to settle the estate with you inside of six months. In case you dont find this, youll be fixed anyhow. But I didn’t want you to know about any other money till you’d been here long enough to let the sun an the air git under your skin.

Your lovin Dad.”

“He shouldn’t ever have doubted,” Tamesie repeated. “I wanted to come. Now that I’m here I’ll never leave.”

“Buck Lowell,” Lin said, “was one great gent.”

“I wish he knew,” Tamesie murmured.

“Mebbe he does,” Lin said. “But if you got to tell somebody, tell me.”

Her hand went to his shoulder and pulled him down. “I like you a little rash, Lin. Haven’t I told you?”

It must have been twenty minutes later when Steve Nebo saw his partner come out of the house and strike blindly off into the desert. It seemed very queer so Steve let out a whoop. “Where you goin’?”

“Huh?” Lin Jessup pulled himself together and aimed in the direction of his partner. “Oh, nothin’—nothin’. It’s all right. Yeah, you bet I am.”

Steve maintained a skeptical silence. Lin looked long and earnestly at his partner. “But it’ll always be the same, won’t it, Steve? Yeah, by golly, I’ll sure maintain that contention.”

“Cracked,” Steve said sadly. “Absolutely cracked. Now, lemme ask you one intelligent question. What’s the date o’ the month?”

Lin assembled his thoughts. “Sixth, ain’t it?”

“Sound and sensible,” was Steve’s dry answer. “An’ do you think you can make Providence, Rhode Island, by the seventh, which is t’morra?”

Silence. A long, deep and fertile silence. Lin’s answer came as if from remote space. “You know, I hadn’t given it a thought.”

“Natcherly. But you been nicked just ten thousand dollars and the biggest hairpin factory east o’ the Hudson River.”

“Clothespins,” Lin corrected. He built himself a cigarette, from time to time turning to look at the light glimmering out of the kitchen window. Steve’s eyes were filled with sinful malice. “Well,” Lin continued, “charity is a noble institution, and who shall say it shouldn’t have the money? I couldn’t have turned it down cold without an excuse. That comes under the head of bein’ simple-minded. But seein’ as I did have a due and full reason why—why, I’m sure tickled to death. Anyhow, I’ve discovered something out here worth a hundred times as much.”

“Another treasure,” Steve grunted. But he pressed that point no further, he being a man of wisdom. “Goin’ to tell Tamesie about them clothespins?”

“Don’t you utter a syllable,” Lin warned. “She’ll hear soon enough. I sorta want things to get settled first.”

“Which is a clear and complete statement of facts. Now I will ask one more question. What time is it?”

Lin pulled his gift watch from a vest pocket. He placed the glowing cigarette tip against the crystal, raised the instrument to his ear and gently waggled it. “Blamed thing quit runnin’ at eight o’clock last Monday night. Ain’t wound it.”

“An’ they gives you a watch!” Steve mourned. “I will say you worked a fine trick to git a piece o’ jewelry.”

Tamesie’s voice floated across the yard. “Come to supper, boys.”

Lin chuckled softly.

“All I want, Steve, is only about sixty years more just like that. By Jum, smell that bacon!”

BLIZZARD CAMP

CHAPTER 1

On the third day of being bottled up in the old line-riders' hut, Tom Darrah looked at the sky and decided reluctantly to chance a run for Arrowhead. The driving easter had stopped sometime during the night and the ensuing calm was profound and brittle—not the calm following a blown-out blizzard, but rather that sort of a sullen recess auguring worse to come. There was no feel in the air of the bland chinook which erases and melts the effects of the harsher winds; there was, in fact, nothing to indicate change. Two feet of dry, packed snow lay along the ridge and trimmed the pine boughs. A slate-gray sky pressed its ceiling down within a hundred yards of the ground. The footing, he knew, would be bad and the travel slow. Nevertheless, Tom Darrah decided to make the try. So he saddled, tied his tarp roll to the cantle thongs and started out. Crossing three lesser ridges, he fell into the flats of the Arrowhead and was around five miles from the cabin when the worst of his fears were realized. The snow began falling again, softly bellying down. A clap of wind rushed into the vacuum of stillness. Inside of half an hour the full tempest was upon him, howling like a thousand mongrel packs.

Arrowhead lay to the east, and out of that east rose a rushing, screaming element he could not fight. There came a time when his horse, stout and willing, was able only to march in its former tracks. As for Tom Darrah, he could not face the knives of that hurling blast. For man and beast Arrowhead became an impossibility. Turning to northward, Darrah tried a tangential advance. In that direction, about three miles, an abandoned mining camp, Sumpter Gulch, butted against the hills and furnished the shelter he had to have rather soon.

An hour of this, he reflected, is about the outside limit. Sumpter Gulch better be where I think it is.

It was a canny thought, for he had fought blizzards long enough to realize how greatly they increased the probabilities of error. All the landmarks were gone. Sky and horizon ceased to be. It was a world suffocated and drowned out; there actually seemed to be no free space. The snow didn't strike the earth but ran parallel to it in ever-thickening substance, and all this while the cataclysmic wind beat the pony on its flank and drove it off the true course. Great solid clouds were ripped up by that wind and rolled against Darrah, tipping him in the saddle, smothering him. The grayness of the morning deepened, the rumble and whine and clapped-out reports increased. Now and then Darrah essayed to correct his course, deliberately setting himself little sums in arithmetic to think out, asking himself simple questions. Storms like this one did things to a man, warped the mind and dulled it; in some respects it was like the heat craze. Meanwhile he felt the inward creep of the cold. Heavy as was his buffalo coat and his ear-lapped cap, a slow paralysis struck his extremities and worked back. The bandanna raised over his mouth was quite stiff. Fringes of ice drooped from his brows and lashes. Lids three-quarters closed, he had only a narrow vision of a world revolving like a wheel.

“One, two, three, four, five,” he said to himself. “And five and five make ten. Pony, you damn fool, quit drifting on me.”

Suddenly, like some island in an empty ocean, a scrub pine loomed dead before them. Instinctively the pony aimed at this and got on its lee side and halted behind a shelter that was no shelter at all. Tom Darrah beat his arms across his chest, calculating rapidly.

I'm sliding over to the timber, he thought, or this is the lone tree outside of Sumpter Gulch. Or it might not be either. Maybe I'm goin' backwards. No, that can't be right. The wind's dead in the east. Sumpter should be less than a mile forward. Go on, pony.

The horse, decidedly reluctant, bucked the drifts, its hoofs rising like the pads of a dog. Bent over in the saddle, Darrah saw a small dark object being kicked up by one of those hoofs. It had been at the base of the tree, but the wind took it and threw it twenty feet before it lodged in the snow again. Riding that way, Darrah bent over to the uplifted surface, got the object and held it unobserved a moment while he fought the pony into the slanting blast. When he looked down his distorted vision got only a blur and it was some moments before he could focus his vision on what he held—a woman's fur-lined gauntlet, stiffly frozen.

In weather such as this was there could be only one thing to surmise and only one reaction. Darrah turned the pony toward the tree, literally pushing the beast a hundred yards into the teeth of the incredibly bitter blizzard.

Afterwards he wheeled and drifted on an exploring circle, finding nothing. The second time he made his circle the tree stood very dim on his right hand and presently he lost it. By now he was considerably downwind, bowled along like a piece of debris. Struggling back, he could not lift that tree again. Once more dragging the area, without luck, he discovered he would never repeat the maneuver a fourth time. The pony refused to face the wind. It stood still, stubborn and exhausted.

If she's out here, Darrah said to himself, she's dead and buried. May have floated miles from the tree.

Hard as the thought was, he could do nothing more about it. Squaring himself at the uncertain north, he pressed on.

It was the horse that discovered the abandoned camp first. Knocking along the drift with a stumbling discouragement, the beast flung up its head and whinnied and thereafter showed a surprising remnant of strength. Darrah let the reins go slack. Ten minutes later the huddled line of Sumpter's old buildings made a phantom appearance through the storm mists and he was in that camp's single street before he had quite oriented himself. The pony, surer of judgment, struggled against a head-high band of snow and bucked a trail through it, to stop against the closed doors of a deserted stable. Darrah got down immediately, kicked open a smaller doorway beside the large ones, and went in. The pony followed close at his heels, eager as a human to be out of the torture. Along the clammy darkness of the stable rose the sound of other horses stamping and shifting.

So, Darrah thought, mildly surprised. I'm not the only one caught in this blow.

His eyes burned, his cheeks began to ache. But presently the blankness before him coagulated to shapes and silhouettes. Going along the line of stalls he found an empty space near the end. He put his pony there, unsaddled, and threw the saddle blanket over the beast for whatever warmth it would afford. Then, curious about his neighbors, he casually cruised the stalls. He counted twenty-four horses, all dry enough to have been stabled a considerable time. Investigating more closely, he found some of them branded Lazy JT—which caused him to wonder what Lewes DeSpain's outfit was doing so far from home. Nearby, he ran into the Circle Arrow iron and he guessed that this bunch had been out on a winter inspection. Then he brought up in front of a horse with narrowing, quickened attention. The Slash N on that rump made him whistle softly.

Nig Sommers, he mused. What kind of company have we got collected out of this blizzard?

The question was worth an answer—for Sommers and Sommers' men were notorious. Going to the door, Tom Darrah pushed his way into the stinging slash of the storm and stood three-quarters buried in the drift a moment, surveying the buildings across the street. Necessity, he reflected, made strange bedfellows. Under ordinary conditions these three outfits could not be got together in the same town and it took a powerful motive to put Sommers within gun distance of any ranch crew. Directly opposite he saw light leaping through the windows of what used to be Sumpter's hotel, and without further reflection he ploughed a trail to it and went in.

Sudden heat struck him; this and the smell of drying clothes. On the far side of the lobby a great fireplace was banked high with blazing wood. In front of it stood eight men, all facing him with a show of deep interest. He recognized the Circle Arrow crew and more particularly the slim and yellow-headed young foreman, Lonzo Hardesty, who confronted him with a kind of indifferent alertness. At the moment he failed to remark the oddity of this attitude.

"Move over, Lonzo," Darrah said. "I damned near didn't make this camp."

Lonzo Hardesty's answer was somewhat noncommittal. "Glad to see you, Tom. Don't come near this heat till you thaw out. You look nipped."

Darrah stripped off his outer clothes and stepped away from the puddling water around his feet. He chafed his ears vigorously. "How long you been here, boys?"

"This is our third day," Lonzo Hardesty said. "We were up in the hills lookin' after beaver tails when the easter come. Don't look now like we'll ever get clear of this damn place. Hate to think of the amount of frozen beef lyin' around this country."

Darrah chuckled. "I observe you got company."

"What?" Hardesty said, a little sharp with the question. Then he said, "Oh, sure. You mean Lazy JT and Nig Sommers. Ahuh. JT boys are campin' in the old jail office. Sommers—him and six others of his mugs—they took to the saloon."

"A friendly gatherin'," Darrah drawled.

"We'll get along—apart," Hardesty muttered.

"Who's in charge of the Lazy JT lads?"

"Eric Bull."

Darrah showed a little surprise. "Lewes DeSpain always used to ride these winter tours with his men. He ain't along this time?"

“No,” said Hardesty.

Something about that answer brought Darrah’s attention back fully to Hardesty. It had been a barren, laconic answer and it hit the silence of the room flatly. It occurred to him now something was wrong. These men were not at ease. Distinctly they had an edge to their tempers. They were taut as fiddle strings. Hardesty remained still in his tracks, the lines of his cheeks drawn tight and his mouth dipped at the corners. He said, “No,” again with a more metallic inflection and kept his sober eyes on Darrah. It came to Darrah that the group was touched by the weather, turned cranky by close confinement. Yet that hardly explained the touch of actual unfriendliness demonstrated toward him. He had it on his mind to ask another question and then decided against it. Curiosity had a place and a time, neither of which items seemed appropriate now. So he moved nearer the fire and kept his mouth closed. Hardesty wheeled, speaking.

“Where’ve you been, Tom?”

“Was over at The Pass for a month. Started for Arrowhead five days back and got caught in one of your old line cabins when the blow came on first time. This morning I figured I’d try again. I was lucky gettin’ here. No doubt of that.”

“When was you at that line cabin?” Hardesty rapped out.

“All of the last three days,” Darrah answered, surprised at Hardesty’s tone.

“Then you came straight here? Which way did you come here?”

“Out onto the flats,” Darrah said. “What’s the palaver about?”

“Nothing,” Hardesty grunted and fell silent.

“So you’re just talkin’ to make sound?” Darrah said skeptically.

“This ain’t no time for humor,” Hardesty said, rough and curt.

“If there’s any humor around here,” Darrah pointed out, irritated now, “you’re furnishing same. What’s biting you?”

The front door came open and slammed violently against the inner wall. Eric Bull, the Lazy JT foreman, stamped in with nine or ten of his outfit filing behind him. Looking sidewise for a reaction, Darrah saw the Circle Arrow crew stiffen and turn more taciturn. Hardesty was rolling a cigarette at that moment, but his fingers stopped moving.

“Hello, Eric,” Darrah drawled.

“Thought it was you that came in,” Eric Bull said truculently.

“So you came to see.”

“So I came to see,” repeated the JT man, and squared himself toward the fire. It was a characteristic gesture on his part; he always put his blocky body definitely against those with whom he talked. No taller than the slim Lonzo Hardesty, he was probably twice as broad and twice as heavy. He had a short bull neck supporting a heavy head and uncompromising features as ruddy as wine. A high-arched nose swooped down toward a stubborn chin that came out to meet it and this conformation of bone and muscle always made him appear on the verge of biting something. He said gruffly, “Where’d you come from?”

“From a line cabin eight miles back in the hills.”

“That so? How long was you there?”

The questions, mimicking those earlier asked by Hardesty, stirred a sudden suspicion in Darrah’s mind. But he answered readily, “About three days.”

“Anybody with you?”

“Nope. Alone.”

“Been ramming the country before that?”

“Nope. Came from The Pass.”

Eric Bull put his head forward, seeming more and more truculent. “See anybody on your way here? Anybody or anything?”

“Nope,” Darrah said. “And that’s the third strike. You’re out.”

“Maybe I am and maybe I ain’t,” Eric Bull growled. He swung toward Hardesty. “You said anything to him?”

“No,” Hardesty said, plainly angered. “Go on back to your own joint and take your crew also.”

“When I get damned good and ready,” Bull stated, shaking his shoulders. “I’m holdin’ a hand in this game.”

“Nobody’s dealt me anything yet,” Darrah put in. “When you fellows get finished with the dog fight let me know. Anything to eat around here?”

Hardesty nodded toward the rear. “We dragged in a steer. Help yourself.”

Darrah tramped the width of the room, pushed a swinging door ahead of him and entered a kitchen. Circle Arrow had dumped its chuckwagon outfit here, fitted up the ancient range, and made some shift at cooking. A camp coffee pot gurgled on the stove and there was a cold side of beef sitting on a nearby table. Darrah got a cup and poured himself a drink. He carved off a piece of the beef. Leaning against the table he ate this sketchy snack with a show of abstraction. Men were talking in the lobby, talking straight from the shoulder; but he heard none of it plain enough. Words rose and fell in a

bickering, argumentative disharmony. The front door rattled and cold streamers of air slid into the kitchen. Somebody else tramped noisily over the lobby floor. The talk stopped for a little while, then went on again, more surly and acrid than before. Darrah poured himself another tin of coffee and felt grateful for its scalding strength.

These outfits, he thought, never did get along and never will. Right now they got to be neighbors and they don't like it. But what was that hint Bull dropped about Hardesty tellin' me something?

Water dripped along his leg. Looking down he saw that his coat pocket was half filled with slush and he reached in to draw out the woman's gauntlet. Unthinkingly, he had stuffed it there.

"Good Lord," he muttered, "here's something else to think about."

Putting aside the tin cup, he wrung the glove free of the melting snow. Going over to the stove, he lifted a lid so that the firelight would shine up. Then he slowly turned back the rim of the glove. But there was no name on it, and no such initialing as a man might make to identify his property. Darrah's scowl of interest deepened.

Nothing to be done about it, he thought morosely. If she's out there she's dead. But supposin' she ain't out there. Where else would she be?

He folded the glove, put it back in his pocket. The attentive speculation of his eyes brightened. And he repeated to himself, Where would she be? It was a worrying weight that deadlocked his mind. He held the puzzle. One or more of these twenty-odd men in Sumpter Gulch ought to know the answer to that puzzle. All of them had been out along the ridges and in the flats during the preceding three days. That woman would have been sighted—it was only logical that she had been seen somewhere by the roving outfits. This being the case, it was up to him to reveal the story of the glove.

Yet a growing caution stayed the half-formed decision. Thinking over the situation with a deeper, harder concentration, he began to perceive that something more than average antagonism rode the parties now caught in Sumpter. The affair had odd angles; such small bits of information and evidence as he had gathered made a disjointed pattern. Something bothers 'em, he thought, more and more convinced. His suspicions kept returning to the queries Hardesty and Bull had thrown at him. Both men had wanted the same information. Both of them, brushing aside lesser talk, had tried to dig specific facts out of him. What were they so anxious to discover?

He replaced the stove lid and stood idle a moment, trying to form the shapeless warning all this while moving through his head. Hardesty's voice

struck above the pounding and slatting of the storm. “Darrah—come in here!”

Tom Darrah suddenly shook his head. The less said the better, for a little while longer, he decided silently. Then he went back to the lobby.

He saw immediately that the crowd had grown. Hardesty’s Circle Arrow people maintained their positions nearest the fire. Along a side wall the Lazy JT hands had consciously grouped themselves behind the blocky figure of Eric Bull. But Darrah gave these two parties only half a glance. For Nig Sommers had arrived with his men and it was toward these seven unsavory characters that Darrah bent his freshened interest. They were in a farther corner of the room, thus completing the watchful, trustless triangular grouping of outfits. Born in this country, Darrah knew all about those seven renegades and his own reaction was a slow constriction of nerve and muscle. The record of Sommers and his riders couldn’t be more unpleasant.

“Where you been?” Sommers challenged in a queer, chestless voice. The man stood on the balls of his feet, swayed a little forward as if ready for the unexpected. He was tall, taller than any other in the room. But the rest of his body didn’t match its height. Awkward arms hung abnormally long beside the gaunt and shackling frame, and his head, atop a lank neck, was small and forward sloping. Sun and wind had darkened him, yet beneath the surface coloring was the added suggestion of a racial swarthisness. Two small eyes lay in recessed sockets; an insufficient chin retreated below a slack mouth which in turn seemed inadequate for the long and flattened nose that pointed and dominated the whole evil-arranged face. The eyes, of a muddy coloring, had the intent fixity common to a predatory animal startled by some odd sound.

“I’ve spread my yarn twice,” Darrah said calmly. “And I don’t think it’s necessary to do so again. Leastwise not to a brush jumper such as you, Nig.”

Nig Sommers’ mouth went ugly. “Sing low, Darrah. You’ll say and you’ll do just what this crowd decides is best.”

“For a man of no reputation whatsoever,” Darrah said, “you’re throwin’ a lot of weight. Go to hell.”

Lonzo Hardesty turned on Nig Sommers, explaining with a quick patience, “He came from The Pass five days ago, got hung up in one of the Circle Arrow cabins and left it this morning, meaning to run for Arrowhead. Storm caught him on the flats. That’s all, Nig.”

Tom Darrah’s mind closed down on this little scene with a cold, hard interest. Here was Lonzo Hardesty, an honest man working for an honest outfit, obviously trying to keep Nig Sommers in good humor. It wasn’t like

Hardesty. And Hardesty himself must have realized the strangeness of his explanation, for he fell silent and stared from Eric Bull to Tom Darrah morosely, defiantly.

“So that’s that,” Bull grunted, laconic and a little skeptical.

“Darrah,” Nig Sommers said, “what do you know?”

“I know something’s rotten around here and I’m gettin’ tired of all this palaver.”

Eric Bull addressed the room in general. “He might’ve been in it.”

Heavy silence covered the crowd and Darrah felt the whole weight of those absorbed, calculating glances. Anger began to trickle through him and he framed a reply in his head. The glove, he felt, had a share of this mystery. He was glad he had said nothing about it; and he had no intention of telling now. Not until he knew more. “You can all—”

“Tell him Eric,” said Lonzo Hardesty.

“Darrah,” said Eric Bull, pushing his chin forward, “Lazy JT lost a boss out there in the snow. Somebody shot him a few hours after the blizzard first started—three days back. Somebody killed old Lewes DeSpain, see? That fellow is right here in this room. Couldn’t have been nobody else. We’re the only ones that rode the country. And, by God, we don’t leave Sumpter Gulch till we find out who it was!”

CHAPTER 2

The silence returned, more oppressive than before. The other men made a ring around him, watching him as if they sought to pry out the thoughts running through his head. Utterly impassive, he stared back, giving them no satisfaction. And he spoke dryly to Eric Bull. “I can’t cry. Lewes DeSpain deserved shootin’ twenty years ago.”

“Yeah?” Eric Bull said. “Well, that ain’t the point.”

“What is the point, Eric?”

“JT,” Bull said, “is going to find out who killed its boss. Make no mistake on that point.”

“Let the sheriff do that if he thinks it necessary,” Darrah advised. “The man’s well dead. Nobody grieves. You ain’t grievin’, are you?”

Eric Bull's chin and nose came nearer together. "That's the trouble. If we don't find out who got him the blame will be put on the JT outfit. I don't propose to ride this country with that suspicion hangin' to me."

"Where'd you put his body?"

"Left it. Goin' to be left as is, till the sheriff can be got. Nobody is goin' to touch him. And nobody is going to leave Sumpter till we get the true dope."

"Suits me," Darrah said. "But you're wastin' your time nevertheless. DeSpain was a born crook. He had notches on his own gun and he never said a fair word for a livin' soul. You worked for a man, Eric, that didn't own a friend in three hundred square miles. Why, anybody in this room had reason enough to shoot him."

"One man in this room did," Bull said doggedly. "I propose to find out who."

"Might've did it yourself," Darrah said. "He laid his tongue on you plenty." Then his attention centered on Eric Bull's increasingly flushed face. "And, by the way, who would be the man who would get the ranch if DeSpain shuffled off? He had no relatives. Might be the man who could handle it, who knew it. Might be you, Eric."

"Darrah," rasped the JT foreman, "that's enough outa you!"

"Or it might be Lonzo," Darrah went on evenly. "Circle Arrow always did fight DeSpain."

Hardesty didn't say a word. He only showed an increase of suppressed anger. Nig Sommers laughed ironically. "That ain't so far from the truth either."

"Yes?" Darrah swung toward the outlaw. "Well, what prevents you from bein' the killer? It's right down your alley."

"By God," Sommers yelled, "I won't take that from you!"

"Wait a minute—wait a minute," Lonzo Hardesty pleaded. "We've threshed this out before. Might as well do it again, seein' Darrah's come into the business. All right. Tonight after supper. It's damned near noon now."

Bull said suspiciously, "You act funny to me, Lonzo. You keep wantin' to stall along."

"Tonight," Hardesty repeated.

"Nobody is goin' to pin this scrape on me," Nig Sommers said. "I'll be around on the dot." Motioning his men to follow, he tramped out of the lobby. Eric Bull teetered on his heels, glumly thoughtful. Then he said, "All

right,” and followed the retreating Sommers. The JT crew milled into the storm. Somebody slammed the door, leaving Darrah alone with the Circle Arrow bunch.

“Before this is over with,” he drawled, “you’ll all wish you’d taken my advice.”

“I’d take it now,” Hardesty muttered, “if it was my say-so. Pete, get some grub fixed up.”

Darrah shot a sharp question at Hardesty. “What are you afraid of, man?”

Hardesty actually flinched. He opened his mouth to answer, then closed it with a quick pressure of his lips, sulky stubbornness showing on the strained face. One of the other Circle Arrow hands said to Darrah, “What makes you—”

“Shut up, Tansy,” Hardesty ordered.

Darrah shrugged his shoulders. “You boys have got a bad case of the jumps,” he observed, and went into the kitchen. Rummaging around, he found a five-gallon oil can and filled it with snow beyond the back door. Melting it on the stove, he trudged through the lobby and out to the street. Even in that short crossing the curdling blast of the storm left him shaken and miserable; it went through clothing and flesh and left an ache all along his bones, and when he got inside the stable he was shivering as from the ague. Pausing to adjust his vision for the semidarkness, he heard a low and hurried voice stop in the middle of a word. Feet shifted. Two blurred figures moved apart and Eric Bull’s blunt, challenging words struck at him.

“What the hell you doin’ here?”

“You’ve got eyes,” Darrah said dryly. The other man never spoke. He seemed, in fact, to want anonymity for himself. But Darrah recognized the long, ungainly frame of Nig Sommers even in the obscure shadows. Going on, he let his pony drink the can dry. Eric Bull spoke to Sommers with an exaggerated force. “There ain’t but a little straw and it’s moldy. We’ll split it among the brutes, even.” Darrah took his tarp roll over his shoulder and walked into the hurling tempest again.

Cookin’ up somethin’, he said to himself, fighting through the drifts. Maybe Lonzo Hardesty’s got a reason to be afraid. I wish I knew what it was.

Half running down the hotel porch, he wrenched the door open and stumbled through. The room was empty. All hands were moving around the kitchen and talking casually, but Darrah’s eyes rose and caught one man turning out of sight on the second-story landing of the stairs. The fellow

stared down and deliberately backed beyond view, though not quite quick enough to hide the plate of food he held in his hands. Lonzo Hardesty put his head through the kitchen doorway. "Come and get your chuck."

"Already had my snack," Darrah said. Riveted to the middle of the room, he listened to the footsteps of the Circle Arrow puncher above. The man obviously was trying to walk softly, but each loose board of the warped hall betrayed him as he moved on to the left end of the building and halted. A door's rusty hinges shrieked; silence held the upper quarters for a moment. Then the puncher started back. Darrah deliberately drew the interest out of his face and strode to a chair by the fireplace. When the Circle Arrow hand came down the stairs Darrah was sitting on the small of his back, feet cocked against another chair, eyes shut. The hand dallied a moment in the room, then went to the kitchen.

Darrah remained motionless for perhaps a minute, thinking, More mystery—who's the invalid that needs grub brought to him? Opening his eyes, he found the kitchen door closed and thereafter he rose abruptly, crossed the room and took the stairs two steps at a time. Rounding into the upper hall, he halted briefly to orient himself and to recollect which way the Circle Arrow hand had gone. There were, he saw, four doors on either side of the hall's left wing. All of them closed. Yet, irresolutely considering this, he picked up the tapping sound of a shoe—a sort of restless rhythm made by somebody beyond the third door on the right hand series of rooms. Gently advancing to that door, he placed his ear against it and got the sound more distinctly. There was no longer any doubt. He thought slowly, May be lettin' myself in for something, but it will be an answer to one question anyhow. Then he turned the knob and pushed himself into the bedroom.

A woman—a girl, rather—sat up to a small table in the center of the room eating the meal brought her by the Circle Arrow puncher. She was swathed in blankets from waist to foot and a man's leather jacket cloaked her small square shoulders. For the briefest of moments she smiled at Darrah and her head, massed with glowing copper hair, nodded slightly. But that smile fled when second sight found a man she had never before seen. Her chin lifted sharply and a quick breath fell out of her.

"Who are you?" she said peremptorily.

It took Darrah completely aback. Even though some faint hint of such a situation as this had been in one small corner of his head it took him momentarily off his guard and he only stood and stared, oddly thinking that he had never met her before and that she made a striking, satisfying picture.

“You’re not one of Lonzo Hardesty’s men?” she said, alert and more poised now.

“No. My name’s Darrah.”

“Tom Darrah?”

“How would you know about that?” Darrah asked, curious.

“I have heard of you,” said the girl. It seemed to him that she sat more relaxed and relieved. In any event the quite dark eyes lost part of their alertness and the angles at each lip corner dissolved. Her face was symmetrical, finely modeled; a cool reliance lay on it and a sort of thoughtful sobriety.

“I thought,” Darrah said, “I knew everybody in this country.”

“I’m new. I came out here four months ago to prove up a homestead at the foot of the ridge—where Hondo Creek comes into the flats.”

“Alone?”

“Yes,” the girl said, and added, “my name is Anita Goodridge.”

“What could you do, alone?” Darrah asked, in a manner that more or less answered the question.

“Does it matter?” the girl parried. “I’ve been happy, which is more than I could say four months ago.”

Below, in the lobby Lonzo Hardesty’s voice rapped out an impatient, “Darrah, where are you?” Darrah shifted, knowing the showdown wasn’t far off. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the gauntlet, holding it toward her.

“Is this yours?”

Her face changed again. Fear came distinctly into it, the rose-colored cheeks whitened. She made a gesture toward the gauntlet and then laced both hands together until the knuckles turned pale. “Yes,” she whispered. “Where—where did you find it?”

Hardesty shouted, “Darrah!” And then he started up the stairs riotously. Darrah laid the gauntlet in the girl’s lap, saying quickly, “Never mind. Get it out of sight.”

She whipped the gauntlet under the fold of blankets and somehow her eyes began to show warmth. “That’s the kind of a man,” she said swiftly, “I heard you were. Darrah, please, stay around here if you can. I’m not sure—not sure of anybody.”

Darrah felt that she had something more on her mind. But there was no time for it. Lonzo Hardesty flung himself along the hall, cursing. He lunged through the bedroom doorway and spat out a brittle order. “Stand fast!

Damn you—you're a born meddler, Darrah! Who told you to come up here?"

"Easy, easy," Darrah warned, slowly pivoting to face Hardesty. He found himself covered and, coolly silent, he wondered what profound disturbance could so put this Circle Arrow riding-boss completely out of character. Hardesty had always been an even-styled man, a friend of a rather close sort. But the gun was risen and aimed and Hardesty's slim cheeks were haggard with the combination of rage and worry.

"So this is what troubled you?" Darrah asked.

"I wish you'd lost your way out in the easter!" Hardesty cried. Other men were climbing the stairs and coming down the hall. The bedroom doorway was blocked. The Circle Arrow crew looked forebodingly in and one man said, "You want help on this, Lonzo?"

"I'll handle it all right," Hardesty grated. "I ought to've known better. You never let well enough alone, Tom. Always pryin' around and askin' fool questions. Well, this time is just where you forget what you discovered and keep your damn mouth shut!"

Darrah grinned a little, which didn't help Hardesty's temper. "This is a mighty cold place," Darrah observed, "to put a lady. Ain't there any stoves up here?"

"No," Hardesty said. "And never mind. Come back out of here."

"Wait a second," Darrah argued. He turned to the girl. "How long have you been in Sumpter?"

"Since the beginning of the storm. Three days."

"You come with these men?"

"They—"

"Be still," Hardesty snapped. "Look here, Anita, you got no license to put any trust in him. If there's talkin' to be done, I'll do it. Come on, Darrah."

Darrah shrugged his shoulders and went out of the room. The other Circle Arrow hands followed him down to the lobby, but Hardesty stayed behind for quite a while. Darrah took a seat by the fire, closing his eyes and listening to the beating fury of the wind outside. Only a little past noon, the light of the day was almost gone. The windows were gray rectangles and the fire on the hearth made it seem actual night. Hardesty's words arrived from the upper hall rather clearly, followed by a quick, emphatic exclamation on the part of the girl. A door slammed. The foreman descended and walked to

the fireplace. When Darrah opened his eyes he found Hardesty watching him with scowling intensity.

“I suppose we better iron this out,” Hardesty said. “But I don’t like it. Not even if it’s you. Why didn’t you keep your confounded nose clear of this?”

“Usually,” Darrah drawled, “you’re a pretty even and substantial citizen, Lonzo. Right now you don’t show a lick of sense. Why be afraid of me?”

“I’ve handled this mess so far,” Hardesty said, “and I’ll continue to handle it. I don’t trust anybody. If you want to know what I’m afraid of, I’ll tell you. It’s you. You’re always willing to gamble. You take too many risks. I don’t play cards that way. So I’m telling you plain. I’ll run this show.”

“Now that that’s settled,” Darrah said, “go ahead.”

Hardesty stared at the fire grimly, collecting his thoughts. “As a matter of fact, Tom, the girl came here with us. We were coming off the ridge just as the easter began to rip. We passed her shanty. She was pretty near out of grub and I told her she better come along to Arrowhead and stay till the worst of it was over. So she did. We got this far.”

“You lie, Lonzo,” was Darrah’s cool retort. “I don’t know whether Circle Arrow or the girl got to Sumpter first—but you didn’t come together.”

Hardesty didn’t answer, but Darrah saw something in the man’s eyes he never had seen before. It was an emotion pretty close to the edge of homicidal violence. Even the rest of the Circle Arrow crew caught that. And one of them said, “Easy, Lonzo. Tom Darrah’s straight. Don’t be a dummy.”

“All right,” Hardesty growled. “The girl was here first. We came along about a half-hour after that. DeSpain’s men racked up just a little later—tellin’ us DeSpain was dead. Nig Sommers didn’t show till that night.”

“You’re thinking to protect the girl,” Darrah mused. “What makes you think she did it?”

“I don’t know who did it,” Hardesty rapped out. “And I don’t care. But I had her hide when Eric Bull and his bunch hove in. That DeSpain outfit is made up of tough nuts. It’s the only kind DeSpain hired—the only kind that’d work for him. Well, I don’t propose to let them bear down on the girl. Figure it out for yourself. What would they think if they saw her here? They’d think something damned funny caused it.”

“Anything else?” Darrah suggested quietly.

Hardesty’s glance narrowed on Darrah. Points of odd and glinting light showed in his eyes. “Yeah,” he muttered. “She ain’t safe. Never mind the

murder for a minute. Disregardin' that, she ain't safe. I said DeSpain's outfit was tough. Nig Sommers is a wolf and so are his men. Well?"

"I never knew a decent woman in this country who was ever insulted."

"How would they know she was decent?" Hardesty said. "There's been talk about her livin' up on the ridge alone. Also, she's with us. If they find that out they'll draw some wrong conclusions. I tell you straight, Tom, I ain't so much afraid of their pinnin' the killin' on her as I am of the other thing."

"When you found her here," Darrah questioned, "did she tell you what she'd been doing out in the blizzard?"

"I didn't ask," was Hardesty's instant response. "And I don't want to know."

"Good boy," Darrah said. He got out his tobacco and rolled a smoke, face scowling over the job. He struck a match, eyes hard and bright. "I can see something else here pretty plain."

"What's that?" Hardesty demanded, displaying a trace of belligerence. Noting the manner, Darrah reflected that this Circle Arrow foreman seemed afraid of some fact so far hidden; that the man was braced for a further revelation. He put the thought back of his head, meanwhile drawling on.

"If Bull and Sommers decide to play against you, they've got you hipped. Here's nine men. Ten, includin' me. But Lazy JT and the Sommers' riders count up about sixteen guns."

"Don't you suppose I've thought of that?" Hardesty said, morose at once.

"Yeah? Why did you think of it? What have they got in common against you?"

But Hardesty didn't answer. He swung away, restless and troubled. One of the hands dragged another log from the kitchen and pitched it on the fire. The foreman's restlessness seemed to communicate itself to the others, for a small argument arose concerning the horses and presently five of the hands left the lobby, bound for the stable. Darrah's mind worked on, endlessly involved with this tangle of fact and guess and suspicion. Sprawled comfortably in his chair, he let the heat relax him. His thinking came harder, and presently he lifted himself abruptly and found he had been sleeping. When he looked at his watch he found it was beyond four. The windows were black and the wind was cutting the eaves of the house with an increased roar and report. Somewhat ashamed of himself, he went to the kitchen, located the bucket and brought it back to the lobby where he scraped half a dozen loose stones out of the fire's bed. In the bucket they

made a decent heat; and with this improvised stove he started up the stairs. Hardesty's challenge immediately caught him.

"Hey—where you going?"

"If you're afraid I'll hear something I shouldn't, come along," Darrah said.

Hardesty started for the stairs, but a change of mind turned him back a moment later. He said roughly, "Oh, all right." Darrah went on, cruised the hall and tapped lightly on the door. He heard the girl's voice, very small and shaky, calling him in.

When he entered, he had some difficulty in seeing her—the place was that dark. And it was bitterly cold, draughts of wind knifing through the warped boards. She moved toward him, blankets about her shoulders. "Who is it?"

"Me," said Darrah. "Sit in the chair."

"I don't think I can stand this much longer," the girl said.

"You won't have to," Darrah promised. "Sit down. Now put your feet beside this bucket. Blanket around it. That'll keep the heat in."

He stood back while she arranged herself. He heard her sigh of relief, which further shamed him. "I had forgotten," she whispered, "that men were thoughtful. Thank you, Darrah."

"Men are no better than they ought to be," Darrah said. "That's why you're here."

"How do you know?"

Darrah said gently, "I know nothing. But I can guess."

"Do you want to know about that glove?"

"No."

"You're the first man," she said bitterly, "who hasn't wanted to take advantage of me. Anybody else would be holding that glove over me like a club."

"Don't answer this if you'd rather not. You left your cabin alone and in a hurry—because you were scared out of it?"

"Yes."

"A man rode along—and you had to run from him?"

"Yes," the girl repeated, scarcely audible.

"It was Lewes DeSpain?"

She didn't answer directly but he saw her head slowly incline. Darrah said irritably, "Lewes DeSpain was noted for that. Had he ever bothered you

before?”

“Once. I drove him away with a gun. This time the gun wasn’t handy. But my horse was saddled in the shed, so I got free and rode off. He—he followed me part of the way but by then the storm was so bad he lost sight of me within a hundred yards. There we were, wandering around in it. Then —”

“Never mind,” interrupted Darrah. “You didn’t kill him.”

Then he saw a different side of the girl. She straightened in the chair, saying swiftly, energetically. “I might have, Darrah! I’m capable of killing a man like that! I have known people of his sort before and I hate them!”

Darrah took another line of attack. “Anyhow, you got to Sumpter. You were here first. Then the Circle Arrow bunch drove in and Lonzo Hardesty found you. Did he know about it?”

“No. At least I told him nothing.”

Darrah straightened. “Then how was it he hid you when JT came along?”

“He said he was afraid of my being seen by the JT crew. He said they were tough.”

But Darrah, staring through the dark, shook his head as another thought occurred to him. It was that Hardesty should hide the girl on that excuse alone. It seemed insufficient; it seemed only a surface excuse to cover a deeper fear. “He knows you pretty well—he’s seen you quite a lot?”

“Yes.”

“Fact is, the man is in love with you.”

“Yes.”

Darrah paused, then went on slowly, quietly. “Don’t answer this if it sounds inquisitive to you. Do you—”

“No!” said the girl emphatically. “I don’t feel that way toward him at all. I know he is your friend. He’s told me so. But—when you go downstairs—look more carefully at him. Look at his eyes.”

“I’ll run along,” Darrah said.

“Come here,” the girl said. And when Darrah moved nearer she took his hand and held it tightly a moment. “I heard so much about you from different people that I got to dislike you. You seemed too sure of yourself. You got into fights and out of them as if you never doubted your strength. I guess I have been a man-hater, Darrah—with some reason. But—but I don’t feel that way about you now. Other people have leaned on you for help. I’m doing it now. Some day, when this is over, I’ll try to pay you back.”

“I’ll be riding your part of the ridge more frequent,” Darrah said, and went out. When he descended to the lobby all the Circle Arrow crew stood by the fire, watching him with a studied attentiveness. Hardesty’s cheeks were smoothed out, consciously wiped clear of emotion. But Darrah thought of the girl’s warning and he looked at Hardesty’s eyes. They held, he saw, a kind of expectancy. The man was bracing himself for trouble, for bad news, for something he thought was to break.

“She was blamed near froze,” he said shortly. “Why in thunder didn’t you think of that?”

Hardesty shrugged his shoulders, seeming relieved. Darrah walked toward the kitchen, calling over his shoulder, “Come here a second, Lonzo.” And when Hardesty followed through the door and faced Darrah alone he was obviously on guard again, taut as a fiddle string.

“You’re sold on her, ain’t you?” Darrah inquired.

“That’s none of your damned business!” Hardesty snarled, glowering. “I told you, Tom, to quit pryin’. If you don’t—”

“Yeah?”

Hardesty pointed a finger, jerking it downward with each slow word. “I’m playin’ this game and I’ll continue to play it. Don’t butt in. You’re in no shape to interfere. Get what I mean? Between Bull and Sommers and me, you’re mighty small potatoes. If you get too curious we might bunch together and put the load on you. Now remember that.”

“So?” Darrah said, tonelessly. “That’s different some more.”

“How different?” Hardesty challenged, alert and hard.

“Never mind.”

Hardesty started to speak. But the lobby door opened, letting in the rush and riot of the storm. Then it slammed and men stamped across the floor toward the fire. Both Hardesty and Darrah left the kitchen—to find Nig Sommers and Eric Bull waiting for them. At that moment Darrah realized the situation had changed, and for the worse. As clearly as if they had announced it, Darrah saw they had made an agreement between themselves and were now about to put it into effect.

“Let’s get down to cases,” Eric Bull said, pushing his jaw forward.

Again it was Lonzo Hardesty who showed reluctance. He said irritably, “I thought we’d set the time for after eatin’.”

“You’re stallin’,” Bull accused.

“We’ll get no further than we were before,” Hardesty said. “I’ll tell you—we’d be blamed wise to agree to a closed-mouth policy on this and let it go as such. If we say nothing the sheriff won’t find out anything.”

Bull shook his head. “Won’t do. I ain’t goin’ to be tarred with this murder. I want it pinned on the proper man.”

Nig Sommers’ black and lined cheeks showed a sullen amusement. “Supposin’ we did agree to say nothin’. It wouldn’t last. Somebody’d squall.”

“If anybody did, it’d be you,” Hardesty rapped out.

“Sure,” Sommers agreed, cynical to the extreme.

“All right then,” Hardesty said, “Let ’er flicker.”

Standing idle and watchful, Darrah saw that Bull and Sommers had made up a common attack. Bull slid a short glance at the outlaw and then braced himself in front of Hardesty. “Just where were you when the shootin’ happened? That’s what ain’t quite clear to us.”

Darrah fully expected Lonzo Hardesty to flare up and make a scene. Surprisingly, Hardesty did not. He returned Eric Bull’s close glance and drew a long breath. “I’ve told you already. We were working up along the foot of the low ridge. I saw the easter coming and decided to split the crew so we could comb the timber and drive such scattered stock as we could find on over to Medill’s pocket. That’s where we’d put up a thirty-ton stack of meadow hay, see. I took the chuck wagon myself and drove across the flats, along the edge of the ridge. It was my intention to leave the wagon here in Sumpter and go back to the pocket. I did. But before I could reach Medill’s pocket the blizzard busted down. I had a hell of a time gettin’ the men together. We came here. That’s all.”

“All?” Bull grunted.

“No-o, not exactly,” Hardesty amended. “I was out there alone, downwind from the lone pine, when I heard the shot. Thought it was one of the men signaling so I answered. Looked around and couldn’t see a damned thing more than fifty feet ahead of me. So I turned for the timber, got the men and paid no further heed to the shot. That’s all I know.”

“But you was alone when you heard the shot,” Eric Bull pointed out. “You admit that much. You was inside of a hundred yards of Lewes DeSpain when he was killed.”

“What of it?” Hardesty said. “I’ve laid my cards on the table. I’m clear.”

Darrah broke in, speaking to Bull. “Where were you, now that we’re on the subject?”

Eric Bull answered readily, as if his story were pat and perfect. “JT crew happened to be on top of the second ridge, travelin’ south. Lewes DeSpain pulled away from the outfit and said he’d meet us at Diamond Bar Gully.”

“Where was he headed for?” Darrah asked.

Eric Bull hesitated a moment, staring at Darrah. “He went to that Goodridge girl’s cabin. Or he said he was goin’ there. When we got to the gully he wasn’t in sight. By that time it was snowin’ to beat hell. So we come back along the flats and went up to the girl’s place. Nobody there. We come back. Stumbled mostly by accident onto DeSpain. He was layin’ on top of the snow and he hadn’t quit breathin’ more’n ten minutes.”

“You heard the shot?”

“In all that wind? No.”

“But you were close enough to the spot to find him,” Darrah said.

“I said it was pure accident that we did,” Bull said.

“Kind of a well-timed accident, wasn’t it?” Darrah said evenly.

“Don’t mean a thing,” Bull countered. “Except for a quarter hour I was with my outfit every bit of the time.”

“Lot could happen in that many minutes,” Darrah reflected. “And it’s on record that DeSpain called you a bastard three weeks ago in Arrowhead.”

That went home. It hit this stocky, belligerent Eric Bull harder than Darrah imagined it would. Bull’s florid face congested with blood and the greenish blue eyes filled with fire. He lifted one solid arm and shook it at Darrah. “I don’t want that repeated,” he shouted. “I took it from him because he was drunk. He apologized later and I accepted it. By God, Darrah, don’t let me hear the remark from you again!”

“But it still hurts, doesn’t it?” Darrah said softly. “You didn’t forget that cussing.”

“If he’d been sober I’d killed him!”

“Yeah? Well, he was sober when he died, Eric. And it wasn’t very dangerous to end a grudge in weather so thick it could be cut with a knife.”

Bull suddenly realized he had said too much. He closed his mouth so rapidly that his teeth snapped. He glowered at Darrah. An uneasy silence came to the room for a brief while, to be broken by Nig Sommers’ chestless, dead-flat voice. “I’m the man that’s goin’ to be accused right off of doin’ it,” he said. “But they’ll never make it stick. I was two-three miles away,

bringin' my boys to Sumpter because I knew it was goin' to be pretty tough weather. I'm plumb clear."

"This isn't your country," Darrah said. "What were you doing over this side of the ridges anyhow?"

"That's my business," Sommers growled.

Darrah turned on Eric Bull. "For that matter, this ain't your end of the range, either. There's no DeSpain beef anywhere's near Circle Arrow country. What were you doing in these parts?"

Eric Bull started to speak, but bit off the phrase and pressed his lips together. It seemed to Darrah that this heavy-bodied man had thought of some unexpected turn in the talk and was now craftily puzzling his way around it. He shot a quick, surreptitious glance at Nig Sommers. Nig instantly looked away. Definitely a message passed over the space—and found no willing receiver. Meanwhile, Hardesty's cheeks turned more and more care-worn as he stood back and watched. Darrah's mind closed avariciously around a new-framed thought. He had stumbled into something.

"We thought there was some DeSpain strays over here," Bull explained at last.

Darrah threw a fast, metallic question at Nig Sommers. "Sommers, did you and the DeSpain outfit have a meeting up in the ridge some time before the storm broke?"

"No," the outlaw said instantly.

But Eric Bull lifted a warning hand. "Now, Nig, we got to play it right through. Somebody in my outfit or somebody in your outfit will squall. Sure, we met. But what of that, Darrah?"

"Another curious accident," Darrah drawled. "Both of your outfits coming into the same country about the same time. There might be some unkind comment on that. It might even be guessed that DeSpain and Sommers made a gentlemen's agreement to join up and tour the Circle Arrow range for a little Circle Arrow beef."

Nig Sommers' beady eyes were charged with glittering light and he had unconsciously thrown his body forward until the weight of it rested on the balls of his feet. His long arms hung motionless, almost rigid; and not for an instant did he take his attention off Darrah. But Bull, oddly enough, accepted Darrah's suggestion indifferently. He shrugged his big shoulders. "What's that got to do with Lewes DeSpain bein' killed? If anything it leaves Nig out of the case. Don't it, Nig?"

Sommers scowled, relaxing a little. And he muttered, "Yeah," uncertainly. Nothing could have been clearer to Darrah than that Bull's

statement had been meant to reassure Sommers, to keep him from going off half-cocked.

“In fact,” Bull said, ironically, “it would leave the little chore right on Lonzo Hardesty’s doorstep. It could be said he found DeSpain poachin’ and promptly knocked him over.”

“Justifiably so,” Darrah said. “No jury in the West would hold him for it.”

“I ain’t interested in that at all,” Bull returned. “All I want is to get the suspicion away from me.”

“That helps me, don’t it?” Lonzo Hardesty said to Darrah, sullenly tossing the words into the room.

“A justifiable killin’—that’s the right answer,” Bull mused. “You see it, Lonzo?”

“What are you tryin’ to do?” Hardesty snarled. “Push the whole rotten mess on me? Not by a damned sight! That ‘justifiable’ wrinkle don’t fool me for a minute!”

Darrah turned from them, walked past the knot of tense Circle Arrow hands, and faced the fire. He drew out his cigarette tobacco and rolled a smoke with an utter absorption of mind. This thing went deeper and deeper. In the beginning it had looked like the girl. Afterward, Hardesty’s own attitude had indicated a participation in the shooting; for it was clear that he wanted the girl badly enough to kill any man who troubled her. But this scene had complicated that logical explanation. Sommers and Bull each had a sufficiently valid reason for wanting Lewes DeSpain out of the way—yet these two men were now, without any doubt, working together for some common end. And Lewes DeSpain had had both of them in his confidence. Once more, the reasoning led him back to Hardesty, on the entirely different assumption that Hardesty had found DeSpain stealing Circle Arrow stock.

Bending to the fire, he got a lighted sliver of wood, thinking coolly, That won’t do. Hardesty wouldn’t be afraid to face any jury on that score. And he is afraid of something. Also, Bull seems to have the bulge on him this minute. Why?

He waved the burning sliver across the tip of his cigarette, hearing Bull say abruptly, “There’s a better answer yet, boys.” And turning around he found Bull pointing at him. Sommers grinned slyly, nodding.

“Me?” Darrah said.

“You,” Bull said.

Hardesty looked all around the room, at Bull, at Sommers, at the Circle Arrow crew, and lastly to Darrah. He drew a breath, his whole face changed.

“All right,” he said. “That’s the answer.”

“So I killed DeSpain?” Darrah asked.

“You crossed his trail at the right time,” Bull said. “You’ve got no witnesses to your whereabouts.”

“It won’t stick,” Darrah answered calmly. “You know, of course, it’s a plain cock-and-bull story.”

“It’ll stick if all of us make a case against you,” Bull rapped out. “And we will!”

“Now wait a minute,” put in one of the Circle Arrow hands, “I ain’t so sure—”

“Shut up,” Bull snapped. “You lads will do as you’re told! Don’t make any mistake about that. If you don’t there’s plenty of holes in the hills to bury you in.”

Darrah looked to Hardesty. “You’re willing to agree to this frame-up?”

“It ain’t a frame-up,” Hardesty said doggedly. He avoided Darrah’s glance and stared across the room. Darrah took a long drag of smoke into his lungs, at last decided on the final question in his mind. It was not only Bull and Sommers. It was Bull and Sommers and Hardesty. Somehow, DeSpain had not fitted into their scheme. He started to turn and speak. But before he did, a voice came clearly down the stairway.

“You men lie. Darrah didn’t shoot DeSpain. I know who did it. I saw it done!”

Every man in the room whirled about. Looking up, Darrah saw the girl come slowly to the bottom of the stairs and face the crowd.

The silence turned heavy and oppressive.

CHAPTER 4

It was strange. Of all those men in the deceit-ridden room Nig Sommers spoke first. Darrah saw him straighten, saw actual relief cross the dark, trustless visage, saw even a shadow of a grin come along the thin lips.

“Who was it?” Sommers called.

But he no more had got it out of his mouth than Hardesty started toward the girl with a lifted arm; and at the same moment Eric Bull said sharply, "Wait a minute! Hold on, here! I want to know how you—"

"Never mind," the girl said, entirely calm and confident. "I'll say who it was when the sheriff comes."

Eric Bull went to pieces. "Hardesty!" he yelled. "Hardesty, you been holdin' this trick up your sleeve!"

Hardesty checked himself, turned on Bull with plain puzzlement showing. "What in hell are you talkin' about?"

But Eric Bull, crimson from temple to neck strode across the room, toward the lobby door. "You'll never get away with it!" he yelled. "By God, you never will!" And with that announcement ringing throughout the room he disappeared into the storm-blasted street. The slamming of the door recalled Nig Sommers from a long study. He looked around him, half startled. Then he followed Eric Bull as rapidly as his long legs would take him.

Darrah moved away from the fire, all at once warned, "Go back," he told the girl. "Go back up. This room will be full of smoke in five minutes."

She hesitated, but he shook his head so quickly that she finally turned and ran up, out of sight. Darrah swung, pointed to the one man in that Circle Arrow crew who had made any sort of protest during the recent scene. "You—I want you to go to the landing up there and see that nobody gets to her. You hear? Nobody."

"Done," the fellow said, and went for the stairs.

Hardesty, meanwhile, had neither moved nor spoken. Darrah thought he had never seen a face so full of trouble and uncertainty and fear. But there was no time now to dally and he threw his hard command at the Circle Arrow foreman: "Blow out these lamps. Get away from the fire. Spread around. You'll have both those outfits on top of your neck right away."

"But I don't see," Hardesty muttered, "I don't see what Eric's so worried ___"

Darrah ignored him and motioned to the rest of the crew. When the men got into motion, spreading along the walls, turning down the lamps, he knew that his long doubt of them was groundless. They were straight. Whatever part Hardesty played, they themselves were straight. Enormously relieved, he ran to a corner of the room, seized a rifle standing there, and plunged on to the front door. When he opened it the wind struck him savagely and he had to brace his legs and push himself to the porch. Looking into the mealy smother toward the eastern end of the camp, he saw lights glimmering out of

the saloon windows yonder. A file of men was at that moment coming up from the farther darkness and going into that saloon, and he thought he recognized Nig Sommers' angular body at the head of the party. He plunged to his armpits in the drifts, slogged across the street and entered the stable. There he turned about and posted himself.

This strange game was about to be played out; the uncertain end darkly suggested itself. Waiting there in the almost unendurable cold with a disciplined patience, Darrah knew that Sommers and Bull would attack Circle Arrow for no other reason than to get Lonzo Hardesty. Clearly as if it were written, Darrah realized this was the falling out of thieves who dared not trust one another—the ancient and inevitable disagreement of the lawless. And as a broken line of men came from the saloon and ducked forward toward the hotel, Darrah lifted the rifle and trained it with the clear realization that he was not fighting for Lonzo Hardesty, but for the girl, for the honest Circle Arrow crew and for himself. His first shot's echo whipped back along the gun barrel, struck him in the face and was carried off by the hurling easter. As poor as the visibility was, he saw one of the advancing party stagger aside, turn and grope for the saloon.

They had not found him yet and he placed two more bullets with a grim, implacable thoughtfulness. They had no mercy in them, and they deserved none. One man pitched over. The others recoiled, flattening against the building wall. He was spotted then. A dimming crash of guns fled past him on the wings of the wind and one chance slug hit the stable above his head. He answered coolly, swinging the rifle from point to point. One rasping yell raced by. The group broke, retreated, losing shape and definiteness. The saloon door opened and on that rectangle of light he pinned his last shot as the men stumbled through it.

But one of the party—he thought again that it was Nig Sommers—remained in sight, firing at random with his revolver and shaking his free fist. About the same time another figure ploughed across the drifts from some obscure angle of the camp, passed Sommers and vanished in an alley adjoining the hotel. Sommers instantly wheeled and ran for the saloon's shelter.

This much of it was over. Wondering about that shift of the fight, Darrah dropped his empty rifle and drew his revolver. He beat a trail back across the street, reached the hotel wall and worked a cautious way to the mouth of the alley. He could see nothing in that blackly smothered strip. Half of a mind to follow it down, he heard the sudden roar and reverberation of guns in the hotel lobby. A confused crying and cursing passed out to the wailing street and then, as suddenly as the fury had developed, it died. Darrah retreated

from the alley, dividing his glance between the saloon and the hotel porch. He heard a faint sound and whirled to see a short, stout figure appear on the far side of the porch and come forward.

The man saw him as well and sprang against the hotel wall. He challenged Darrah. "Who's that?" And Darrah, his feet trapped in the hip-high drifts, recognized the blunt voice of Eric Bull. Knowing even then what was to come, Darrah called strongly: "Bull, put down—"

But Eric seemed to identify him at the first sound and he wheeled again and ran directly forward, his gun rising and exploding. That crimson-purple muzzle flash bloomed in Darrah's face and died. Then it bloomed again. The JT foreman's broad, squat body leaped at Darrah. And Darrah, grown rigid and relentless, tilted his own weapon and fired at the full, fair target. He heard Bull grunt. The desperate charge carried Bull on another five yards and when he fell it was directly at Darrah's feet.

The man was dead. Darrah knew that without looking. Meanwhile a hallooing came from behind. He turned to see the saloon door emitting its gush of light again. A long cry carried Bull's name forward strenuously. Immediately afterward, Darrah heard somebody knocking against one of the lobby windows. Placed in this tricky position, Darrah ran down the porch to the hotel door and pounded against it, yelling his own name. It opened in his face. An arm reached out and seized him and a Circle Arrow hand, silhouetted sharply against the firelight, said: "Get in here, Tom!"

Darrah rushed through and stopped, eyes touching a figure sprawled full length on the floor near the leaping blaze. The Circle Arrow hand muttered briefly, "It's Lonzo. He's passing out. Somebody shot through a side window and got him."

"Go to the porch," Darrah ordered, "and keep your eyes peeled." Then he crossed the room and bent over Lonzo Hardesty, whose half closed eyes stared up, brimming with bitterness and regret. The Circle Arrow foreman's words were labored and harsh.

"Bull got me. He said he would, and he did. Get that dog for me, Tom!"

"He's lyin' on the porch, dead," Darrah said slowly.

"Good!" Hardesty cried, and seemed to draw on some yet untapped reserve of energy. His eyes widened; he talked with greater force. "I'm sorry I agreed to put the bug on you. God knows I've got plenty to answer for—but I was against the wall and didn't see no other way out. I'll admit it, Tom. I killed Lewes DeSpain."

"On account of the girl, Lonzo?"

“I won’t lie,” Hardesty muttered. “It was only part on her account. Here’s the straight of it. DeSpain hooked up with Sommers to raid the Circle Arrow range. I met DeSpain a couple weeks ago and agreed to come in on the deal. These boys—” motioning to the Circle Arrow hands about him —“didn’t know about that. They didn’t know I was aimin’ to drive the beef toward the ridges so DeSpain and Sommers could get the stuff and run it out of the country. It was all agreed that way. Well, I laid back from the boys and met DeSpain just when the storm broke. I knew he’d been up to Anita’s place and it made me sore. Anyhow, I figured he was tryin’ to double-cross me on the beef—cheat me out of my share of the profits. I shot him when he turned around to leave. Saw him fall. Then I got to hell out of there. That’s all, Tom.”

Darrah said, “Well, Lonzo, make your peace—” He stopped and laid his hand on Hardesty’s chest, then looked up quickly to the other men in the room. “That’s the end of him.”

“Waste no sympathy on him,” one of the men said emotionlessly.

The front door opened and the Circle Arrow hand guarding the porch put his head inside. “Sommers is here with his hands lifted. He wants to make talk!”

“Send him in,” Darrah said.

Sommers came into the room rapidly and stooped by the fire, his attention fixed on the dead Hardesty. “I knew Bull got him,” he muttered. “He said he would. Who shot Bull?”

“I did,” Darrah said. “What do you want?”

“All I want,” Sommers answered, “is to get clear of this business. So do my boys—and the JT gang. We don’t want to fight a dead man’s side. Listen. I’ll tell you something Hardesty didn’t know.”

“Go ahead.”

Sommers stared all around him, then spoke swiftly. “Hardesty put a bullet in DeSpain. But he only thought he killed DeSpain. When Hardesty ran away DeSpain got on his horse and started for the ridges. Eric Bull found him, saw he was hurt. DeSpain told Bull what had happened and Bull, figurin’ this was what he had been waitin’ for a long time, let DeSpain have it. He finished the job right there. Then he came into Sumpter with his men. When I came along he told me all about it. But he didn’t tell Hardesty, for we figured we had to hang the killin’ on Hardesty. It looked kind of serious for us if we didn’t. So here we was for three days, jawin’ about it—tryin’ to pin it on Hardesty and make him admit it. When you came we all saw a chance to get clear. We tried to pin it on you. The rest is what you know.”

“Get back to the saloon,” Darrah said. “When the storm quits, you mugs pile out of here. I don’t care which way. I’ll spill the story to the sheriff. It’s up to him, then.”

“When the sheriff gets here,” Sommers said, “we’ll be out of his reach.” And Sommers, at once alert and suspicious, backed across the room and into the night. Darrah rose slowly to his feet, speaking to the Circle Arrow crew.

“That’s the best way. We don’t want any more gun play. The affair is finished.”

There was a sound above him. Looking up, he saw the girl dimly outlined on the stairs, standing quite straight and watching him. He said to the crew, “Take Lonzo in a back room and put a blanket over him.” Then he went to the stairs and rose toward the girl, smiling a little.

“I was at the lone tree,” she said, “when I saw Hardesty and DeSpain meet. The snow was so thick in the air they didn’t see me. Hardesty fired—and then I ran. That’s where I lost the glove. But I’m sorry for Hardesty, Tom. For if DeSpain had caught up with me—I would have shot him.”

“Hardesty was usin’ you as an excuse of last resort,” Darrah said. “Forget about it. There’s better things to consider now.”

“As you please,” the girl murmured; and Darrah thought the long soberness of her eyes was breaking up, turning warm.

DISCOVERY GULCH

The Gulch was goin' into its worst days, ready to sink under a load o' accumulated wickedness. The diggin's was played out, there was blamed near one crook for every honest man. Lights burned pritty red, murder was plumb organized, and there hadn't been a jury trial since God knows when:—Narrative of Four-Finger Blackie, sole remaining resident of Discovery Gulch.

Discovery Gulch, perched halfway up the canyon side, with its front door cut into the soil and its back door hanging over the abyss on stilts, had turned to evening pleasures—the hectic, strident pleasures of a thoroughly unreformed mining camp. From the Sweet Kitty Belle on along to the Lost Bonanza was a succession of smoky, glittering lights. Eight saloons, all full, were a-flood with brawling echoes, the cry of men in liquor, the slurred and tuneless speech of the professional gentlemen, the jingle of the piano intertwining with this Nellie's or that Fanette's rendition of the moment's favored song. The wall lamps, winking like fireflies, played down on humanity in one of its looser postures—upon swart faces glistening and animated, twisted with laughter or distorted out of rage; upon clay-plastered shirts and upon the white starched fronts of the gamblers wherein the diamond studs blazed; upon the tinsel of a dancing skirt. And it fell upon the gold in the pokes along the bars, creating molten puddles. Across those bars passed a ceaseless commerce of hands, all outstretched, all groping like talons.

Out and away from that bright bedlam stepped three gentlemen—each coming from a different spot in the town, each taking an obscure route through the darkness to converge at a point directly behind the Lost Bonanza. They were careful enough to challenge down the shadows as they met and to drop their voices to a whispering pitch; and although nobody saw them and there was no particular need for it, each drew a bandanna above the bridge of his nose and exchanged a quick and peculiar grip of hands. The parley lasted but a moment.

“Stage will leave half an hour earlier in the mornin’,” said one. “Wells Fargo’s got an idea to take somebody off guard. That’s ten o’clock.”

“All right. Collect the gang at the usual spot. We’ll ride to Three Mile Creek and take it there.”

“No,” interposed a third. “That’d make the job happen before ten-thirty. Won’t do. It’s got to happen after ten-thirty. Understand.”

“That’s so. Well, at Hangman’s ford, then. How’s that?”

“Agreed.”

That was all. They separated and slipped away, returning to the swirling lights of the saloons.

CHAPTER 1

Neal Falk? Well, Neal was a terror to the Gulch. He done it deliberately. Either that or he’d soon been dead. Remember, every gunman in the state honed to try a draw with him. Every step he took was jus’ one more tords death. Silent? Why, he was an enigma to the Gulch an’ remained so to the very end of the story:—Four-Finger Blackie.

Exactly at half past nine in the morning Neal Falk, marshal of Discovery Gulch, emerged from the shanty that was his home and walked slowly toward the Lost Bonanza. At this hour it should normally have been deserted save for the swamper; all miners should have been at work on their claims. Yet the diggings were playing out and men had come to the dangerous pastime of idling the days away inside the saloons. So there were many witnesses when Neal Falk entered the Lost Bonanza, took a seat at a corner table, drew out both guns and laid them before him. From another pocket he found a home-made ramrod and a wiping rag. Picking up one of the weapons, he ejected the shells and began to clean the barrel with the scrupulous care of one vitally interested in the result. It was to be observed—as those present did observe with covert glances—that while he worked on one gun the other was within reach, ready for use. It was further noted that Neal Falk took his customary seat in the corner, in a position to command the door’s entrance and the bar alike. With Falk thus seated, nobody could come up behind him unobserved.

He was a figure of fame in Discovery Gulch. His name and the legends associated with it were common property throughout the state. And whenever men talked of noteworthy gunfights they sooner or later dwelt upon one or more of the encounters in which Neal Falk had been a participant. In point of physique he failed to follow the accepted gunfighter type, for he was ruggedly built and in action seemed slow. His shoulders were the biggest part of him, his fingers quite stubby and apparently more fit for handling a rope than aught else. Therefore, it was an endless source of debate in the Gulch as to where, during the course of a battle, Neal Falk managed to assemble muscle, speed and judgment for that flaming second he faced his adversary. He owned a tanned, oval face and a broad forehead across which fell a black cowlick; and his eyes, blue in color, sat quite deep in the sockets. He had never been seen to smile, save after a duel, and then it was not so much a smile as a release of suppressed energy that drew back the muscles around his eyes and lips.

Yet he once had been a smiling man. Old-timers in the Gulch recalled that he had smiled easily two years ago. That was the date of his inaugural as marshal. Four marshals had preceded him in the office, and all had died within a month of their stewardship. Thus, Neal Falk had outlived by more than six times the allotted span, according to the law of averages, and each succeeding fight seemed to draw him nearer that grim conclusion, to that inevitable day when a faster man's gun would speak in the breathless street and he would pitch forward in the dust, gripping a silent weapon. It was ordained. The legend that surrounded him like a halo inevitably drew fighters toward Discovery Gulch as a magnet draws steel filings. One by one they had tried conclusions with him, and again and again the Gulch had the same picture of Neal Falk—stooping a little, shoulder swung aside as he stared across the wisp of his own powder smoke, his guns lying rigid along his palms as if to mark irrevocably the path of the bullet. Always he drew both pieces, yet never fired more than one of them. That was the mystery the opposing fighters never yet had solved—which gun he would use, which way his shoulders would swing. And always there would pass across his face the release of energy that looked like a smile, before he turned and walked off, a little grimmer than before.

He finished cleaning one gun and took the other. Those in the saloon watched him repeat the operation, and no matter how they hated him or feared him or loved him, a strange premonitory thrill passed through them like a cold breeze when he rose, set both weapons in the holsters and squared his shoulders. They might have set their timepieces by that rising, so unvarying had this custom become. It was ten o'clock sharp and his day had

started. Next to the departure of the stage—which had left early this morning for some unaccountable reason—Marshal Neal Falk’s ceremony was the most dramatic. A dozen reasons conspired to make it so. Out along the streets of the town were certain newcomers waiting for a time to test him; a full half of the town itself was set against him and most of the rest doubted him; but the thing that never failed to stir the Gulch profoundly was that Neal Falk, in using a table in the Lost Bonanza to clean his guns, entered the headquarters of his deadliest enemy. The Lost Bonanza belonged to Niger Duluth, and it was common knowledge that Niger Duluth only delayed the day when he, himself, would match bullets with Neal Falk. The Gulch had long believed this and long waited for the event; yet so sodden and corrupted with intrigue had the decadent mining town become that many men now doubted the enmity and wondered if in reality Neal Falk were not a part of Duluth’s ring.

As Neal Falk stood by the table, a thoughtful, introspective figure, the outer door swung back and Niger Duluth came in, escorting a girl. Niger was a squat, broad and spider-like man, massive down to the watch chain he wore and the yellow gold rings on his fingers. Withal, he had a certain gallantry of appearance and he displayed it in his manner as he crossed the room with the girl and motioned her up along the stairway leading to the balcony booths. He was aware of Falk’s presence yet gave the marshal no glance. As for Falk, his eyes followed the pair and his face seemed to settle a little, become older. The girl was not one of the Lost Bonanza dancers, nor of any other saloon in town. She wasn’t of that type; she seemed fresher and she had no gay glances for the loitering miners as she passed. Falk caught a gesture of her arm as Niger Duluth took hold of it to help her on the stairs, and that gesture betrayed her. No dancing girl repulsed Niger.

It was an old and familiar scene. The two of them appeared in a booth above and Niger’s swart face stared down upon the barkeep. “Champagne, Jerry, and two clean glasses.” Then the man’s gorilla arms swept the burlap curtaining together and closed the booth.

Falk watched the barkeep skipping up with the champagne; he watched the barkeep come down, grinning slyly. And all eyes turned to Falk as he moved across the room. Ordinarily his prescribed path led him to the street and to the restaurant for his breakfast. This time, he headed for the stairs. The crowd stopped its idle muttering to observe. The marshal rounded out of their sight and stood a moment in the corridor as if not yet quite sure of himself. It was only for a moment. He crossed to a door marked “I”, and without bothering to knock, opened it and entered. The girl turned toward him as if in relief. Niger was in the very act of knocking the top off the

champagne bottle. His muddy eyes settled on Falk—not in anger, for Niger seldom wasted anger on any man, but in a flickering watchfulness.

“Step outside, Niger,” Falk said. “I’m talkin’ to this lady before she seals any bargains.”

Niger Duluth set the bottle carefully on the table. For so heavy a man he could command a surprisingly soft drawl. “It ain’t hardly your play, is it, Falk?”

“You know me well enough, Niger. I ain’t given to premature moves. I’ll take the responsibility.”

Niger’s fist squeezed together on the table top. He studied the girl until she dropped her eyes. He stared at Falk. And still in the soft manner he answered the marshal. “Ain’t exactly in line o’ duty is it, Falk? Ain’t a very good excuse to force an issue, is it? She any relation to you—any interest to you? Didn’t think I was poachin’ none.”

“Step outside, Niger,” Falk repeated. “No, your time ain’t come with me yet. I’m just talkin’ to the lady.”

Duluth raised his pudgy fingers and even in the poor light the great diamonds sparkled. “Fair enough.” He rose and passed to the door. Falk stood silent, listening to the man’s footsteps creaking on the stairway; and presently he crossed to the curtains and ripped them back to command Duluth until the latter had left the saloon door. He sat down in the vacated chair, sweeping bottle and glasses aside. At close observation she was more mature than he had supposed, more in command of herself. About twenty-five, he judged. She had chestnut hair and eyes touched by recent tragedy. Her lips were pressing back some clamoring emotion—the bitter pent feelings of one who had struggled to keep some harsh, unnatural resolve and was even now attempting to maintain that resolve. It threw her face out of its line of comeliness, Falk decided. She had literally uprooted herself, or been uprooted, from gentle surroundings to come to Discovery Gulch, the last place in all the Territory for a decent woman.

“Ever drink champagne before?” he asked, quite grave.

“No. And I hadn’t intended to drink it now.”

“Ever been in a dance joint before?”

She shook her head. Falk bent forward to watch the light ripple across her eyes. For a long, long while he held that glance. At first it fell softly on her features; but as the moments lengthened it bore against her like a drill, causing something akin to physical pain, seeming to dredge down and down until her very secret was in danger of being torn out of her breast. In that silent booth he loomed larger and larger, a sinister, implacable figure

surrounded by legends. She had heard of him before, never believing the tales told of him, doubting that any man could possess the power he was accredited with; but as he sat there she felt a wave of fear sweep through her and she dropped her eyes. The color flooded to her cheeks. She felt as if she were being stripped.

“I thought not,” Falk murmured, relaxing. “You ain’t that type. The tales of big money wouldn’t interest you particularly, either. Ma’am, you’ve got something on your chest. Something that’s drivin’ you here and makin’ you do what you don’t want to do.”

“How can you know that?” she cried, pulling back. “You don’t know me. You’ve never seen me before!”

“That’s true,” said Falk. “But I’ve seen many men driven by desperation. Seen ’em come toward me to kill me. Not exactly wanting to kill me, understand, but forced to the attempt by somethin’ inside. Seen the look in their eyes just before they died. Always the same look, the same acts, the same words. It’s in you now. You want to be a dancin’ girl to carry out some idea of yours. Well, you had better reconsider.”

She moved an arm. Her hand dropped to the table, holding a derringer. “There’s all the protection I need.”

“Against men, yes,” Falk agreed. “But not against waggin’ tongues nor against gossip that’ll follow you like a brand mark the rest of your life.”

“I’ve got to live,” she said. “I must stay in Discovery Gulch until— Anyhow I’ve got to live while I’m here.”

“There’s a job open in the restaurant for you,” Falk said.

“No there isn’t. I’ve asked there.”

“The job’s open now,” Falk repeated. He got up and moved toward the door. “You come with me.”

She was still in her chair, staring at a corner, half in anger, half in defiance. Falk watched her a moment. “It ain’t polite to ask anybody’s business in this place. I’m not askin’ yours. But I will observe that if you’re lookin’ for somebody, you’ll see him sooner or later in the restaurant. Or if you want to find a certain piece of information, you hear it sooner or later over pie and coffee. It’s a better joint for that than a saloon.”

That startled her. She dropped the derringer in her pocket and got up. “I believe what men say about you now, Neal Falk.”

“What men say about me makes no difference. I’ve put the fear of God in ’em and so it will remain until I go down. If you will step over to the restaurant with me—”

“Oh, I’ll come.”

He bowed and led her downstairs. The crowd gave way to let them pass. Falk turned a moment to the bartender. “Go get that bottle of champagne, Jerry. The lady don’t drink.” Out in the street he looked around to find Niger Duluth, but the saloon man had vanished. Falk said nothing more, yet he was struck with the suppleness of the girl as she walked beside him. There must have been a time when gaiety came naturally to her clear face, when her eyes were bereft of the reflected glow of that fire burning inside her like the slow smoldering of a peat bed. He motioned inside the restaurant door. The owner, a thin, dyspeptic character, looked up warily.

“I brought you a lady for that job you got, Keeps,” Falk announced.

“What job?” Keeps growled. But after a moment’s inspection of the marshal’s oval countenance he amended his attitude quickly. “Oh, yeah. All right, ma’am. Pleased to have you. Coffee an’ sinkers as usual, marshal?”

Falk nodded. The girl disappeared through the kitchen door and only reappeared when Falk had finished his breakfast and was ready to leave.

“I suppose I should thank you, Mr. Falk. I suppose I ought to be grateful. But—that must wait.” Her gaze fell to his wrists and remained there a moment.

Falk nodded, paid his bill and went outside. The bright sun slashed along the dusty street, unmercifully revealing all the town’s ugliness. There was a woolly pup worrying at a bone by the restaurant door and for quite an interval the marshal watched it, head dropped forward on his chest. Everything this man did held drama for the citizens of the Gulch and more than one of them spied on him as he towered above the dog, engrossed in its antics. He who had extinguished so many lives was here spending his time, seemingly oblivious to aught else. Yet he had noted instantly a figure lolling in a shaded angle near the Sweet Kitty Belle; another stranger waiting to try guns, another man stalking him and watching for the unguarded moment; another readying himself to die.

Falk moved on and stepped inside his shanty, and again men might have set their watches by the swing of the shanty door. It was exactly ten-thirty and he would not reappear on the street until one. This was his custom, this was a part of the schedule he had so painstakingly built up for the benefit of those human wolves who lusted for his blood. At all indications he was inside the shanty, yet the Gulch knew from hard experience he was somewhere else. More than once some extraordinary turbulence at the ends of the town had brought him into sight, coming from unexpected angles, dropping right on their backs. Nobody understood how he transferred

himself from the shanty to these odd points. They could only guess. And so he kept them in uncertainty, stalked them like an unseen presence and left them to grumble and worry. He moved around that town, a harsh and rugged figure of retribution, unsmiling and unsleeping. He was marked for death and he knew it. Every man in the diggings down to the humblest Chinese gravel picker knew it. Day by day they waited for the event while the very air grew choked with a tension that seemed on occasion to sing like strings on a taut instrument.

CHAPTER 2

Was Neal Falk honest? Me, I didn't know. Nobody else knew except Neal Falk and he wasn't tellin'. At the beginnin' when the town was decent we figgered him to be square. But at the last the crooks got control and they was lots of folks to tell you Neal Falk had thrown in with 'em to save his life. He trusted nobody. Everybody feared him like the plague. He kept violence down, but it was a losin' fight and it come to be common knowledge that the big issue in the Gulch was whether Falk would die or whether he'd wipe out his enemies. You see, the Gulch was decayin' and it got to the point where Neal Falk was bigger than the towns:—Four-Finger Blackie.

It was just around noon when the street began to fill with men from the diggings that the stage was seen careening down the canyon side. The fact that it was not due back from the railroad junction across the pass until late night, and the further fact that only one man sat up on the seat, was sufficient to draw the crowd to the sidewalks as the lumbering vehicle coasted along the ruts and stopped by the Lost Bonanza. The horses were heavy with lather, there was a scattering of bullet holes through the wood, and all eyes instantly fell upon the aperture beneath the seat where the strong box was ordinarily strapped. It was gone and the straps had been slashed with a knife.

The driver's left side seemed to be of no use to him. He seemed to hear none of the questions pouring up from the crowd. Quite methodically he wrapped the reins around the brake handle and edged over to dismount. But

his body relaxed beneath him and he fell head first into outstretched arms, crying as he fell.

“Tell the Jessamine super they got the bullion—flagged me at Hangman’s ford. Me, I got sense, but Josh Hinkle made a fight of it. He’s dead with his head in the crick.” The Jessamine was the big syndicate mine of the Gulch. Josh Hinkle had ridden out of town that morning as guard, with a shotgun propped between his knees. The stage driver murmured something else that nobody heard. Then he was so much dead weight in the arms of the miners. They packed him to the Lost Bonanza bar and stretched him out. Bedlam broke loose. A man took a full bottle of whisky and dripped it on the stage driver’s face, nearly strangling the fellow before the bottle was knocked away and sent spinning like a top across the mahogany. Somewhere in that camp was a disgraced physician and him they sent for, while threat and counter-threat swirled through the room. The medico, it was presently reported, lay in the Sweet Kitty Belle, dead drunk. Thereupon a veterinary was sought. But before such quasi-professional aid arrived, the stage driver revived and called for a drink.

“Six in the party. Yeah, naturally they was all masked. Oh, I’m all right. Jus’ sorta disconnected temp’rarily in m’ shoulder. They figgered they’d crated me away. I sagged on the seat and played possum. Where? How the hell do I know where they went? Up in the hills, box an’ all. Well, a fine time they’ll have luggin’ them bars over the landscape. Lemme down, I got hosses to take care of.”

The crowd parted. Niger Duluth came swinging down the lane with the angular, sliding gait of a mammoth spider. The yellow dust sat on his blue coat, a blue bandanna neckpiece hung askew over one shoulder. The stage driver eyed the saloon proprietor warily, staring into the latter’s eyes with a peculiar intensity. Duluth was booming at the crowd. “Well, boys, it’s work for a posse, ain’t it? Come on, come on. Git your hosses. We’ll trail them road agents.” He stopped in front of the stage driver. “Pinked you, huh? Masked, was they? Six? Think you’d know any of ’em, boy?”

The driver massaged his lame shoulder. A drop of blood ran down his finger tips. He seemed afraid of Duluth, which was not uncommon in the Gulch, yet he stood his ground, answering almost defiantly. “How would I know ’em?”

“Told Sheriff Tipstone about it yet?” Duluth pursued.

“Tipstone? Ha—Tipstone! What would I be tellin’ him for?” And for all his uncertainty he managed an ironic grin. The driver was not very old and

he had his moments of rashness. “I’m drivin’ stage. It’s what I’m paid for, not to identify crooks. I’ll let you gents take care of that.”

He shouldered by Duluth and headed for the door. But the door was nearly filled with the bulk of Neal Falk. The marshal had dropped out of the sky again, a grave and listening figure in all this turmoil. The crowd, turning to watch the driver depart, saw Falk for the first time. And as always happened, a semi-silence came over them. Niger Duluth’s head rolled forward on his short neck as if to see the marshal better; his short, sardonic laugh rolled across the interval.

Falk paid no attention. He was speaking to the driver.

“Bullet lodge in your frame, boy?”

“No, it jus’ pinked me, Falk.”

“You go on home then and slap a little poultice on it. This soft-nose lead is apt to leave a poison. Tell you what—come on to the restaurant and we’ll plaster some beefsteak on the raw spot.”

Niger Duluth laughed again and turned a skeptical eye to the crowd. “The drinks is on the house,” said he. “Ain’t it too bad the marshal don’t imbibe while on duty?”

Falk walked slowly along the sidewalk with the stage driver. “Know anything particular, boy?”

The driver looked up, still sullen. “I’m mindin’ my own business, Falk. What I know ain’t for consumption.”

“My advice to you,” Falk said gravely, “is to go home and stay there till dark. After dark you put your possibles on a horse an’ leave the country. Waste no time about it.”

“Sure. Sure! They meant to get me, but they didn’t. Oh, I know I’m marked! They’ll put a bloodhound on my trail. I’ll go down. Damn ’em, they was masked, but I’d know one by a cataract—” He bit the sentence in the middle. He had strong white teeth, this driver, and when he drew his lips back from them he seemed like an animal at bay. “Why should I be tellin’ you? And what’s the idea of you wantin’ to save my skin?”

Falk shook his head. “I don’t want to see you die. The Gulch has devoured enough men. The hills is littered with broken bones. Better leave, son.”

A man came down the street in long, shambling strides, swinging his arms like flails. He was as tall as Falk, but older—going on to middle age. His hair was rust-colored below the brim of his hat, his features gaunt and florid. A star swung loosely from his vest. This was Sheriff Tipstone coming

on a summons to the saloon. He stopped by the two men, flashing a swift and narrow glance across them. "You come back with me," he said, indicating the stage driver. "Want to question you. Mebbe have you ride back with us."

"No, I ain't goin'," the driver grumbled. "Horses to take care of and m'self to fix. It ain't my fight. I tol' the boys all I knowed."

Tipstone's nose twitched. He shifted his look to Neal Falk, and the two of them, great-framed and taciturn, seemed to wage a silent struggle for possession of the slim youth standing between. "You takin' a personal interest in this, Falk?" Tipstone murmured.

Falk shook his head. "It's outside of my province, Sheriff. But would you be wantin' any particular help in this case?"

Tipstone refused to answer the question. "Gettin' a little information from the boy, eh? Mebbe givin' him a little in return?"

"He's keepin' his own counsel," Falk replied imperturbably. "As for me, I told him the country ain't healthy to live in."

"Sound—comin' from you," Tipstone muttered, and swung away. The stage driver went on toward the street end. Falk remained in a patch of shade. Somewhat beyond the Lost Bonanza he saw a stranger loitering in like shade—the same stranger he had observed once before. Presently the crowd came spilling from the saloon. Tipstone and Niger Duluth got into the saddle and a dozen men followed suit. Falk noted every one of these, silently calling their names. And when they had ridden off, apparently bound for the scene of the holdup, he inclined his head and walked leisurely toward his shanty. Certain witnesses saw him close the door and relayed that information to the Lost Bonanza. Presently a subdued query passed through the crowd. That holdup had been held some time between ten-thirty and eleven-thirty. Where had Neal Falk been then?

Falk passed to the back of his double-room shanty and stooped to lift a trap door out of the floor. Below him was semidarkness and he waited a moment to listen. Lowering himself, he pulled the trap door into place and ducked between the stilts supporting the shanty. This trestlework supported all the structures of Discovery Gulch and made a kind of tunnel. Nobody came here except Falk; there was no way to get into this gloomy burrow save by descending the scantlings of the back porches or by climbing the precipitous bluff side. It made an admirable covert. By crawling forward on his stomach he could even reach the under side of the town walks and thus listen to whoever stood above. Once he had done so and the knowledge

gained had saved him from treading a certain alley after dark, where a gunman waited.

He traversed the length of the town thus and arrived at a thin path shooting into the full daylight. Once more he stopped to take in his surroundings. Far below, a creek unwound itself across the scarred canyon bottom like a silver ribbon. Ahead was a point of rock. He let himself partly down the slope, circled the rock and put the town behind him. He walked a hundred yards, clambered upward and over a ridge and to a small lean-to built of logs. He kept a horse saddled here. Presently he was riding up and into the pines and around the town. He struck a clearer path and went on at a full gallop.

At intervals the pines grew thin and he saw the road below, climbing the canyon wall. It crossed the summit and followed on over a flat. He kept well in the shelter, always paralleling the primitive highway. The flat sloped into a glen and the road shot down and up and out of sight. A bird streaked across the late sunlight, making a vivid colorful arc in the dusty droning air; the sound of its chatter merged with the drum of advancing horses.

Neal Falk came to a halt behind the trees just as Sheriff Tipstone and his hand-picked posse debouched from the woods. They had traveled very leisurely, else Falk never would have overtaken them. And they seemed in no hurry now. They came to a stand in the flat and dropped from their saddles. Tipstone and Duluth were arguing over something, or deciding something. Duluth covered the four corners of the compass with his arms, whereat the rest of the posse seemed to join the parley. Half an hour passed before they mounted again and swung directly back to town.

Neal Falk dropped into the glen and crossed up the far slope. Below was a deeper gulch, the road winding down in hairpin curves. A creek shot out of a constricting gorge, widened to a placid shallows and grew turbulent again as it raced beyond. The ford of Hangman's. Falk disregarded the road and reached the water's edge. He saw where the stage had left the road and turned about. He discovered the hoofmarks of the road agents circling the spot where the vehicle had stood. And lying on the ground, face half submerged in the water, was the body of Josh Hinkle.

He had no further business there. Still somewhat sheltered, he traced the retreating path of the bandits down the gulch and up along the slope until it stopped in a bayou of the pines. Here he dismounted and bent to all fours. They had dropped the strong box—one corner had gouged deeply into the sandy soil. Here it had been opened and emptied. Probably, if he looked into the deeper brush he might find that iron-bound receptacle. But he wasn't interested. All the story he wanted could be found here. The bullion bars

were too heavy for any man to pack individually and too difficult to conceal. They had used a hacksaw to cut the gold ingots into more manageable sections; the glittering filings impregnated the earth and some day might mislead a prospector into believing he had at last found the mythical mecca—a claim rotten with gold up to the very grass roots.

Neal Falk studied the scene through narrowed eyes, and when he had imprinted the memory of it deep in his brain he got in the saddle and turned homeward. The sun slid over the western line, purple dusk swirled through the trees. The lights were blazing again along the Gulch when he rode his horse into the stable and walked toward the Lost Bonanza.

It was Falk's invariable habit to make the rounds of each saloon during the course of the evening. Starting at the Sweet Kitty Belle, he paused at the Pride of the Gulch, Faro Jack's, Cripple Creek Place, and the Blue Bucket. And when he had stepped out of the latter establishment he knew some strange portent bore up on the wind. He knew it by the tempo of men's talk, by the significant glances intercepted, by the hush that fell as he stepped across each doorsill and stood his usual moment at the edge of the eddying crowds. Men usually gave him the tribute of subdued talk when he appeared amongst them. Tonight it was more prolonged. Tonight he was aware of an indirect scrutiny—like the morbid curiosity mankind exhibits toward one about to die. Here and there he saw a man whom he knew to be a friend, and in each instance that friend seemed to launch a silent warning across the intervening space, trying to convey a message. No more than that, but to Neal Falk it was sufficient. All the uncanny power the Gulch attributed to him was but the ability to sense the imperceptible currents swaying a crowd, to read the set of their lips and the glow of their eyes.

He passed the restaurant, visited the Red Mill and O'Brien's Cup of Cheer. Next was the Lost Bonanza. He stepped into an alley's darkness before entering this last saloon and swept the street. Men moved across the walks, murmuring idly: The Jessamine was laying off a shift; Dutch Zinzebauer had made a cleaning and was in the Lost Bonanza showing his poke to all comers; there was a faro table in the Sweet Kitty Belle easy to buck; he heard his name mentioned, followed by a sibilant explosive phrase that eluded him.

Patiently, Falk's eyes quested along the angles and nooks and alleys wherein the shadows were deepest. A cigarette tip alternately glowed and grew dim somewhere near the harness shop. He marked that carefully, having previously noted the stranger slide out of the light and toward the shop. Well, the man was patient. Whatever fever burned in him, however strong his killing instinct, he was patient—and therefore the more

dangerous. Falk stepped to the walk just as a man with a bronzed beard and one short foot came abreast. It was Four-Finger Blackie, heading for the strong cups of the Lost Bonanza. Falk's arm barred the way.

"At it again, Blackie?"

"Who's 'at? Oh, Marshal." Four-Finger Blackie's breath came tumbling out in relief. "Sorta started me, considerin' all the doggoned blackjack gents roamin' loose. Now, Marshal, I ain't had a drop all evenin'. It's gospel, I ain't." His voice grew plaintive, wheedling. "Here I been muckin' all month and I sorta hone for light an' strong speech. You wouldn't be denyin' me that, now would you?"

"Where've you prospected this time, Blackie?"

"Up Bannock Gulch, Marshal. Did right well, too. But I ain't heard a human voice so long I plumb forgot the sound. Ain't had a drop—wa'n't intendin' to imbibe. Jus' lookin' around."

Neal Falk knew better. The history of Four-Finger Blackie was a series of ups and down. In poverty he made pious resolutions and talked of going East. But when his poke filled with dust he grew parched of throat and the next morning was broke again. The marshal murmured something about the frailty of nature. "It's burnin' a hole in your pocket, Blackie. Give me that poke. I'm puttin' it in the Wells Fargo safe."

"One round. Jus' one round," pleaded Blackie.

"You've had it already, Blackie. It ain't water that odors up your breath. I guess I've got to see that you go East this time."

Blackie swore softly. "What if I spend it? There's more in the hills."

"And more for the barkeeps and the gamblers and the leeches of the Gulch, Blackie. No, Blackie, the gold is playing out. The Gulch has about drained dry. The foundations are rotten and some night, not far off, the sky will be red. You don't want to be caught in the wreck. There'll be enough dead men."

Blackie acquiesced to the inevitable. He passed over his poke. "I'd as soon have you keep it, Marshal, ruther'n put it in ary express company safe."

Falk shook his head. There was a slow rise of his shoulders. And though he said nothing, Blackie understood perfectly. Neal Falk had no illusions as to his own safety. He might be dead before the hour was gone. Blackie moved uneasily. There was something on the tip of his tongue that seemed hard to spit out.

“Gent over in the shadows, Marshal, though it’s none o’ my business. Thought I’d mention it. Goin’ to the meetin’?”

“What meetin’?”

“Why, there’s a meetin’ at the lodge hall. Guess it’s about the stage affair. Dunno who called it, but the Jessamine super an’ Colonel Latourette are booked to say somethin’.”

“Thanks, Blackie.” Falk moved away toward the door of the Lost Bonanza. Blackie watched him turn in and the crippled miner’s head described a slow and puzzled arc. “Now, didn’t he know about that meetin’? Him a-talkin’ about the gamblers and the crooks—an’ hell bustin’ loose. He’d ought to know. By Godfrey, I sure wish I knew whether he was in with that gang. I sure do. But crooked or honest, the man’s got a heart.”

The Lost Bonanza was brim full. Fanette Duval was singing up on the balcony to a crowd of men who drowned her words. But they saw Falk and for a moment the talk fell to a lull. Night after night he made his appointed rounds with that regularity that had come to be a part of the legend. A thousand times they looked up to find him in the doorway. And yet the situation perpetually held interest. There was something blood-stirring in the very attitude of the man as his big shoulders filled the door and his graven face looked through the smoke. There was something foreboding about his silence, about the temper that never rose yet rested sleepless back of the deep-set eyes. He was as solid and as visible as a rock, yet it was uncanny the way he faded out of their vision and later came upon them unexpectedly.

They moved uneasily. Niger Duluth leaned against the bar with a sardonic grin stretched across his swart face. Beside Duluth stood another character whom Neal Falk watched for a moment. This was Duluth’s chief henchman, the Duke; a man dressed like a fop and carrying himself like one. He had the tapering fingers of an artist and a dead-white skin in which his eyes glittered. He had been smiling until he saw Falk; now the pallid face constricted and the Duke looked old and deadly.

Falk stayed but a moment, yet in that moment he clearly read his fate. Out of the wisdom of his profession—a profession unwillingly thrust upon him—he foretold what was to happen. They had made a figure of him, they had made him fight and scheme for his life until his deeds made a pedestal for him to stand upon. Once he had been only an official; now he bulked greater than the Gulch itself. Cold reason touched not at all by pride or vanity told him this. They were afraid of him, they were tired of him and they were about to pull him down.

He stepped into the street and tarried a moment beyond the light. Presently he observed the men of the town swing toward the lodge hall. A speaker's voice, ringing clear in the unaccustomed silence, carried outward and he went over and quietly slipped through the door. The stranger, he noticed, had moved up beyond the harness shop and now skulked in the opaque pall near O'Brien's Cup of Cheer. Yes, the man was patient, and very cautious. And it was just such a man who would, some day, bring Neal Falk down in the dust.

CHAPTER 3

Law was a dead letter in the Gulch. A full half o' the crowd took orders from the ring. The rest was afeered to express a honest opinion. Men are plumb like sheep; in the beginning Neal Falk was believed in, but when the rumors got started folks doubted him. If he'd opened up, he could have made more friends. But he didn't dare. He was hemmed around by hungry wolves snappin' at his throat. All told they wasn't more'n a dozen stuck to him—stuck, not knowin' whether he was honest or not ner not carin'. I was one an' to the end of my days that'll allus be a pleasant thought:—Four-Finger Blackie.

Standing at the doorway, Neal Falk saw Colonel Latourette before the crowd, talking in a dry, rasping voice. The colonel was a man of law, thin and small and ramrod straight. He had a goatee and frosty eyes. He executed such legal instruments as the Gulch needed and handled the local affairs of the syndicate's Jessamine; and alone in the town he spoke out boldly in favor of purity and reform. Since he was alone in so speaking, he carried no great weight and was thus tolerated and to some degree respected. Perhaps his immunity was further secured by the sword cane he always carried and a known accuracy with the revolver. Falk missed most of what the colonel said; he was not, in fact, greatly interested. Falk was bluntly practical and he measured the import of that meeting by the other actors present and what he knew of them. The Jessamine super sat to one side of the colonel, Sheriff Tipstone to the other.

Latourette sat down. Tipstone rose, his sorrel hair burning under the light. “The good colonel has stated the legal entanglements of this Gulch, which is most true. Now, coming to the more immediate subject in hand, I will say me and the posse swept the scene of the crime without results. Well, almost so—but there’s one point about the affair which I ain’t the first to mention. It’s been rumored about the town there was a bay horse seen riding up the pines about half an hour after the holdup. I brought the stage driver with me to this meetin’ and I’m askin’ him to step up to answer some questions.”

Falk nodded to himself, as if finding confirmation of his beliefs. They were not yet sure enough of themselves to mention his name out aloud. They crept softly around it by designating a bay horse, which was his horse. The stage driver moved reluctantly forward, uneasy under the weight of the crowd’s attention. Falk squared his vast shoulders and walked into the light and straight down the aisle. The stage driver saw him and stopped instantly. Tipstone leaned forward, grim and displeased. And then it was as if the fact of Falk’s presence touched the whole crowd at the same instant. The benches creaked to twisting bodies and a low, sibilant murmur rolled across the hall. Falk passed between them slowly. He turned at the foot of the platform, climbed the steps and took his seat in a vacant chair.

There he sat, a harsh lump of a figure that jammed the words back into the mouths of whoever had come to damn him. Tipstone swung his head from side to side. He pointed his finger at the stationary stage driver.

“You been sayin’ that you knew somethin’ about those road agents. You was overheard as not wantin’ to talk to me. ‘Tipstone—ha,’ was the exact comment. Now, boy, if you got a single clue of evidence it’s your duty to give it.”

The stage driver only shook his head. Tipstone ripped at him savagely. “Who’s been givin’ you advice?”

Falk’s level voice rose. “Tipstone, if you aim to strike at me, do it direct. Don’t fix to crucify that driver.”

The sheriff flung his head back and turned until he faced Falk. “I will supply the answer, Marshal. You was the one to bid him to keep his mouth shut. Likewise to tell him this country wasn’t healthful. Mebbe you can explain why all that sudden interest.”

“That’s plain enough,” Falk said gravely. “If he knows somethin’ and certain gentlemen discover he knows somethin’ he’ll die before mornin’. That’s why, Sheriff.”

“Who invited you here?” Tipstone challenged.

“Hold on,” Colonel Latourette broke in. “That’s irrelevant. Marshal Falk has the right to be present. Free meeting.”

“Something like that,” Falk agreed. “I might add that my chips are being played on the table and I’ll stick around to see how they’re distributed.”

“I’m through,” Tipstone muttered, and sat down. Silence held the hall. Falk let his attention stray along the front rows. Niger Duluth’s dark face stared back with a trace of mockery. And beside him was the Duke, whose red eyes gleamed against the dead-white skin. The super of the Jessamine said, “Well, wasn’t the purpose of this meeting to do something? Quit holding hands and do some plain talking.”

Colonel Latourette turned a severe countenance toward Falk. “Marshal, you have admitted advising the driver not to talk, as well as to skip this country. That’s a poor kind of advice from a duly constituted officer of the law. It sounds bad. I believe you owe an explanation.”

Falk rose from his chair. And it seemed as if a cold wave of air scoured from one corner of the room to the other. He faced his enemies, and the whole crowd recognized that he knew he faced them. They gave him the tribute of grudging admiration as his eyes passed along the rows and appeared to count and measure them individually. He swung his body so that he half-commanded Colonel Latourette. “Colonel, are you aware of the purpose of this meeting?”

“Certainly am, sir. It’s to discuss the holdup and to adopt some measures of pursuit, as well as to interest all good citizens in a more effective government of the town.”

“That’s what you think it is,” Falk countered. He let his glance rest on the colonel until the very weight of it caused the other to move restlessly in his chair. “Colonel, do you know all of these men?”

“I can name them,” Latourette asserted, visibly irritated.

“And what else do you know about them?”

“Dammee, sir, I don’t read their letters or tap their conversation, if that’s what you drive at!”

Falk nodded. He appeared to dismiss Latourette from his mind, turning toward the crowd. They waited. They could afford to wait, for anything Neal Falk might say or do would be worth witnessing. His heavy arm rose and pointed outward, and even the most unimaginative of them saw him in his fighting posture. Only the gun was lacking in his fist, only the trailing smoke absent. His words, deliberate and implacable rolled over their heads. “I know what you came here for. You’re hungry for blood and you hear the pack howlin’. All right, here I stand. Now go on with the ceremony.”

“By Gad, sir!” Latourette sputtered. But that was as much as a signal. A bench fell back and the crowd moved toward the door. Tipstone jumped from the platform and elbowed his way among them. The Duke had not yet risen from his seat. Niger Duluth raised his arm in a kind of salute, grinning. “All right, Falk. You win the pot.”

Latourette plucked Falk on the arm, his voice like sandpaper cutting across wood. “Are you setting up to be the law in Discovery Gulch? By Gad, sir, you’ve got enough to answer for! I’m not satisfied. I am *not!*”

Falk brushed this aside with a brusque counter question. “What law are you talkin’ about, Colonel? Law ceased here a long time back. There won’t ever be any law here again unless it’s Judge Lynch’s kind. It’s a queer thing you don’t catch the meaning of all this. Three quarters of this crowd was set to follow a leader and take the blood cry from him. The rest would’ve followed just to be in at the kill.”

“What leader?” Latourette snapped. “And what kill do you allude to?”

Falk, halfway to the rear door, looked over his shoulder. “Wake up, Colonel. You’re the only man in the Gulch that don’t know, I reckon.”

He dropped into the outer darkness.

The Jessamine super was a more perceiving man and he watched Falk go with a shake of his head. “There is a gentleman, by Joe! There’s power for you.”

“I am not satisfied,” the colonel repeated testily. “I have always given Neal Falk the benefit of the doubt. Rumor is poor proof, always. Nevertheless, he stands convicted by his own words.”

“Convicted, perhaps, but not yet taken into custody,” the super amended with a touch of levity.

“He will be, don’t worry about it. The law must run—it will run in this gulch. No man is above it.”

The super gave the colonel a curious, expressive glance. “You’ve been buried in your legal volumes too long, Latourette. I’m afraid you’ve lost touch with the muddy affairs of our disintegrating municipality. Let’s go over to the Lost Bonanza and have a look at the fun. After all, the express company pays for that bullion, not me.”

The crowd had sifted out of the hall and broken into eddying fragments along the street. Somebody quarreled just beyond the door. Latourette and the super moved toward it, the colonel shaking his head vigorously. “Not so out of touch as you believe. There are ways to clean the stables. There are ways. Remember, I lived in the Montana diggings. I saw the box knocked

from under Slade and I heard him scream. It was his last breath. There are ways. Oh, well. I hear you're laying off a shift."

The super nodded. "On the quiet, my friend, but we're past the stage of cream. It's low grade right now. We'll be needing some process work pretty soon if we're to carry on. Don't believe the owners will bother with it. They want quick returns and no investment. Wouldn't be surprised to get closing orders."

But Latourette's mind was still on the scene. "Law must run," he muttered. "One way or another—"

They were at the door. A man came stumbling across the beam of light, bent over. His hat was off and his hair straggled down his face. He heard Latourette and turned his head; it was the youthful stage driver with the fear of death imprinted upon his drawn features. A shot spat out of darkness and the driver drew back his lips, crying, "I'd ought to've gone! I'm dead!" He relaxed, crumbled to all fours, and then rolled flat.

Latourette started down the steps. The Jessamine super knocked him back. "Keep out of this. Keep back! Eyes up, man!"

Men poured from the saloons like jets of water tumbling down the spillways of a dam. They milled around the body. A lantern swung through the darkness and there was a sharp order. "Step back!" Latourette pulled up his head to see Neal Falk shouldering out of the shadows. The super saw him too, but also noticed Niger Duluth converging from another angle. And the Duke's pallid face stood foremost in the crowd; the man was rubbing his palms along the sides of his trousers. Neal Falk dropped to a knee. His hand touched the driver's shoulder, slid around to the driver's chest. The lantern light glowed and flashed in the deep well of his eyes.

"Well?" Latourette challenged.

Falk stood up. "Just another man crucified, Colonel. Didn't you hear me say they'd get him? He knew too much."

Niger Duluth advanced and squatted on his heels. "Shot in the back. That bullet came from the alley beside the lodge hall." He sprang up, his squat, spider-like body drawing together. One arm fell accusingly on Neal Falk. "Where was you, Falk?"

"In the said alley," Falk droned.

"Let's see your guns."

"Not my guns, Niger," Falk replied somberly.

"By God, there'll be an empty cartridge in 'em!" Duluth shouted. He turned the circle, haranguing the crowd. "Why should he be afraid to show

his pieces? Because they's an empty cartridge in one of 'em!"

"You don't want to see those guns," Falk said. He seemed to expand. "Your time ain't come yet, Niger."

"No, you bet it ain't. Nor never will from you. You're forcin' the bets too high, Falk. The luck won't hold much longer."

"I'm playin' my chips."

Latourette advanced toward Falk. "You know me to be honest, Marshal. Let me see the weapons."

Falk shook his head. "Don't let 'em make a decoy duck of you, Colonel. It's another roll of the same old loaded dice. Never play another man's game."

"You refuse, sir!" cried Latourette.

"No man touches my guns while I live. When I die it won't be empty-handed. Stand back, Colonel. There's no empty cartridges in either piece. Step back!"

And such was the weight of that command, such was the vibration of it, that Latourette gave ground. Falk studied the crowd solemnly. "Same old verdict. Death by accidental gunshot wound. Party or parties unknown. Boot Hill gets another body an' the candle burns a little lower. I told this boy to pull stakes because I knew plumb well he'd die. He knew somethin'. I know what that information was and I'm chalkin' up the score. Mark that well. I'm chalkin' up the score." He stopped. Someone in the crowd had muttered an oath and he turned toward the party. Silence clamped the circle tightly. Neal Falk's words fell one by one, harsh and premonitory. "Before the week is out, the boy's murderer will be dead. I never go back on my word."

"You figger to die soon, huh?" Niger Duluth said.

"Your time ain't come yet, Niger."

"Savin' me up, Falk?"

Falk's head dropped and rose. "Savin' you for the Gulch's last victim, Niger. When the bonfire's bright it'll be needin' the best fuel."

Duluth's laugh exploded like a bomb, ringing harsh and metallic against the wall of the night. "We'll make it somethin' to talk about a long time, Falk. A long time! Hell, the evenin's young, why waste it on a post mortem? Come on gents, back to pleasure."

Falk stood above the stage driver as the crowd sifted away. He seemed to be communing with himself. By and by he lifted the boy on his shoulders and strode off. The Jessamine super's breath whistled from his mouth. "By George! He's cold, he's like ice! Fear never touched him. Never!"

Latourette pivoted on his heel and hurried away like one bitten with a sudden idea. Over in the Lost Bonanza, Fanette Duval was singing and the clatter and the scrape of feet echoed into the street.

Neal Falk carried the stage driver to the building wherein all the Gulch's dead temporarily rested. Coming out, he stopped a moment and sought the shadows. He thought he saw somebody still stationed near the harness shop, but he wasn't sure. The stranger was not far removed—Falk's nerves told him as much. It was an old and infallible omen. Something piled up inside of him. The air seemed tainted. He had the same warning all wild animals have when a pursuing beast comes into the wind. Living as he had, in the very center of intrigue for two years, he had developed that sense to the point where he almost knew the step he must not take, the alley he must not pass, or the definite hour he must turn and fight back. He moved past the Cup of Cheer and went into the restaurant. The girl saw him come and she met him unsmiling, distant.

“Your order, Mr. Falk.”

But the Chinese cook put his head through the kitchen door and popped back quickly. Falk's order was known, and always the same. The girl pressed her lips together, trying to measure this stolid figure who seemed to hold Discovery Gulch in the hollow of his stubby hand. “You give no orders, I see. People either know or are supposed to guess.”

“Ma'am, it ain't usual for questions to be asked, but if it makes no difference to you I'd admire to know your name.”

She cupped her chin in her hands. She was inscrutable when she chose to be. She had the gift of swift change. Falk was sure of only one thing about her: she belonged far above the level of the Gulch and only some great cataclysm could have brought her here. He thought she meant to refuse his question and, strangely, he admired her the more for it.

“Get no false ideas about me, Mr. Falk. I thank you for helping me to get this job. But I'd rather have taken my chances at the Lost Bonanza. There is something I must know—and I will know it, no matter what it costs.”

“All things cost a price. Good or bad, ma'am, we've got to pay the ante.”

“Then—you would not have marked me down for becoming a dancing girl?”

“It might be a fair price for what you want to know. Or it might not. I reckon I won't judge.”

The cook came in with Falk's meal, beaming. “Yeh, old-timer he back. Yeh. You ketchum vest buttons, Falk. Ketchum tight.” And he retreated to his domain.

Something in that by-play interested the girl. A word or a gesture or a fleeting expression can overturn a lifetime's belief. She came closer, voice dropping. "My name is Maryse Bridger."

Falk raised his face from the meal. "I'm obliged. It's a good name. Was a Bridger in the Gulch not long ago. They got him."

Her whole countenance changed. "That was my father! That's why I'm here. I'm going to find out who killed him!"

Falk nodded. "I'd sort of thought I saw somethin' in your face. Ma'am, he was a square gentleman, one of the last in town. Used to be our magistrate—in the days when we had one. But they got him."

"Why?"

"Oh, he struck a rich vein and the ring wanted it."

"The ring will pay, Mr. Falk," she said, dropping to a monotone. "It will pay me."

"It's been four months ago. Hard to locate the guilty party now. Anything you could use to pin it on a particular person?"

She hesitated. Even in the short day she had been here the rumor of Falk's bargain with the ring had reached her. It was inevitable; men seldom had his name off their tongues. She heard of his strength, she saw visible evidences of it. She heard of his weaknesses, though none of them appeared in his face. So he was to her what he was to all the rest—an enigma.

"I will find the man," said she. "There's one scrap of evidence. I am the only one to know of it, the only one who might identify it."

Falk nodded, not venturing to press further. He understood the doubt she harbored. And though he was a man who rode rough-shod over his own hopes and unfulfilled desires—a man who had schooled himself in misfortune and hardened himself against ever wishing a normal life—he had a small stirring impulse of regret as he looked at her. She was a fair girl. She had courage. Falk's glance rose imperceptibly. The coffee cup in his hand poised. "Ma'am," he said in a small, sing-song voice, "take that lamp on my right and put it near the door. Easy, now, and don't look surprised. On my other side, ma'am. That's right."

She obeyed, coolly, cleaning the counter as she moved. "What is it?"

"I never put myself in front of a light," Falk said.

She saw Falk then as few men ever saw him: on that borderland that divided the stolid townsman from the killer. There was an edge to his words, a congealing of his facial lines—and the fire danced far down, far within. He drank the last of his coffee, paid his bill and slipped from the stool. "I wish

you luck,” he observed gravely. He spoke with an exaggerated slowness. He moved in the same manner, as if to excite no suspicion. She saw, or thought she saw, wistfulness in his final glance; and the memory of it stuck to her like a thistle after he had gone. “I won’t ask you to take my word for anything ma’am, but I will ask you not to take any other man’s. Don’t move near that door! You might stop a bullet. And if you should hear shootin’ in the next fifteen minutes don’t come outside. A man fresh dead is a bad sight.”

He slipped into the kitchen. She heard the Chinese murmuring to him and she heard the back door slam. Somebody ran across the sidewalk in front of the restaurant. A swift, rising oath slapped across the night.

Why should I trust him? Maryse Bridger wondered.

He was going out to fight, to kill or be killed. The legends men told about him came rushing back to her. Once she had overheard her father—when he was back home from his mining ventures—saying that he never understood how so slow a man escaped being killed. “Why should I trust him?” she repeated aloud. But if he were slow he would some day meet his death. Suddenly she felt physically cold and a little heartsick. Despite all the legends and all the tales, he was brave. The door opened and in slouched the man she had heard called the Duke. His eyes burned with a strange brilliance against his pallid skin. His nose twitched as from protesting nerves. He said, “A cup of coffee. Black. An’ move that light back—back so it won’t shine through the window!”

Falk dropped from the rear of the restaurant straight down to the gulch side and traced his way through an alley. He came out by the Cup of Cheer and directly between a pair of whispering men who fell silent and crept off. The buzzards were out, waiting for the kill. He saw them lined along the sidewalks. Even the music in the saloons had stopped, even the boisterous uproar had subsided. The town knew. Falk raised and lowered his arms as if to collect and warn his muscles. The stranger slipped into momentary sight by the restaurant, faced the other way; all day he had been patient and a patient man was dangerous. Falk advanced to the middle of the street and sent his challenge along the interval.

“Turn around, stranger. I shoot nobody in the back.”

The man whipped about with widespread arms. He took two mincing steps forward and thus left the glow of the restaurant.

“Were you lookin’ for me?” Falk asked.

“I reckon.”

“Hold your fire,” Falk advised, “till you get close enough. I won’t shoot till you cross the last lane o’ light.”

“I’ve heard o’ your style an’ your favors—but I don’t need ’em, Falk.”

Falk waited. The stranger traversed the yellow path that streamed from the Cup of Cheer. Falk marked him well in the instant and all that he saw was but a repetition of what had gone before. They looked the same, they acted the same. The stamp of death never varied. And, while he waited, his mind ran back along the corridor of time to recall the others who had died in front of him. No single twenty-foot space of this narrow, short street but what bore the stain of some man’s blood. They came from all parts of the country, like moths attracted to a flame—and they rested together now up on Boot Hill.

“I ain’t lookin’ for you, stranger. There’s time yet to draw off. That fever you got is better quenched some other way. Life is mighty fine an’ sleep comes soon enough.”

“I heard you was fast,” the stranger muttered, obscured, yet advancing. “I hone to know how fast. I made a long trip to find out.”

“It’s a long trip ahead,” Falk warned. There were men on the sidewalks close enough to see him and it appeared to them that he grew into the shadows, to be enveloped by their protective mantle. Such is the power of legend and such are the tricks of a strained eyesight. The stranger’s breath came in one great gust.

“Let’s have it out!”

And the watching miners heard Falk murmur softly, “By God, it’s too bad.” Then they lost sight of him. There was a soft padding of men on tiptoe in the dust, a rising of breath and that street seemed to sway and pull apart and roll like the sea. They saw Falk again in a dim patch of light just as the guns spoke. Twice. Each crackling, crashing echo followed into the other, the rose-purple jets appearing no more than a yard apart. Somebody fell with a weird and gagging breath—such a sound as to brand the memory of it upon the listener to eternity. But it was not Falk. He still stood in that dim patch of light, one shoulder thrown forward, his gun pointing into space. A wisp of powder curled back and his face was faintly silhouetted, as bleak and immovable as some age-old rock in the hills.

It was over. Falk’s arm fell. He walked straight on, into the Lost Bonanza. They made a lane for him. The barkeep pushed bottle and glass toward him. Falk drank and slid the bottle away. He swept them at a glance, the temper sleeping beneath his brows. Niger Duluth was in front of him and at the first clash of eyes Niger looked like a whipped mongrel. Falk turned

and strode out. One of the miners looked at his watch and shook his head in a kind of grim amusement. It was ten to the dot, the hour Falk invariably appeared in the Lost Bonanza to take his pony of rye. For him the duties of his office were over until the following morning.

Not twenty minutes beyond the hour, three men met in the alley beside the Lost Bonanza and challenged each other with a password. They wore bandannas, yet no kind of concealment could disguise their voices. It was Niger Duluth who broke through the silence.

“Well, that didn’t work.”

The Duke’s reply was a kind of suppressed fury. “No more beatin’ around the bush, Niger. I’ll do this myself.”

They waited for the third one to speak. He took his time, the while shifting his position. “No, that ain’t the way. You’re fast, Duke, but you can’t match him. Yeah, I know you could try to ketch him in the back. But try is all. No man livin’ can pull down Neal Falk. He wasn’t borned to be shot in a face-to-face fight.”

“That’s what you say, Tipstone,” the Duke growled. “But I’m about worked to a point—”

“Which is sure death, Duke. Falk calls it a fever. He’d ought to know, havin’ cured plenty of them kind of fevers. You bide your time. They’s a better way.”

“Let’s have it,” Niger Duluth said. “He knows too much an’ he’s got me on his score sheet. Won’t do.”

“Here,” Tipstone replied. “The town’s against him. We’ve sowed plenty o’ seed, ain’t we? Well, that seed is sproutin’. He’s got ’em all cowed, but they’re a-mutterin’. All they need is a push in the right direction. Supposin’ I go to Colonel Latourette on the quiet an’ suggest he an’ I start a secret committee. He don’t nowise suspect my connections. Let him pick his own men to make up the committee. Then—”

“Post Neal Falk’s name,” Niger finished. “He rides out or he’s lynched. That’s a good idea, Tipstone. You fog over to Latourette’s right away. He’s feelin’ hostile to Falk. Talk smooth to the old gent.”

The Duke remained uneasy. Something bit him. “Hear him say the driver’s murderer would be dead before the week was done? What does he know, huh? By God, that man ain’t human! What does he know—he can’t see through a board wall in the middle o’ the night, can he?”

“I wouldn’t bet no money against it,” Niger Duluth answered. “You boys happen to know where he went this afternoon? Down to Hangman’s Ford.”

The news made Tipstone squirm. “Sooner we settle this the better. The situation is ripe. If we don’t hit sudden he’ll wipe us out. Niger, you sure you got everything well cached?”

“Sure. Well, let’s sift. I don’t feel safe as I used to. That damn Falk sorta shoots a man’s nerves. It’s how he wins his fights. The other fellow is licked before the guns go off. Imagine—me feelin’ like that! Time to settle it.”

“Supposin’ this committee don’t settle Falk?” the Duke asked. “Then what?”

“Then,” Duluth said with a sudden accession of fury, “I’ll call out every man I can command and we’ll start shootin’. An’ we’ll keep shootin’ till Falk drops. Now mosey.”

They separated, each taking a different path. Tipstone, the most cautious of the trio by nature—and doubly so because of the star he wore—hesitated some time before leaving the alley. He went on past the Lost Bonanza, his tall and lank figure passing across the bar of light. He flanked the stable and a row of shanties sitting forlorn and suggestive at the street end. The last building was his destination. A light burned in it. The door stood open. Tipstone elected to circle and knock at a rear window. Latourette came to it, raising the sash.

“Colonel, close your front door and pull the shades. It’s important.”

The colonel complied. Tipstone crawled through the window and lowered it. He took off his hat and drew close to the colonel’s desk. And for an hour they talked, Tipstone leading the conversation on and on. But he had less missionary work to perform than he supposed. Latourette’s mind already dwelt on the same idea. The reformer’s zeal in him had been fired by the fiasco at the lodge hall and by the death of the stage driver.

“How many men should we bring into this committee?” Latourette asked.

“The more the better,” Tipstone replied. “Enough to represent the sense of the Gulch, Colonel. As to the particular ones, I’ll let you name ’em. Of course, I can suggest some I think fit an’ honest.”

“Let’s draw the list. We’ll get in touch with them quietly and hold a meeting somewhere up on the hill.”

“The law must run,” Tipstone said, shrewdly echoing the colonel’s own sentiment.

“It will,” was the colonel’s dry and rasping response. “No man is above it. I saw the box kicked from beneath Slade and I heard him scream. It was his last breath. There are ways of cleaning the stable.”

At the end of the hour Tipstone left the colonel's office by the front door. He was careful to reconnoiter the dark angles of the street with a minute scrutiny. He saw nobody. And he also noted, with a kind of grim satisfaction, that a light burned in Neal Falk's shanty farther along. Very quietly he dropped into the Lost Bonanza and went about his secret chore.

But Falk was not in the shanty. He had stood no more than ten yards from the colonel's office during the interview. And he still stood there when certain designated men walked singly and furtively out of the street and up the slope of the Gulch. Thereupon he left his post and returned to the shanty. On the verge of entering he paused at the sound of a woman's voice. Maryse Bridger happened to be coming from the restaurant. Beside her walked Niger Duluth. And both of them were laughing.

Falk went in and turned out the light. Sometime in the early hours of the morning he heard his door give to a pressure. He sat bolt upright, gun rising. There was no more sound and he slept again. At daylight, when he opened the door, he found a square piece of cardboard hanging by a string to the knob. It said:

"8 hours to leave or the forfeiture of your life. V. C."

CHAPTER 4

I ain't a imaginative man. But that day it sorta seemed like the sky was pressin' down. It was hard to breathe. Nobody went to the diggin's—why work on a Roman holiday? Men drank heavy, they was a knifin' scrape in the Blue Bucket. They buried the stage driver an' I never saw men uglier-minded than after the earth was shoveled over the kid's box. It sorta grew—you know, like wind whippin' up a fire in pitch pine. Oh, they knew Falk wouldn't run! He'd stay an' go under fightin'. He did stay an' though I live to be as old as these here hills I won't forget the sight of him standin' before that crowd. By God! The pillars o' Discovery Gulch was rotten an' ready to fall. He put his big arms around 'em an' brought 'em thunderin' down:—Four-Finger Blackie.

Falk took the sign inside and sat on the edge of his bed. The ring had struck at last: struck directly and publicly, abandoning all subterfuges and all

imported gunmen. It made no difference that this Vigilantes' Committee probably was headed by Latourette or that he had possibly picked his own men to back him. Latourette was a reformer immersed in a dream and the ring used him as a decoy. Latourette knew very little of the men of the Gulch and Falk well knew there were as many wolves in that committee as there were lambs. And behind the committee stood the ring, ready to see that the committee's edict was enforced. They were growing bolder, or they were growing desperate.

Both guesses right, Falk concluded.

He rolled a careful cigarette. Bereft of his hat he seemed a different man, milder, better looking. Or perhaps it was that he had not yet stepped into view and draped the professional manner about him. His clipped black hair was inclined to be a little curly and it fell forward on his broad brow.

Evidence, he thought. What more evidence do I need? What good will evidence do me, even if I've got it? To use evidence you've got to have a court and an impartial jury. Such ceased here long ago. No, it's beyond that.

He knew who the members of the ring were; knew every single one of them and most of what they had done. A man with a cataract in one eye had killed the stage driver. That would be the Duke, though nobody would notice the cataract unless they looked closely. And the Duke took care they should not look closely. He knew Tipstone's connection with the ring; he knew who had robbed the last sluice boxes and killed the last two miners. And he knew that all these incidents went to swell the power and the wealth of that one man who sat in the center of the web and issued his orders—Niger Duluth, Niger, the squat dark-faced saloonkeeper whose shape and walk even resembled that of a spider. And right at the present moment, Niger's safe in the Lost Bonanza held the bars taken from the stage and the hacksaw that had cut them into portable sections. So much for the evidence he had.

It did him no good. For Niger had quietly cut him off from all sources of help. Niger's men had voted the court out of existence. They would have voted Falk out of existence as well, save that the marshal had come to be too powerful a figure to touch. All else they had done until he had only the star and the theoretical power. Discovery Gulch was Niger's town to sway, to rob and to profit from. Falk moved through it as a solitary reminder of the decency that once had been. Only the legend surrounding him and the fear of his name and of his guns kept him from going down. And now the pack was on him.

He raised his great shoulders in a kind of fatalistic signal and looked toward the far wall of the room. It was a barren room with a chair, a table

and a bed. Nothing relieved the monotony of the pine boards save one lone picture he had cut from an illustrated magazine. Upon this picture his eyes rested: a picture of a cowboy riding across the prairie, sitting loose and lazy in the saddle. But that cowboy had his head raised toward a sky that was a summer's blue. A single white cloud stood in the heavens like a ship. Sage grew along the land and far off cattle grazed. It seemed to Falk that the cowboy was drawing a deep breath. It seemed the man was glad to be alive and riding free and easy across that smiling expanse where life was but one day gliding into another, where the hot sun dripped over the snow peaks and the stars came out clear and frosty in the fathomless night sky.

Falk's fists gripped tightly together. The wrinkles grew around his eyes and furrowed his forehead. Wistfulness was on his face, a longing for something that might never again be.

That's where I belonged, he thought. I shouldn't ever have left it. That's what I sold for a mess o' pottage. So-long, cowboy.

Eight hours to leave. They knew he wouldn't leave. He couldn't leave. This thing had passed that point. Long ago he had ceased to be just a marshal enforcing the peace. That was gone. He was a man fighting for the right to live. He was the single landmark Niger Duluth had yet been unable to pull down.

Falk got up, put on his guns and his hat and faced the door. A harsh impassivity settled across the face that but a moment ago had shown a lonely fragment of human emotion. He opened the door and passed into the street.

With his presence, Discovery Gulch came to life.

He went into the Lost Bonanza. There was a man at the seat he always occupied. One of the ring. But as he looked at the fellow, all the latter's sullen and desperate resolution vanished and he vacated the chair. Falk went through the morning's ceremony, walked out and went to the restaurant.

As he stepped inside he saw that Maryse Bridger had something to tell him. There was another customer at the counter; Falk ate his coffee and doughnuts silently. When the man went out, Maryse Bridger bent toward Falk with a flash of triumph in her eyes.

"I've found the man who killed my father!"

"How?"

Overnight she seemed to have lost her doubts regarding him. "I know! On his birthday I sent him a set of cuff links with two small diamonds in them. He wrote back and told me he had put them on his cuffs. That letter was dated the very day of his death. And when all his belongings were sent

to us every valuable piece of jewelry, including the cuff links, was gone. Last night, I found those links on a man of this town.”

Falk nodded. “A man, maybe, who had dressed well and put on his finery to keep an appointment with you? I can see why you wanted to dance in the Lost Bonanza.”

The girl moved away from him. There was no reason, as far as he could see, why her face should change so swiftly and so startlingly. The color went out of it and a kind of cold despair settled down. She spoke as from a great distance. “I will never ask you to believe me to be any better than I appeared to you then.”

The man shook his head. “What does it matter, ma’am? I reckon I’ve already said we pay a price for everything we get. It’s only a question of buyin’ cheap—or sometimes gettin’ stung on a bargain. Who’s to know? Who’s to judge?”

“I paid nothing, Mr. Falk. I was not that desperate, even though I seemed so. I—”

“Let it ride. Now that you know the gentleman, what’s left?”

She came closer. All the fire was out of her. “I had thought to kill him. I can’t. I wish I’d never found out who he was. I am going home.”

“Nobody can be very bad if it ain’t in their blood,” Falk said gently. “You ain’t cut out for the Gulch or for the ways of the Gulch. As for Niger Duluth—”

She started. A hand rose. “How—”

“As for Niger Duluth,” Falk went on evenly, “the day may see him dead. There’s a law of averages, ma’am. He’s lived away past his time. So have I. The clock ticks on and somewhere in this world there’s always a better man.”

The color came back to her face. “Mr. Falk—Neal Falk—I have heard men saying things this morning. There is something in the wind. I think—I think you’re in trouble. What could stop you from leaving the Gulch? Is there anything here to stay for?”

He thought that over a long while, staring out into the bright sun along the street. “Pride. Every man stands to his profession, I guess. I stand to mine—gunfightin’.”

“You are not that!” cried the girl, suddenly angry. “Whatever else you may be, you are not a killer! Why should you let this evil town and all the evil men in it make a sacrifice of you?”

“Who’s to care?” Neal Falk asked.

She had no answer for that. But after he reached the door he turned back and found her looking queerly at him. Queerly. And though he might read the heart of a man to the very core, he had no keys by which he could unlock the meaning of that straight and clear glance. So he met it for a grave, lengthening moment. She was above this town, above him, yet he walked out of the place unsteadied, stung by desires that he knew would never be realized.

He saw the Duke sliding into the Lost Bonanza. There seemed to be pickets on either end of the street. Four-Finger Blackie hobbled along the boards with a bright and bitter face. Falk looked straight on, but as he passed Blackie he murmured:

“Go north of town to the first shed. Wait.”

Colonel Latourette came out of the Cup of Cheer and refused to recognize him. Falk paced the walk to its very end and swung back. The pack had not yet found its voice. But they were drinking hard and all they needed was a leader. It was ten-thirty, time for him to disappear. He returned to his shanty and closed the door. Once more he raised the trap door and, after a close inspection, dropped through. He followed around the flimsy underpinning until he reached the trail that shot into daylight. He saw a pair of miners—Duluth’s henchmen—up above in the street, but the sudden rise of the gulch and the excavated earth hid him as he took the trail around the ledge and thus put himself beyond the town. Presently he left the trail and dropped into the hollow. Blackie crouched in the lean-to. Blackie had burned his bridges behind him.

“I’ll stand or fall with you, Marshal. Just say what I’m to do.”

“I’m obliged, Blackie. But it ain’t gunplay. I want you to get drunk, Blackie. Drunk enough to wobble, but not too drunk to lose sense.”

“Hell, gimme somethin’ hard to do.”

Neal Falk held a pouch in his hand. He tilted it upward and the free gold fell out—dust, pea-sized kernels, slugs the size of a thumb-nail. That was Falk’s wealth, gleanings out of two years in a mining camp. He dropped it back in the sack and drew the string. He passed it to Blackie.

“Take that back to town. Drink a little, one saloon to another. And when the time comes, Blackie—when they close on me—you go to the Lost Bonanza and spill this over the bar. Understand?”

“So far—no farther,” Blackie grunted.

“Then tell them, all of them and any of them who ain’t yappin’ at my heels, that this poke of dust came from Indian Creek. No more than that. Then shut up like you’d bitten your tongue.”

“All right. But I tell you, Falk, I can play a better part. I can swap a slug an’ die like a gentleman.”

Falk shook his head. And Blackie marveled how even now, with all that came along on the narrowing hours, the temper slept so serenely in the big man. Falk gave no sign—none save one small twining note of wistfulness. Blackie heard it and cleared his throat. Falk’s arm dropped on his shoulder. “You’ll never play a better part, Blackie. By that sack of dust Discovery Gulch falls. The honest men and the leeches will swarm out and this festerin’ sore will dry up.”

“Not before they have their holiday,” Blackie warned. “It’s none o’ my business, Marshal, but they’ve took the one weapon that’ll level you. It’s their holiday.”

Falk turned. “I’ll give it to them, Blackie. One more victim before the curtain comes down. One—maybe more than one.” He slid over the gulch side and retraced his way to the shanty. They still had the end of the street picketed, and after he got to his room he heard men’s boot heels dragging across the sidewalk at regular intervals. Measured from daylight, his eight-hour grace was drawing to a close.

Still, he sat there on the edge of his bed, his great shoulders bowed a little and a cigarette smoldering in his stubby fingers—a grim, hulking presence swayed and lashed by queer memories that rose out of his past—the night he had ridden through a stampede on the Flying Bell; a dance at a schoolhouse where Uncle Ike Finch’s violin played the hours through; Maryse Bridger. Casually, he rolled another cigarette and studied the picture of the cowboy. There was a sweet land, a land he never should have left.

Suddenly there came a light drumming of knuckles on his door. Before he answered the portal swung open and shut. Maryse Bridger stood before him, one hand rising to her throat.

“Neal Falk, you must get out of here! They’ve thrown a rope over a rafter in the stable! They’re ready to come after you!”

Falk nodded his head. “They won’t have to come far, ma’am. I’ll be where they can find me.”

“Why do you stay?” the girl demanded, the words breaking in her throat. “Is it worth your life? There’s the whole world to ride into, and only this evil Gulch to put behind. Haven’t you served your time?”

“Pride,” Falk murmured. “The kind of pride that kills fools, I guess. Niger Duluth has tried two years to whip me. The game’s got harder an’ harder, but he ain’t never yet turned up the winning card. Well, nobody can ever say I didn’t stick to the finish. I’ll play it out.”

He rose and went beside her. "You don't belong here, ma'am. If I was you I'd ride the next stage out. And I'm just askin' a favor. You'll hear a lot about me, most of it bad. Don't take another man's word."

"You don't have to ask that favor," said Maryse Bridger. "I have already judged you. I know."

He opened the door. Together they crossed the street to the restaurant, and there he left her, himself turning away quickly. The girl murmured, "Take care, Neal Falk."

He walked toward the Lost Bonanza with his head bent a trifle. Yet he saw the guards drawing in from the street ends and he saw how swiftly the saloons emptied to the telegraphic message of his presence abroad. He shouldered by them, giving them no more attention than he would have given a pack of stray dogs. Nor did they oppose his progress, though he overheard a low ground-swell of comment behind. They were waiting for a signal. The Duke slipped across the street and disappeared into the Lost Bonanza. Colonel Latourette showed himself a moment and vanished. Four-Finger Blackie came staggering from the Blue Bucket, singing out to the four corners of the town.

"Lemme be, lemme be! Dam't, I got to get my hawsses! Don't none o' you tin-eared coyotes try to foller me, neither. Don't try it. What I know is my own business!" And he passed into the Lost Bonanza.

Falk reached the stable and paused. They were ready for him, well enough. The rope swung from a rafter, a keg stood beneath it. Someone moved into the shadows, whispering sibilantly. There was a brittle snapping of words and when he swung about he saw men marching irregularly toward him, silent and dogged. Almost immediately he was hemmed in. Boots dragged across the stable flooring. He stepped aside until his back was against the wall of the building. Niger Duluth came ploughing through the crowd, face all aflame.

"Your time's up, Falk. Pass over the guns."

Falk raised his arm. "Stay where you are; Niger. Don't come any closer."

"Don't buck us," Duluth warned, slowing his pace. "You ain't dealin' with some raw gent. The Gulch has passed its verdict. Your time's up."

"Stay where you are, Niger," Falk repeated. His shoulders swayed slightly and the saloon man stopped dead in his tracks.

"Give up your guns!" Duluth roared. "If I raise my hand you'll get fifty slugs in your body!"

"You know my policy," Falk said. "Nobody touches my pieces while I live."

“Make way. Let me pass.” Colonel Latourette forced himself through the circle and angrily faced Duluth. “What are you doing here, sir? What’s all this about?”

“You ought to know,” Duluth said. “He hangs, don’t he?”

Latourette pulled a watch from his vest pocket and thrust it under Duluth’s nose. “He’s got fifteen minutes in which to exercise his option, Mr. Duluth. Give way.”

“Give way, hell! What difference does fifteen minutes make? You don’t suppose we’d let him escape, anyhow, do you?”

“This is not your business, Duluth,” Latourette warned. “The organization will deal with this man. Don’t interfere.”

“Go back to your playthings,” Duluth scoffed. “I’m expressin’ the sentiment o’ this Gulch.”

“By Gad this will be done fairly! Sheriff Tipstone, step out here!”

Tipstone squeezed his way through the packed ranks. He stared at Latourette out of his gaunt and bony features. He looked about him. He met Niger’s sardonic glance for a fleeting moment. And then he shook his head. “Falk’s got to die, Latourette. It’s right. What difference does fifteen minutes make?”

Latourette’s little body grew rigid and his cold eyes tallied the crowd. “I will not permit myself to witness plain mob law. Gentlemen, stand by me. All those who believe in giving Marshal Falk his allotted time step to the front.”

The crowd swayed and shifted, a rumble of excited protest running along the semicircle. “Are you going to allow Niger Duluth—a known and notorious character—to influence you!” cried the colonel.

“You have played the part of a cat’s-paw, Colonel,” Falk drawled. “Didn’t you know, when you allowed Tipstone to talk you into this mess last night, that he belonged to Duluth, body an’ soul?”

“I will see you burn in hell for that,” Tipstone said, just above a whisper. He ducked his head. Latourette spun around, was caught by ungentle hands, and disappeared in the fringes of the crowd. The sheriff edged nearer Duluth. The Duke likewise crept up, and thus the three of them stood shoulder to shoulder. Uneasiness pervaded the circle. It was slowly forced nearer Falk by pressure from the rear. Those men along the outer rim were growing impatient and began to challenge Duluth to be on with the job; but the front row of miners struggled against the tide, for they were directly facing Falk and they knew that when Falk’s guns rose from his holsters some of them would die.

Duluth turned and swore at them. “Take it easy. We’ll skin this skunk!” Once more he raised his hand to Falk.

“Give up your guns, Falk. I’m countin’ ten and when I reach the last number up goes my hand. Give up your guns.”

Falk shook his head slowly. His shoulders seemed to expand, and as he stood there the crowd saw that gray, grim cast settle upon his face—the mask of battle. A hush came over them, the silence of men fascinated. It was always so when Falk was before their eyes. Drama touched his least move. He was a figure, he was an issue. All that they knew about him, his uncanny knowledge, the oppressive power of his presence, conspired to keep them at a distance. And now that the showdown had come and they were assembled to see him die, more than one was chilled by the stolid, immovable courage he displayed. He had made them walk humbly in his presence for two years, and the habit was not easily broken.

He stepped away from the wall, arms loose.

“Some of you boys are honest. Some are as crooked as these three renegades right in front of me. Well, if you’re bent on your last Roman holiday I guess you’ve got to have it. The Gulch is dyin’, and maybe I’ll die with it. But as long as I live, no man will touch my guns. If you want ’em you’ll have to take ’em. And that little act will cost six lives. Niger, you fall first—an’ Duke an’ Tipstone will lay across you. That’ll be the price of your holiday, boys. All right, Niger, start countin’.”

“Back me up, boys,” Duluth muttered.

“Oh, hell, get it over with!” the Duke ripped out. “I’ve had enough of this grandstand! Get it over with!”

“Start countin’,” Falk droned.

Niger’s mouth moved slowly along the numbers. Behind him, the fringe of the semicircle began to shift and break away. There was a sudden and brittle whispering. Men, retreating by slow steps, broke into a run, passing into the Lost Bonanza. And presently they ducked out again. A soft phrase broke along the ranks, “Indian Creek—rotten yaller!”

“Six,” Niger mumbled, and turned with a querulous protest. “What’s bitin’ you gents? Hold steady!”

Then it broke with all the force of a tornado. “Indian Creek! Four-Finger Blackie’s spilled it in his drunk!”

“Seven!” shouted Niger Duluth, wetting his lips. “Hold steady!”

But the crowd milled and stampeded and broke in a hundred fragments. The hint of a new strike touched them with a greater force than the killing of

a man. Incredibly swift was their dispersal. To honest man and to leech alike came that fevered vision of riches. Discovery Gulch was about played out and for months the camp had been ready to dissolve. Always did the hint of a new find sway them thus; always were men ready to race away to stake beside a new Discovery. Many a pot had been left simmering over a fire and many a bucket, half up the windlass, been left to fall back as they followed some new whisper over the hills and down the gulches. A new lure, a new hope of wealth—it cut across every normal occupation, drained towns and left machinery to rust. And to all camps that had reached barren days, such as this one, it spelled doom. They never came back.

Four-Finger Blackie was in the street, crying futilely, “Where’s my hawsses! It ain’t so—I never found no pay streak! Damn a man, where’s my hawsses.” He went spinning to the dust, knocked there by the racing miners. Horses galloped south, out of town. A rig swept past, with men vainly trying to catch on. The mill whistle, high on the slope, began to shriek, maintaining its steady blast for a good five minutes. And then it seemed as if the man operating it had discovered he too was overlooking his chance for wealth, because it stopped abruptly. Miners afoot breasted the current, cursing thickly as they were elbowed and struck. Fanette Duval made a lane through them, whipping her horse to a dead gallop.

Niger Duluth had forgotten to count. He turned from side to side, watching this onrushing stream. He stared at the Duke and muttered something to Tipstone. Tipstone shook his head angrily, but Niger walked toward the Lost Bonanza and presently disappeared. Then the Duke withdrew and left Tipstone alone to face Falk. The latter stood silent, somberly witnessing the exodus. And before the dust had settled, they were gone and Discovery Gulch was only a shell, another scar on the green gulch side, another flimsy monument to the transitory works of man.

Tipstone stood rooted in his tracks, a gaunt and angular figure. He seemed to compress himself, to gather himself. And presently, at one sweeping motion of his arm, he snatched at his Stetson and sent it sailing far away, the sun striking his iron-shot hair.

“Well, Falk, I reckon I’m the only one left to pay the bill.”

Falk seemed plunged deep in a study. He pulled himself from it with a kind of effort.

“I could have liked you, Tipstone, barring the fact you threw in with Duluth. Go on—it ain’t too late. I don’t want you. I want no man but Duluth.”

Tipstone's thin lips curled upward. "I'm too old to change my tricks, Falk. I believe I can beat you to the draw. By God, I want your hide!"

"Many another man's wanted it," Falk murmured. "Take warnin', Tipstone. That fever ends on Boot Hill. I don't want to kill you. It's a big world. We won't be rubbin' elbows again. This town needs only one more sacrifice, and that's Niger Duluth."

"I'll chip in with him," Tipstone gritted. "Reach for it!"

At that moment the sun sank below the rim, leaving the street in shadows. And it seemed a prophecy that those shadows fell heaviest on Tipstone as his body weaved and rose. Balls of dust puffed up beneath stepping feet. White teeth flashed and there was a sharp blast of breathing. Then a single shot's echo careened down the desolated street. Falk was a rigid figure, standing above the sheriff. Thus he stood a moment while Four-Finger Blackie, crouched by the Lost Bonanza, yelled a warning.

"Watch it—watch it!"

The Duke and Niger Duluth appeared simultaneously on the street. The Duke came from the Lost Bonanza. Niger appeared a few doors farther removed. Both were firing as they came. Neal Falk walked out to the middle of the street and stepped forward, pacing slowly. The Duke fired wildly, a kind of frenzy overwhelming him. Each crashing echo beat over a flood of words, such words as a man might harbor through many months, until they were saturated and envenomed with hatred. So he weaved along the sidewalk, his red eyes burning against a pallid, unnatural skin, while Falk cruised forward. There was a sharp and solitary reply, and the Duke fell.

Niger Duluth had stopped firing during the Duke's fusillade. Now he raised his gun, giving ground. Falk spoke to him.

"Your time's come, Niger. Better stand an' take aim."

"Come and get me!" Duluth taunted. "You know how I shoot."

"I never underrated you, Niger," Falk called. "But the chapter don't close till one of us goes down. I reckon you'll be wearin' Old Man Bridger's cuff links, won't you, Niger?"

"None of your business!" Duluth snarled, still retreating.

"I'm makin' it so, Niger," was Falk's tuneless answer. "It was a mistake, Niger."

"Come an' get me!" Duluth screeched.

"You bet."

Four-Finger Blackie moved away from the sidewalk and watched. Duluth had reached the end of the town and was drawing Falk on over the

rise of land. Presently both were lost to sight. Four-Finger Blackie started in pursuit. At the restaurant door he found Maryse Bridger crouched against the sill, staring out toward that rise of land. She wailed, "If Neal is killed—"

"If he's killed," Blackie broke in, "I'm ambushin' Duluth an' shootin' him in the back. Woman, I'd go to hell for Neal Falk!"

"If he is—"

Twin explosions over the hill; explosions reaching out against the canyon walls and reverberating back. The girl cringed. Blackie muttered a blasphemy and looked toward the evening sky.

"Them shots is a last salute," he said. "Discovery Gulch is done. Done. Done. Damn, my eyesight is sure gettin' poor, ma'am. Who's 'at comin' back?"

"Neal!"

"Then I believe in Providence," Blackie sighed. He straightened. "I think I'll go get me drunk tonight. Free liquor."

Falk trudged along the street. His shoulders were sagging and they saw the great weariness in his face. But as he looked to the girl, there was a flame in his eyes. "It's over. Now I can resign in honor. Thank God."

"They'll come back," Blackie grumbled. "When they discover Indian Creek ain't got no gold."

"They'll never come back, gold or no gold," Falk replied. "They never do. But there is gold in Indian Creek, Blackie. That's where the dust came from—in that poke I gave you."

Blackie jerked up his head. "An' you give it away?"

"I'm going back to cow country, Blackie," Falk said. "Do a chore for me. Go tell the Jessamine super he'll find the stage money in the Lost Bonanza safe."

Blackie turned on his heels. A yard away, he stopped. "I'd like to ask—how do you know that?"

But Neal Falk held his professional secrets to the very last. He only shook his head. The girl's arm touched him. "Come inside, Neal, while I get you a meal."

Blackie started for the Jessamine, but tarried in the deserted Lost Bonanza. And it was considerably along in the evening when he stumbled into the street to find a rig rolling out of the stable and a horse saddled and tied behind. The girl was up in the rig, bundled against the cold night wind. Falk held the reins.

"Now where?" Blackie demanded.

“We’re pullin’ out, Blackie,” said Falk. “Out for the prairie. It’s ten miles to James’s settlement.”

“Never comin’ back?”

“Never. God bless you, Blackie. What’s up your sleeve?”

“Oh,” said Blackie, “I’ll stay here. I got the whole town to myself, with ninety beds to sleep in. Reckon it’s home.” He stared at the girl. “Make him a good wife, ma’am. He’s got one comin’ to him.”

“So-long.”

Blackie stepped back and watched them go. There wasn’t a smile on Neal Falk’s face. A man can’t erase the somberness of two years overnight. But it seemed to Blackie that Falk’s countenance was more serene than he had ever seen it. His last picture was of Falk looking at the girl and of the girl sitting straight and proud beside him. And then they were gone and the squeal of the buggy wheels faded in the shadows. A coyote cried up on the slope, whereat Blackie shook his head. Damned lonesome in an empty town.

“Well, I got somethin’ to remember in my old age,” he said out loud, and turned back to the Lost Bonanza. “Good-by, fella. Now I’m goin’ to get good an’ drunk.”

So he passed into the saloon, limping a little, carrying the legend of Neal Falk in his breast. That legend permeates the gutted relic of Discovery Gulch today—while far down in the prairie country, an ex-marshal rides the boundary lines of his range.

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 *Grim Canyon* by Ernest Haycox]