

**A Black Horse Western**

**Marvin Kayne**  
**TORNADO TRAIL**



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# TORNADO TRAIL

By

**John Russell Fearn**

Writing under the pseudonym *Marvin Kayne*.

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## ONE

Rod Cameron was feeling pretty pleased with himself. In two short hours, instead of the normal week he had expected it would take—and which anticipation he had passed on to his friends—he had completed one of the biggest cattle deals in some time. Five thousand head to be sold for the Little Pinnacle Trading Company, for which he was the representative. That would bring a grin of satisfaction to Bill Hawkins, his boss—and, come to think of it, the girlfriend would be pretty proud of him too.

‘Yeah—nice going,’ he complimented himself, as he jogged his horse along the trail in the evening sunlight. ‘When Bill Hawkins engaged you, feller, he did himself a good turn, and you set yourself in line for sizeable commissions, too . . .’

Out of sheer good spirits he started singing, his heavy and rather unmusical baritone losing itself on the desert wastes. Here, on the fifty-mile trail between Little Pinnacle and the city of Bartonville, where he had just completed his business, he was alone. But it was an aloneness which he appreciated. A sense of loneliness was never with him when he had the mesa, the distant mountains, the smell of the fresh, warm wind, and his faithful sorrel for company.

Just the same, Rod Cameron was a little tired. Fifty miles in the burning Arizona sun, with only occasional halts at a water hole, was no picnic. He carried his fatigue well, however, riding straight and taut in the saddle, brown hands slackly holding the reins, his deep blue eyes glancing about him as he rode. Always, no matter where, he was ever alert for a sign of trouble. Outlaws were abroad, as they nearly always were in these lawless regions—and at any moment his life might depend upon his quickness of sight and the speed with which he could draw his .45s. There was Tim Fancourt, for instance. He had been wandering up and down the territory for some time now. His unlovely features covered three-quarters of every reward-dodger on posts and building walls within a hundred mile radius. \$10,000 the authorities were offering for his capture, dead or alive.

But there was no sign of Tim Fancourt—or anybody else. The landscape remained undisturbed as Rod rode along, the sun westering slowly, stabbing monstrous javelins of salmon-coloured light into the gathering twilight mist.

The sun had altogether set when Rod at last rode into the little and somewhat ramshackle township of Little Pinnacle. He came in from the southern trail, as usual, the track from the desert—and also as usual he expected to see the kerosene lamps gleaming in the main street, or the windows glowing as the folks spent their evening in recreation. He also expected to see Bill Cranshaw’s Dancing Lady saloon ablaze with brilliance, and hear the raucous din from within it . . .

But there was nothing. Not a sound. Not a soul in sight.

Frowning to himself, Rod rode his sorrel half-way down the main street before he drew to a halt and sat looking about him in wonder. The silence in the midst of the western afterglow was almost frightening. It was as though everybody had vanished from the face of the earth.

‘What goes on, Frisky?’ he questioned the horse. ‘Queerest set-up I’ve struck in some time. Where the heck’s everybody vamoosed to, anyways?’

Everywhere he looked there was silence. Not a human being appeared to be in the entire town. It was ghostly, unreal, as though it had never contained a living being. Except for the fact that it was in good shape—with its general stores, livery stable, hotel, saloon, and church,

and the usual scattering of offices—it reminded him of a ghost town he had once seen left in the wake of a gold rush. The desolation was exactly identical, only it was an orderly desolation . . . but still inexplicable just the same.

‘Hey, there!’ he yelled suddenly, cupping his mouth with his big hands. ‘Hey! Everybody dead?’

There was no response. Rod frowned the harder and pushed his dusty black Stetson up on his forehead.

‘If this don’t beat everything!’ he ejaculated. ‘A town of a thousand inhabitants becomin’ deserted overnight! Why, when I left it yesterday mornin’ it couldn’t have been busier.’

Completely baffled he descended from his sorrel and led him across the street to the deserted Dancing Lady. Tying the reins to the hitch rail, he strode up the three steps and through the batwings. Just beyond them he stood staring into deep gloom, but what light there was filtering through the windows revealed an even more surprising sight than the deserted street outside. In here everything was untidy and uncleared. There were half-filled beer and spirit glasses still on the tables. There were playing cards put down in the middle of a hand. On the edge of several of the tables cigarettes had burned down to the stubs and merged into the paint.

To Rod Cameron it was beyond everything. He went over to the three oil lamps depending from the central ceiling beam and lighted one of them. The glow from it only served to pick out the mystery in greater detail than before.

‘Queerest thing I ever struck,’ Rod muttered, dropping the flaming match from his fingers and crushing his heel on to it. ‘Looks like the lamps haven’t been lit tonight at all. Everybody just went—but for Pete’s sake, why?’

In the dim light he walked across to the bar, reached over to the bottles immediately behind it and dragged forth one filled with whiskey. Pouring himself a drink, he drained the glass and then grinned to himself. The notion of walking into an empty but well loaded saloon and taking from it what he wanted rather appealed to him. It was enjoyable in one sense—but profoundly disturbing in another. A thousand people, happily domiciled in Little Pinnacle, or at one or another of the ranches just outside it, could not just vanish as though at the touch of a magician’s wand. The business did not make sense—even less so to a man of Rod’s hard, matter-of-fact commonsense. The more he considered the more it looked as though folks had just left whatever they had been doing and run out of town—and for that there had to be a mighty good reason. So, as he stood and poured himself another drink in the deepening dark. Rod tried to imagine what that reason could possibly have been.

‘News of a gold strike?’ he asked himself, and shook his head dubiously. ‘Not very possible. I guess all the strikes in this region have been played out long ago . . . Mebbe a band of outlaws—? Nope—that’s worse still, feller. The toughest outlaws on earth couldn’t capture or scare away nigh on a thousand people so’s they never came back.’

How baffling the problem was he was only just commencing to understand, and with it there was a certain heartache. Valerie Shane, the girl whom he was planning to marry (her father ran the prosperous Silver-9 ranch half-a-mile distant on the southward trail) might have disappeared as well. If so, that would be tough to bear.

‘Damned silly!’ Rod declared at last, and slammed the hard-bottomed glass down on the counter. ‘There’s got to be a reason for this, and the sooner I find out what it is the better . . . I’d best water Frisky and then start lookin’ around. I’m liable to go loco wanderin’ round an empty town with nothing but a horde of memories.’

He strode outside again into the starlit street, led his sorrel to the drinking-trough a little farther down the vista, and there tied him. Then, drawing one gun in case of any sudden emergency, he began a thorough examination, starting with the general stores. Here, by striking matches, he discovered that a parcel lay half wrapped on the counter, and somebody had left her handbag behind; whilst in the living quarters of the place a meal was uncleared with the plates still half full of food and the cups three-quarters filled with cold coffee.

So it was everywhere Rod went—the same signs of the people concerned having left in a violent hurry. But the reason? The *reason*?

He came out into the night air again, completely beaten, but with the decision to take another line of enquiry. He would ride out to the Silver-9 ranch and see if Val or her father were there. They might have some information. So he crossed the street to his sorrel and prepared to mount—then he paused, listening.

Distinctly on the still night air there was the sound of fast-approaching horses' hoofs, apparently coming from the southward trail which he himself had followed earlier. His eyes lighted at the thought of meeting somebody at last who could perhaps clear up the mystery . . . then another thought took possession of him. What guarantee was there that the oncoming riders would be friends? As he had reminded himself earlier, there were outlaws abroad, and Tim Fancourt, the stage robber, in particular.

The thought had hardly crossed Rod's mind before he had backed his sorrel into the deep shadow of the saloon, in the little alley-way which ran up the side of it. Here he remained motionless, his eyes and ears intent. It was not long before the horsemen became faintly visible to him, approaching up the main street and slowing their advance as they moved. In all there were about six of them.

Rod's eyes narrowed as he peered at them, and he congratulated himself on his precaution. These men were not friends: in fact the very opposite. Each one, he could vaguely see, was wearing a kerchief mask up to his eyes, and in each free hand a revolver was glinting.

'Okay, boys,' one of them said finally, after a look around him, 'it looks like these suckers vamoosed all right, just as we figured. Better get movin' while we can. No tellin' how soon they might have a mind to come back.'

The horsemen advanced again, and Rod crept to the corner of the alley-way to keep them in sight. Knowing the town as intimately as he did, he could tell at which building the men had stopped. It was the Little Pinnacle General Bank.

'Couldn't expect a bunch of owl-hooters to stop any place else, I reckon,' Rod breathed to himself. 'An' unless my memory's goin' back on me there's something like fifty thousand in gold dust lodged in that place, waiting for the men from Bartonville to come and collect it . . . unless these polecats get it first.'

For a few seconds he stood thinking, and then arrived at a decision. He tied his sorrel securely to one of the saloon's side props, withdrew his other gun from its holster, and then crept silently into the main street. Keeping to the boardwalk, and well in the shadow of the veranda overhead, he moved along until he was dead opposite the bank. Here three of the men were on their horses, mounting guard: the other three had presumably gone into the building to get busy.

Three to one, even if he had the initial advantage, was a bit too much to Rod's way of thinking—so he moved on again up the street for a considerable distance, crossed it silently, and so came to the same side as the bank. Advancing, again, he detoured down a side alley

and came out again at the rear of the bank. There should be an office window somewhere here

There was. He snapped open the sash catch with his penknife blade, raised the lower frame, silently, and dropped into the dark office beyond. Creeping across it—knowing from past visits here exactly where the entrance was—he felt for the door knob, turned it, and peered out into the main area of the bank. There was a light at the far end of it, plainly from an oil lamp. Somehow, perhaps by duplicate keys or else by deliberate forcing with tools, the three gunmen had opened the rather antiquated strong-room grille, and were now busy sorting out their booty.

Rod settled his .45s more firmly in his hands and crept across the area, past the pay-counters, until he was within five yards of the busily working men. Then he levelled his guns.

‘Reach!’ he commanded. ‘And no sounds, any of you!’

Utterly startled, the masked men swung round and glared at him; but they did not obey. Their hands flashed to their holsters, but not so quickly that Rod did not fire first. Having no time to take aim, however, his shots went wide—then something sailed through the air and caught him a heavy blow in the face. He reeled and crashed over on his back, but he did not release the hold on his guns. From his fallen position he fired them furiously at stumbling figures as they blundered to the main doorway—and were gone.

By the time he had got on his feet there was the thunder of hoofs rapidly dying away. He looked about him, rubbing his face, then he hurried over to where one of the men had dropped his still lighted lamp. Picking it up he swung it around him, and smiled to himself.

It had been a fairly large-sized bag of heavy gold dust which had struck him. Six others lay scattered around the open safe, and probably comprised the entire amount. In their desperate efforts to escape, and not knowing how many men were perhaps behind Rod, the gunmen had gone without their prize.

‘Which makes it a good thing *everybody* didn’t scam out of town,’ Rod murmured. ‘Though I still can’t figger out why . . . Anyways, mebbe they’ll pin a medal on me for saving the gold dust.’

Keeping one of his guns handy on the floor beside him for sudden emergencies, he began the task of loading the bags and other valuables back into the big safe. He had half completed the job and had four more bags of gold dust to return to safety when a slight sound behind him made him reach for his gun—but his fingers never touched it.

‘Leave it alone, Cameron,’ a man’s cold voice ordered, ‘’less you want a bullet through you . . . Keep your hands up and git on your feet.’

Rod rose slowly and stood gazing blankly at not one man but many—and women, too. They had gathered in a half circle, dimly silhouetted against the bank’s glass doors and windows. The reflecting light from the lamp on the floor cast on to their grim faces.

‘Sheriff Turner, eh?’ Rod asked, with a smile. ‘Well, I’m glad to see you again—an’ the rest of you folks. I thought the earth had swallowed you up or somethin’. What gives around here, anyroad?’

‘Reckon we might ask you the same question, Cameron,’ the sheriff responded grimly.

‘Huh? You—you mean what am *I* doing? Matter of fact I’m doin’ your job for you. Six gunmen just did their best to clean out this bank’s gold dust deposit. I upset their plans and started to put the dust back—then you came in.’

‘Yeah?’ The sheriff uttered the one word. It was full of menacing disbelief. Rod’s expression changed and he looked from one face to the other sharply.

‘Now, look here, folks, just a minute! You’re surely not thinkin’ that I’m trying to rob the bank, are you? You know me better’n that.’

‘We always thought we did,’ Sheriff Turner commented. ‘But when we sneaked in by the broken office window we saw you takin’ the gold bags out of the safe, not puttin’ ’em in.’

‘That was only so’s I could find the best way to fit ’em,’ Rod protested.

‘We saw the light of your lamp from the street,’ Turner added. ‘Wasn’t very careful of you. Ted Manners back there found your horse all set for a trip—provisions an’ everythin’—tied to the wall of the saloon. Seems to add up, feller.’

‘Like hell it adds up!’ Rod exploded. ‘I’ve just come *in* to town. I’ve been over to Bartonville to fix a cattle deal—most of you knew I was going!’

‘Yeah, sure—but you told us you didn’t expect to be back before the day after tomorrow—or even a week mebbe. How come yore back this quick?’

‘I got finished quickly. Ask Mr Hawkins. He knows what I went for.’

The sheriff glanced at the men and women around him. They looked back at him and said nothing—but there was something in their expressions which Rod found it hard to understand.

‘Hawkins isn’t here right now,’ Turner said. ‘We’re the advance guard.’

‘Advance guard of what?’ Rod demanded. ‘For Pete’s sake, man, why don’t you tell me what’s goin’ on?’ I found the town empty—

‘You found it empty ’cos you planned it that way, Cameron. No gettin’ behind the evidence of one’s eyes, I reckon. There ain’t no outlaws around here that we’ve seen anyways. But there is you—an’ a cracked safe an’ a busted window and door. What kind of mugs do you take us for?’

Silence, and within Rod a realization of the way things were building up against him. He spoke steadily enough even though he longed to make a furious outburst.

‘Naturally you didn’t see the gangsters: they headed towards the south. If you think I’ve been tryin’ to steal this gold dust you—’

‘Listen, Cameron,’ the sheriff interrupted, ‘there have been plenty of thefts in this town during the brief time we’ve been away—little thefts, sure; valuables that wouldn’t mean anythin’ in the ordinary way, but for sentiment’s sake, the folks is mighty sour about ’em. Next we come back into town an’ find you robbin’ the bank. You can talk all you like, but there’s only one way which we can figger it. You’d best come along with me. Later, we’ll see what the court has to say.’

Rod Cameron’s expression was fixed, stony, yet there was in it something of the profound amazement he felt, not only that the folks in the town should be so ready to believe the worst of him, but that they should hint so vaguely at the mysterious something which had driven them all clean away.

‘Move!’ Turner ordered jerking his head and holding his gun. ‘I don’t want to have t’use this on you, feller.’

Rod looked about him on the faces. He recognized many of them in the dim light—but they were all unfriendly. The two who really might be able to help him, Bill Hawkins or Valerie Shane, were absent.

His hands slightly raised, Rod walked across the dim space to the bank doors, the sheriff right behind him. Then Rod turned.

‘My horse is over there at the saloon: at least give me the chance to bed him down for the night.’

‘Where’d that be?’ Turner enquired. ‘You stay in a room at the hotel, usually, don’t you?’



‘Yeah. I use the town’s livery stable for the horse.’

‘Okay. I’ll see it’s looked after. Right now you’re not goin’ any place ’cept jail. Come on—git!’

Rod had no alternative, and as he walked along the boardwalk he felt his guns taken from him. They reached the sheriff’s office presently and Turner opened the door with one hand and motioned inside with the barrel of his gun. In three minutes Rod was in the little adobe jail at the back of the office, the heavily barred door being locked upon him.

‘Nice reward, this, for stopping a gang of outlaws from stealing gold dust,’ he growled in the gloom.

‘That’s your story, Cameron. I work it out differently—an’ so do most others, I reckon. You’ll have your chance to say your piece, in court.’

With that Turner moved away and Rod was left to his own bitter speculations. Not that they got him anywhere. Finally he threw himself down on the hard bunk, locked his hands behind his head and set himself to think. On the one hand he was worried about his own predicament, for looked at logically he could see just how the situation seemed; whilst on the other he was mystified by the emptiness of the town upon his arrival and then the strange return of some of the population. He thought once of asking the sheriff what had happened; then decided against it. Turner was in no mood to talk, and perhaps the least said the better in case the sheriff twisted certain statements in a guiltwise direction.

Finally Rod fell asleep, and it was daylight when he awoke. Turner’s deputy, a ferret-eyed man who never spoke a word more than he could help, brought a breakfast of sorts. Rod was glad of it since it was the first meal he had had in some sixteen hours. By the time he had got to the end of it he had a visitor—a slim girl with dark hair and violet eyes. The moment she appeared beyond the bars of the door Rod was on his feet eagerly.

‘Val!’ He hurried forward and grasped her hands between the bars. ‘Thank heaven to find somebody who can perhaps tell me something sensible . . . What on earth’s bin goin’ on around these parts?’

She did not answer the question: instead she said seriously, ‘You seem to have been getting yourself into a load of trouble too, Rod. The whole town is talking about you—not very pleasantly either. What on earth possessed you to try and rob the bank?’

‘I didn’t! For the love of Pete, Val, you know me better than that, surely?’

‘Of course!’ She smiled at him reassuringly. ‘But it was certainly a shock to me when I heard the news upon coming back into town with the rest of the folks this morning. I came here straight away and Mr Turner’s deputy said I could talk to you if I wanted. What really happened?’

Rod explained matters in detail and then finished:

‘And that’s the absolute truth, Val, and I’m relying on you to believe it, even though I can’t prove it. I’m willing to swear on a stack of Bibles that it was Tim Fancourt and some of his boys who tried to pull that job last night . . . Forgettin’ that for the moment, though, why did all you folks vanish as you did? What caused it?’

‘A supposed twister—a tornado,’ the girl answered. ‘As you know they happen around this district now and again.’

‘Uh-huh, sure they do.’ Rod looked at her wonderingly. ‘But the last one was three years ago, an’ I certainly saw no signs of one during my travels.’

‘Early yesterday evening, maybe a couple of hours before sundown, two men rode in from the southward trail. They were saddle tramps, strangers. They stayed long enough for quick

drinks in the Dancing Lady and warned us that a twister was on its way in our direction. They were riding from it fast as they could go and warned us to do the same. When somebody said there was no sign of it they told us the mountain hid it from view . . . Since there seemed no sense in doubting them, and also because a real twister could have smashed this town and everything in it to matchwood, we all got out at top speed, leaving things just as they were. We took shelter in the mountain foothill caves and waited for the storm.'

'Which, of course, didn't happen?' Rod asked grimly.

'No. Then Mr Turner and some of the others said it was beginning to look as though those *hombres* had fooled us—either as a joke, or else for a far more sinister purpose. Those men who ran the bank said there was a lot of gold dust in it—and from that things seemed to tie up. Mr Turner and several others rode back into town, and you know the rest.'

'Yes, don't I?' Rod's face was grim. 'And it's a simple enough explanation now we have it. Those two saddle-tramps were obviously a couple of Tim Fancourt's men, and he chose that neat way of emptying the town for enough time for him to rob the bank. And he'd have done it, but for me. But instead of getting any credit for it I finish up as the supposed robber myself.'

'You can't altogether blame the folks suspecting you,' the girl said seriously. 'It could just as easily have been you who sent those men here, and since you returned to town long before you said you would it looks even more suspicious.'

'I can soon settle that by proving that I went on business to Bartonville . . .' Rod paused and shook his dark head dubiously. 'Come to think on it, it won't prove anything. I could have gotten through my normal business and returned just the same. In fact, taking it all round, I seem to be in one large-sized spot. What about my boss, Mr Hawkins? Seen him around?'

The girl gave him a grave look from her violet eyes.

'Nothing the matter with him, is there?' Rod demanded. 'There just hasn't got to be! He's the one man who can prove he sent me to Rockville. Otherwise there's only my word for it. The firm in Rockville can prove I was there, of course, but without Mr Hawkins saying his piece that trip might be considered just a cover up on my behalf—Val!' Rod gripped the girl's arm between the bars. 'Has anything happened to him?'

'I'm afraid it has, Rod. He wasn't a young man, as you know. We all had to do some pretty frantic scrambling to get out of the valley and it's a good hard ride to the mountain foothills. He . . .' Val hesitated, then finished quietly, 'He had a heart attack when we got there. It finished him. Some of the folks will be bringing him back into town for the funeral later on.'

'The old Hawk dead,' Rod whispered, clenching a fist.

He did not speak again for a moment or two, and the girl waited patiently; then she said:

'Surely, Rod, it will be considered enough evidence that you went on business for Mr Hawkins——'

'Not without his confirmation,' Rod interrupted. 'That deal was for cattle, some five thousand head of 'em. It's well known that Mr Hawkins hadn't anything like that number of steers on his spread. The fact remains he had them somewheres, ready to sell, and the fact also remains that he was an honest man. Were he alive to explain in court I don't doubt he'd do it—but as it is, see how it looks! I go and negotiate a deal for five thousand head of cattle where five thousand don't exist—visibly. If that doesn't make me look like a private rustler, with no evidence forthcomin' to the contrary, I don't know what does . . . Gosh, am I in a spot now!'

'Time you wus movin' on, Miss Shane,' the sheriff's deputy commented sourly from the end of the passage.

Val glanced back towards him and nodded. ‘All right, I’m coming——’ She gripped Rod’s hand. ‘Don’t let it get you down, Rod,’ she pleaded. ‘I’ll tell dad all about it, and between us we might be able to do something. You can rely on us saying everything we can in court to help you . . . Now I’ve got to be going.’

Rod kissed her between the bars and then watched her go up the short passage and vanish from view. Grim-faced, he fingered his unshaven chin, frowned, and then began to absently roll himself a cigarette.

## TWO

The following day, the evidence against him ranged and complete, Rod found himself hauled off to the town's small courtroom and, there, Judge Barlock presiding, his case was tried. Throughout the long, hot day there was argument and counter argument. Rod's own lawyer, Cal Winters—whom Val's father had engaged specially for the task—did everything he could with the evidence and witnesses at his disposal to swing the balance. But, though supposed to be impartial, the men and women forming the jury had themselves suffered robbery at the hands of the outlaws, whom they firmly believed had been Rod himself and maybe a secret band of men, and in consequence they forgot all about his clean record in the town and brought in a verdict of guilty.

'That's how it is, Cameron,' Judge Barlock said, with his usual lack of formality. 'You have not brought forth one shred of evidence to corroborate your various statements—except that you have proved you went to Bartonville and transacted business there. The matter of five thousand head of cattle doesn't enter into this case, but it does bias what chance you might have had of proving yourself innocent, an' claiming that Mr Hawkins might have spoken for you, doesn't do much good now with Mr Hawkins waitin' to be put under the ground . . .'

The judge paused, peering over his steel-rimmed glasses in a diagonal shaft of sunlight. 'Anythin' to say?' he asked.

Rod shook his head. 'If I had it would only be misconstrued. No use me asking you to remember that I've always been a straight citizen and have the town's interests at heart.'

'No use at all. We figger you've bin a cattle thief on the sly for long enough—those cattle you went to deal with provin' it, even if it was in Mr Hawkins' name—an' we also figger you planned to get us out of town by spreading that alarm about the tornado being on its way. You knew there was gold dust in the bank because most everybody in town knew it. So you planned the smart way to get it.'

'There was nothing to prevent some of Tim Fancourt's men knowing of that gold,' Rod retorted. 'They could easily have been passing through, on the look-out for what they could find, and mebbe heard about it when they were in the saloon some time.'

'Mebbe,' Judge Barlock assented; 'only we don't think Fancourt had anything to do with this. That's your story, and we're not hankerin' after believing it . . . So, by virtue of the authority vested in me as a judge of this township of Little Pinnacle, I sentence you to three years in the State Penitentiary—the maximum sentence I'm allowed to give for attempted gold robbery and suspected cattle-stealing. If you'd actually gotten away with that gold dust you'd have been jailed for fifteen years. All right—take him away!'

Rod opened his mouth to speak, shut it again, and then found himself seized from behind by the sheriff and his deputy. For just a moment he stood looking over the courtroom at the moving, shifting, people. Most of them were looking sourly satisfied, casting contemptuous glances in his direction. Only from Val Shane and her grey-bearded father, in the middle distance, did he behold any expression of sympathy—nor did he have any chance to acknowledge it before he was dragged away and out of the court by a rear door.

'The sentence is pretty stiff, Cameron,' the sheriff said as he and his deputy marched Rod along the boardwalk, a gun trained on him in case he tried to make a break for it. 'I'm not sure

—as a man—that I agree with it. I'm not even sayin' that I think yore guilty, but I've my duty to do, and so has Judge Barlock. But he's a hard 'un, and always has bin.'

'I'm not squawkin',' Rod retorted. 'One of these days, even if I have to serve three years before I can get around again, I'm going out on the prod for that louse Tim Fancourt and beat the truth out of him.'

'That's up to you,' Turner said indifferently. 'Right now my only interest is to keep you where I can find you until the men come over from Rockville to pick you up, ready for transfer to the pen. That'll be in the mornin', I expect.'

Rod said nothing, filled as he was with nebulous schemes for trying to effect an escape. He was prepared to try almost anything. He felt convinced that if only he could have even twelve hours of freedom he would be able to make big strides towards finding Tim Fancourt and making him confess the truth. But to scheme to escape and to actually do it were two very different things. Sheriff Turner was a rigid stickler for justice, and any effort at bribing him would be useless. In this direction his deputy was an even less likely proposition—acid, uncompromising, never particularly sorry to see somebody in a mess.

The only other way of escape—to make a dash for it whilst he was yet outside of prison—was also useless. Turner was a dead shot, and before he would let a prisoner escape him and so ruin his own renowned reputation he'd shoot to kill and explain afterwards. And be justified. As sheriff, he had the privilege of shooting down any man in his custody who tried to break away.

So Rod's speculations and plans had got him no further by the time he was back in the jail again. Moodily he sat down on the bunk, rolled and lighted a cigarette, and gave himself to the task of trying to conceive some new and original way of gaining liberty, however brief.

He was not alone in his efforts to find a way of getting free, however. Back at the Silver-9 ranch, to which she had returned with her father the moment the trial had ended, Val Shane was pacing thoughtfully up and down the big living-room, watched by her father as he sat smoking a black cheroot and wondering what his daughter was going to do next. He was never sure of her. She had his own proclivity for plunging into the unexpected and taking hair-raising risks. Though it alarmed him in the girl, he had to remember sometimes that only his own audacity, as a younger man, had been the reason for his great progress as a rancher—which had finally made him one of the wealthiest men in the district.

Of course, it was all right for a man to take risks—to pit his muscles and brain against another man or team of men; but it was different for a pretty girl of twenty-five. If she got any hare-brained notions about helping Rod Cameron now he had been convicted by the law she must be made to—

'I'm going to get Rod out of that jail, dad, if it's the last thing I do!' Val came to an end of her pacing and stopped at the big table in the centre of the room. She leaned on it, so her knuckles showed white, her violet eyes fixed intently on her father.

'Don't see what you can do, gal,' he responded, trying not to sound uneasy.

'The old straight-forward thing, of course!' Val straightened up and spread her hands casually. 'No monkey tricks, like trying to pass him a file in a farewell cake or something . . . I mean walk straight into the sheriff's office and stick a gun in the ribs of whoever's there—be it the sheriff himself or that nasty looking deputy of his. At the wrong end of a gun neither of them will be able to refuse my request for Rod's cell door to be opened.'

Grant Shane got to his feet, his cheroot smouldering in the midst of his grey beard. He was a big man, heavy shouldered, ruggedly good-looking, but all his size did not seem to count for

much before the defiant pose of the girl in front of him.

‘Now, look-ee here, Val——’

The girl cut her father short. ‘I know what you’re going to say, dad—that I mustn’t do any such thing. Save your breath. My mind’s made up.’

‘But, dang it gal, Rod’s bin convicted by law! You can’t fight the law. If you do you’ll wind up in jail yourself for obstructing justice, or aidin’ a criminal—or something. I know how you feel about young Rod—that he’s been hog-tied by circumstantial evidence, and I agree with you; but it’s not for you to go mixin’ yourself up in it.’

‘Why isn’t it? I’m going to marry him, am I not?—either soon or late. In prison or out of it.’

‘That isn’t rightly the point——’

‘I think it is, dad!’ Val’s round but firm chin had set in a way her mother’s had used to, before a fever had killed her—and it had always meant that she was implacably determined to have her own way. Grant Shane could never handle an obstinate woman—and he knew it.

‘You do that, Val,’ he said grimly, ‘and you’ll be classed as an outlaw—and that’ll mean that every man or woman who has a gun will have the right to shoot you down wherever they see you! Dang it all, gal, do you think I’d let you run yourself into a mess like that?’

‘Not willingly, dad, I know,’ Val smiled. ‘But in this case you’ve no say in it: I’m acting on my own initiative. I’ll enjoy every minute of it, too,’ she added, reflecting.

‘Enjoy it! Enjoy it! You just don’t know what it means to be on the run, otherwise you wouldn’t talk so crazy.’

‘But I’ll be doing something!’ Val clenched her small fists. ‘And that’s the point! I can’t sit here in luxury, doing as I like, killing time, pampered and cared for by you and your money, whilst Rod is railroaded to the Penitentiary for three years. It just isn’t in me to do it!’

Grant Shane had the foggy notion that his past was catching up on him somewhere. He had made statements like this himself, thirty years earlier—and carried them out, too.

‘I like your courage, gal, but just the same——’

‘Listen, dad!’ Val broke into his sentence and he stood looking at her dubiously. ‘Let’s go back a few years. Imagine a time when you had just met mother. Imagine that you were intending to marry her shortly and then knew she was going to be sent to prison for three years for a crime she’d never committed. Would you sit around and let the law take its course?’

Grant Shane shook his grey head. ‘Nope, I guess not. But I’m a man and that makes a whale of a lot of difference.’

‘Not to me it doesn’t. The only difference between a man and a woman out here is the clothes they wear. They both fight the same injustices, the same merciless climate, the same bands of lawless owl-hooters. Pants can change me into a man for all practical purposes—and that’s just what they’re going to do!’

The girl pivoted on her heel and went from the room. Her father looked after her and scratched the back of his neck. Then he raised one eyebrow and gave a half grin.

‘Dang it, the gal’s got good stuff in her,’ he muttered. ‘Reckon she oughta have too with me for her father—an’ the spirit of her mother, bless her . . .’

He returned to his chair by the window and smoked stolidly at his cheroot, trying meanwhile to devise some strategy which would change his daughter’s view—even though he knew at the back of his mind it was a hopeless quest. Then presently he glanced up as Val returned into the room. She had changed from her normal frock into riding trousers, check

shirt, scarlet kerchief, and starred half-boots with high heels. About her waist was a gun belt and a holster carrying a heavy-looking, plated .38.

‘Surely, Val, you ain’t aimin’ to try and get Rod out of jail now?’ her father demanded, staring. ‘In broad daylight? Be risky enough at night, but——’

‘No, not that.’ Val reached up her hands and tied a scarlet bandeau about her thick black hair. ‘I’m going out to rub up on my shooting practice. I used to be pretty good: it’s time I made sure of my aim. If things get too hot for me I want to be certain I can aim straight.’

Grant Shane jumped up again and hurried across the room. He caught the girl by her slim shoulders as she was about to depart.

‘Listen, Val, fun’s fun,’ he said seriously, ‘but I just can’t let you do this. If you succeed you’ll be hunted as much as Rod will. I’ll never have an easy moment—and neither will you.’

‘I’ll be with Rod, and he’ll take care of me—when I can’t take care of myself.’ Val’s violet eyes were perfectly serious. ‘I’m going through with it, dad. Rod needs a break to prove his innocence and I’d be disloyal to him if I didn’t take every risk to give him that chance . . . Anyway, I haven’t gone yet. I’ll be back for lunch.’

Then she was gone from the room and crossed the hall. Grant Shane gave a sigh and knew he had lost a battle. He became doubly sure of it as throughout the day Val clung unswervingly to her intention, spending most of the daylight hours practising with her .38. Then at nightfall she took her own small pinto from the stables, saddled and provisioned it, and hit the leather for the trail which led to town. With her she took her father’s profound good wishes and stern disapproval—but she fancied he was smiling secretly just the same.

Little Pinnacle was about at the height of its evening business when she arrived in the main street—the evening business being mostly centred in the Dancing Lady. Here there was probably more trading done over beer glasses than in the normal way, a fact of which Val was well aware, for it meant that the street was mainly clear of men and women—and all the stores being closed there was not likely to be any interference from there either.

As quickly as she could she branched off the high street into a side turning, which presently brought her to the back of the sheriff’s office and the small strong brick jail attached to it. As she rode within a few yards of the window which belonged to Rod’s cell, she wondered for a moment whether to stop there, and give him some warning as to her intentions—then she shook her head to herself. There was a chance that the sheriff, or his deputy—whichever was on guard at this hour—might be within earshot and hear something. Once forewarned her simple but direct strategy would fall to bits—so she clung to her original plan, dismounting from her pinto at the side of the sheriff’s office and fastening the animal in the alley way.

She glanced about her and then crept to the corner which gave her a view of the main street. It was not entirely deserted, but those few men and women who were visible were quite a distance away and unlikely to prove any hindrance. So in three swift movements she mounted to the boardwalk and, her gun drawn in readiness, knocked sharply on the closed door of the sheriff’s office. That there was somebody within was evident by the glow behind the drapes at the front window.

Her first knockings had no effect—so she tried again. Then from behind the door came a gruff voice—that of the sheriff himself, she realised.

‘Well? Who is it?’ Evidently Turner was not taking any chances.

‘It’s Val Shane,’ the girl said quickly. ‘I’ve got to see you, sheriff. It’s most important ——’

‘How important? It can wait till mornin’, can’t it?’

‘That’s just what it can’t do. I’ve got some new evidence concerning Rod Cameron. You’ve got to let me in and hear what it is. Tomorrow may be too late.’

‘Well—all right,’ Turner assented grudgingly, and the door opened. Val waited, then hid her gun as she caught the momentary gleam of light on Turner’s own weapon. If she attacked now she would definitely get the worst of it. Better to bide her time.

‘I wouldn’t have come at this hour only it means so much,’ she explained, stepping into the dim entrance way.

‘OK. Come into the office.’

Val went ahead of the sheriff and into the glow of the oil light coming from the lamp perched on his roll-top. On the blotter were the signs of a meal—a half-consumed sandwich and a steaming metal jug of coffee. Turner came into the area of the lamp, his hat pushed up on his head, his revolver still in his hand. Val looked at it and gave a nervous smile.

‘What’s that for?’ she asked uneasily. ‘I’m not a criminal, am I?’

‘You might ha’ bin,’ Turner answered. ‘I don’t trust folks who come a-knockin’ on the door at this time o’ night, specially when I’ve a man in custody. Sit down, Miss Shane,’ he added, and heeled a chair towards her.

The girl did so and Turner remained standing, his eyes passing down her riding kit and coming back to her empty holster. Her gun was behind her, and without any apparent movement she sat on it and brought her empty hands to the front to place them in her lap. Turner watched her, his cold grey eyes alert, his gun still in his hand though not levelled.

‘Bit queer, travellin’ without a gun,’ he said.

Val glanced down at her holster and then started. She looked up again with that same nervous little smile.

‘Silly of me! I came without it. I often do that—don’t like guns, really. They scare me. And I wish you’d put that one of yours away. I don’t like it pointing at me.’

‘Sorry, but if it’s all the same t’you I’ll keep it right where it is. I have it handy all the time in case anybody tries any funny business with Rod Cameron. Now, what’s this evidence you got?’

‘Well—dad’s captured Tim Fancourt,’ Val said calmly; and the sheriff gave a start.

‘He’s what? Captured that outlaw? Himself?’

‘That’s right—and what’s more he’s made him admit that it was he who did the bank robbery last night—or rather tried to—and not Rod. The best thing you can do is come back with me to the spread right away and see Fancourt for yourself.’

‘All right, I will—but first I’ll have to get my deputy. He’ll probably be in the Dancing Lady. I can’t leave here, so you’d better go an’ find him if you can and tell him to skip here pronto.’

Val nodded. ‘Leave it to me. First, though, do you mind if I have a drink of that coffee? I’ve had a thirsty ride getting here and the dust’s in my throat.’

‘Help yuhself.’

Val reached out to the coffee jug with its steaming contents—then she raised it upwards and outwards and threw the liquid clean into Turner’s face. He wasn’t burned but he was certainly taken off guard. He spluttered and gasped and swore—then by the time he had blinked his eyes into vision again he found himself looking into the girl’s plated .38, her violet eyes calm and resolute as they studied him.



‘Sorry, sheriff,’ she said quietly, snatching his wavering gun from him and emptying his other holster. ‘I like you quite well as a man and I don’t intend to hurt you—but I do intend to free Rod Cameron. I had to stall with that story of mine while I weighed up what I was going to do. Get your keys and open Rod’s cell door.’

‘Like hell I will!’ Turner raved. ‘You gone clean loco, Miss Shane? This is an indictable offence and——’

‘I said I liked you; but I like Rod a whole lot better. To help him I may have to hurt you—unless you see reason. Understand?’

The sheriff glared, wiping the coffee from his face with the back of his hand, but he did not dare bring his hand any lower. The girl was watching him intently and she held the .38 with a menacing steadiness.

‘I mean it, sheriff,’ she said, after a moment or two.

‘All right—so I get the key,’ he retorted. ‘And I let Cameron outa jail. Then the moment I get the chance I start to chase him—and you, too. The sentence for aidin’ a criminal is a stiff one, Miss Shane, an’ I think you oughta know that.’

‘I do know it. Get your key just the same—and hurry up. I don’t want to hang around here all night.’

Turner knew when it was useless to argue—and it was useless now. With a grim face he picked down a bunch of keys from a green baize on the wall, then led the way out of the office to the back corridor. Val followed him within a few feet, her gun constantly ready. Rod, who had been dozing in his bunk, got up in surprise in the dim light of the corridor oil lamp as he heard the key rattle in the lock.

‘Val!’ he ejaculated, staring at her dim figure. ‘What on earth are you doin’ here?’

‘Getting you out,’ she answered briefly. ‘Come on and let the sheriff take your place. In fact,’ the girl added, as Turner went into the cell and Rod came out, ‘you’d better tie and gag him with the blankets from the bunk. It’ll delay him giving the alarm and give us a chance to get free.’

‘Good idea,’ Rod agreed, and there was nothing the sheriff could do to stop the deed. He finished up on the bunk, securely trussed, and Rod slammed the cell door on him and locked it, taking the keys with him.

‘That takes care of that,’ the girl said, as they hurried through the dim corridor to the office. ‘Now, we’ve got to get out of town as fast as we can.’

‘You’re telling me!’ Rod ejaculated. ‘But look, Val, before we go any further do you realize what you’re getting into? You can drop out right now, if you like and——’

‘I knew I’d make myself an outlaw by doing this and I’m prepared for whatever it involves,’ the girl interrupted. ‘We’ve no more time to talk now: we’ve got to be on our way before somebody happens to catch up on us. I’ve my pinto outside. He’s strong enough to carry both of us.’

‘Good girl.’ Rod took the .38 she thrust into his hand and went in advance of her as they crossed the office. They left the oil lamp burning to give the right appearance to those who passed outside, then they edged silently beyond the door to the boardwalk.

‘All clear,’ Val murmured. ‘My horse is just around the corner there.’

Together they glided along the boardwalk, stepped off it at the alley way, and hurried over to where the pinto was patiently waiting. Rod untied the reins and then asked a question:

‘Any idea where we might go? This has all happened so fast I haven’t had the time to figure anything out. Obviously, we’ve got to get out of town.’

‘Obviously—and our best bet is the mountains. Two reasons for that. One is that it’s the most probable place to get a line on those outlaws, and also nobody is ever likely to find us with so many trails and caves in the mountain face. I’ve loaded the saddle-bags with enough provisions for a week so we’ve nothing to fear on that score . . . now, come on. I get more anxious every moment we’re stuck here.’

Rod nodded, gave the girl back her gun, and then lifted her into the pinto’s saddle. Vaulting up beside her he took the reins, swung the horse’s head round, and set off at a gallop away from the town. With no sounds of pursuit and the emptiness of the great pasture lands expanding ever wider about them, they both began to feel happier, and gradually got round to words again.

‘I don’t see how I’ll ever be able to thank you enough for getting me free like this, Val,’ Rod murmured into her ear as they raced along. ‘It was just the one chance I needed. If I can once lay my hands on one of those outlaws—and Tim Fancourt in particular—I’ll clear my name in a few minutes. And the reward’d come in handy, too, come to think on it.’

‘We’ll find him—somehow,’ the girl said confidently.

‘Meaning you’re in on this with me, to the end?’

‘Just that—and don’t start an argument. I know what I’m doing, and there’s nobody I’d sooner be a fugitive with than you.’

Rod had no response to make to this, but he gripped the girl’s arm tightly for a moment as a measure of his appreciation.

### THREE

Once in the midst of the mighty boulders and escarpments which formed the foothills of the mountain range to the east of Little Pinnacle, the danger lay not so much in pursuit from the sheriff as from a hidden look-out somewhere guarding the hide-out of the gangsters—and for this reason Rod took the horse forward warily on the upward slopes, whilst the girl in front of him had withdrawn her gun from the holster and kept it ready for any sudden emergency.

But nothing happened, perhaps because there was only the starshine to illuminate the way. They were ahead of the moonrise by a couple of hours, which was more than sufficient time for them to find somewhere to pitch camp.

They finally chose one of the dozens of natural caves situated some two hundred feet up the rocky slope. There was room, too, for the pinto at the back of it. Rod's first act was to feed and water him after the heavy load he had been carrying, then from the saddle-bags he took the necessities for a meal for himself and the girl. For drink they had to rely on the raspberry wine she had brought: to light a camp fire in an effort to heat some of the coffee she had also brought would be too great a give-away.

'So far, so good,' the girl said, as they ate their impromptu repast. 'I've been able to think it out this far—and we've accomplished it successfully, but what happens from here on I'll be danged if I know. How do we contact the outlaws, for instance? I don't have to tell you that we might search these mountains for ever, and never find them. Even if we did we'd probably be shot down before we could do anything.'

'Yes,' Rod admitted, 'that thought had also occurred to me.' He was thoughtful for some time, gazing meanwhile out into the night sky with its diadem of stars, visible through the cave opening. Then he said slowly, 'Since it's next to impossible to get at these outlaws in any safety, the only alternative is to make them come to us—or something like it.'

'Sounds simple, but how do you propose doing it?'

'It's a well known fact,' Rod continued, munching his food in between sentences, 'that Tim Fancourt and his boys do a good deal of stage robbery. They've tackled the stage between here and Bartonville many a time, and there isn't any reason to suppose but what they'll go on doing it. Whether there's anything valuable aboard just doesn't seem to matter. They tackle it anyway and rob the passengers or steal the mail if they can't do anything better.'

'So?' Val questioned, drinking some of the raspberry wine.

'These hold-ups invariably occur at Mandrake's Creek, which is about half-way between here and Bartonville.'

'I've been thinking—suppose we planned a hold-up ourselves, took the place of the driver and his ramrod, and then carried on until the outlaws make an appearance farther up the trail at Mandrake's Creek?'

'Yes, but . . .' Val looked puzzled. 'Then what? They'd get the better of us. Only two of us against their loaded guns—and they certainly wouldn't show us much mercy when they realized who we are.'

'Probably not, but their main object in holding up a stage is to rob it, not dispose of us—though I'm not saying they wouldn't try to get rid of us before they were through. Only the way I'm working this thing out they wouldn't get the chance . . .' Rod reached down to the

midst of the food spread on the rough cloth on the cave floor and picked up a small canister. He put it in the girl's hand and she peered at it in the dim light.

'Pepper!' she ejaculated.

'Exactly—and thanks for bringing it along, even if it was only intended to impart a flavour to this canned meat. Don't you see?' Rod went on earnestly. 'We could fix that pepper up in little bags—one each—and keep it concealed in our palms. When we raise our hands before the outlaws' guns, we can still keep the pepper concealed—then at a convenient moment throw it at them. They'll be hopelessly disorganized with that stuff in their eyes. It will give us time to throw a rope around them and take their guns. After that the rest will be easy. We'll use the stage to drag them and their horses back into town, one of us mounting guard over them with guns. Naturally, we'll have the lariats ready on the box-seat beside us. I see you brought a couple with you in the saddle-bags.'

Val was quiet for some moments as she thought the scheme out, then when she spoke her tone was full of approval.

'Yes, it's a nice idea—even though it involves a good deal of risk. We might be shot down by the stage driver and his ramrod, for one thing—or the outlaws might shoot us before our scheme can be put into action. There's another thing, too; there's no guarantee that the outlaws will attack the particular stage we choose to take over. If they don't, what happens?'

'If they don't attack at Mandrake's Creek, their usual spot, we'll abandon the stage a few miles farther on and leave the passengers to figure out things for themselves. One or other of them will drive the crate into town, but that doesn't concern us. I think Tim Fancourt and his boys will attack, though: there is hardly a stage in the last few weeks that has made it through without interference. Sometimes Fancourt's been beaten and sometimes he hasn't. Anyways, that's the plan we'll try and follow.'

'And the next stage is due tomorrow morning, isn't it?—passing Mandrake's Creek round about noon?'

'Correct. Three times a week it makes the trip. So the best thing you and I can do is grab some sleep and be on our way when the daylight comes. It's a tidy distance to the Creek—and it's also a pretty tricky territory around there. The end of the mountain trail before it hits the mesa track clean across country to Bartonville.'

'I know,' the girl said. 'I'm as well acquainted with the geography as you are. And we'd better take it in turns to sleep, hadn't we, in case somebody starts looking for us?'

'Right. I'll take the first look-out. You bed down in the back of the cave there.'

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Sun-up came like the raising of a curtain, during the period when Rod was keeping the last watch. He rolled himself a cigarette, fished a match from his pocket, and sat watching the grandeur sweeping across the sky as he blew smoke into the cool, scented air. Night was swallowed in the departing mists as he surveyed. The peaks of the mountains came out bold and clear against the golden east. The distances awoke to the warm touch of the morning, and the gold of the sky melted swiftly into cobalt blue.

Rod got up, glanced towards the sleeping girl in the back of the cave—she had taken on two watches during the night—then he holstered the .38 which belonged to her and set about the job of preparing a breakfast. This time he could light a campfire without risk and so coffee was on the menu. The rest was simple fare, but sustaining. When everything was ready, Rod went over to the girl and shook her into wakefulness. She joined him at the meal after a wash in the tiny spring gushing just outside the cave.

‘So nothing happened during the night?’ she enquired, settling down.

‘Nothing. And I don’t think the reason’s far to seek, either. Sheriff Turner’s no fool and he must know he doesn’t stand an earthly chance of finding anybody in these mountains. If there were a chance Tim Fancourt and his boys would have been located long ago. Except for the problem of food, I reckon one could hide up here indefinitely.’

‘Uh-huh.’ Val glanced at the revolver in Rod’s holster and said, ‘You’d better keep that. You’re quicker on the draw than I am in an emergency. What about the pepper? Better fix it, hadn’t we?’

‘Done,’ Rod said, and nodded to a corner where there were four small white packages made up with a twist of paper on the top of each. ‘Did them during the night,’ he explained. ‘I’ve checked over everything else, too—including possible snarls in the lariats. Once we’ve had this meal we’re all set to go.’

‘Suits me,’ Val responded. ‘And incidentally, I’ve just been thinking—if we capture these outlaws in the way we intend, doesn’t it occur to you that the passengers in the stage will be witnesses to what we’ve done? That will make things easier than ever for us when we ride into town with the mob all hog-tied. Naturally, at first the passengers will think we’re outlaws, because we’ll hold up the stage—but when we don’t steal anything from them and instead capture the men who intend to steal, we’ll be in a nice position. Couldn’t be anything more calculated to make Sheriff Turner change his mind about you—and me, for helping you.’

‘Yes, it’s a point,’ Rod admitted, reflecting. ‘And it hadn’t occurred to me either. Come on, let’s get this breakfast finished and be on our way. We’ve a tidy distance to travel.’

Some ten minutes later they were ready and the rested pinto more than willing for action. So narrow was the trail at this point near the cave only the girl occupied the saddle, Rod moving on foot and leading the horse beside him. As they moved in the burning sunlight, Rod kept his attention alert for the least sign of a moving figure in the trackless grey wastes of the foothills, relying on the girl to check on anything which he missed.

From their knowledge of the geography both of them knew that this particular trail made its way by many detours to a back foothill trail which, in time, would bring them to Mandrake’s Creek. From the Creek onwards the trail widened slightly, but followed the curve of the mountains for some fifteen miles until it hit the flatlands, which led straight through to Bartonville. The greatest danger lay in the mountain trail, perched some four hundred feet up the side of a gorge, but so far no stage or horseman had been known to plunge over the side to destruction. Both horses and riders were too well trained for that.

Once the narrow path had widened out somewhat, Rod vaulted into the saddle behind the girl and their progress became a little more rapid. With every mile they covered on the plodding, sure-footed horse, the toy town of Little Pinnacle became more remote, until at last they turned a corner and it was hidden from sight. Ahead of them lay the blistering waste of desert, sprawled four hundred feet below, the steepness of the mountainside making it impossible to reach it by any other way except the long, tortuous trail along the barrier itself.

Far to the left, where the mountain range curved round, there loomed one monstrous gash through which the cloudless blue sky showed like a V-shaped segment: Mandrake’s Creek.

‘If we turn off about another mile ahead,’ Rod said, ‘we’ll strike the main stage route about ten miles ahead of the Creek, which is what we want. And it’ll be in the region of noon,’ he added, glancing up at the sun, ‘which is just right for us.’

‘Do you suppose,’ the girl asked, ‘that Fancourt and his boys have their hide-out somewhere in the region of the Creek? Since they invariably seem to strike from around that

region, I imagine they must have.'

'More than likely. Nice cosy spot and pretty nearly unapproachable.'

Just over a mile ahead the mountain trail branched suddenly leftward and took a downward turn. Rod turned the pinto's head and at something approaching a gallop, the animal cantered along the declivity, plainly glad of the opportunity to move more freely without the ever-present danger of the gorge to one side of the path.

At this brisk pace, and always moving downwards, the main stage trail through the mountains was reached some fifteen minutes later, and here Rod dismounted, helping the girl down after him, and then motioning to rock cover.

'Little while to wait yet,' he said, peering up and down the deserted road. 'We'll tie the horse here and then go into action the moment the stage approaches. To make it look extra good, we'd better cover our faces with our kerchiefs.'

Val nodded, her eyes bright with the anticipation of the risks to come and, unfastening her scarlet kerchief, drew it well up over her nose.

'Naturally they'll know I'm a girl,' she said, 'with my hair and figure. So there doesn't seem much point in the disguise. I'm known to have helped you to break jail.'

'Sure—but the outlaws may not know it, and it's them who chiefly concern us.' Rod fastened his kerchief in place in readiness for use as a mask, then he rolled himself a cigarette, lighted it, and settled down to wait. After a moment or two, the girl squatted beside him, her back to the mighty rock which was their cover.

'Queer, isn't it?' she mused. 'The amount of hard work we're having to go through to justify your innocence?'

'Grumbling?' Rod enquired seriously.

'Great heavens, no—I enjoy it. Bigger the risk the more I come to life . . . But just look at all this grandeur—the mountains, the sky, the flowers, the sunlight. I never can fathom why men—or women—have to be so cruel to one another in the midst of such beauty.'

'You can't fathom it Val, because you're just not made that way,' Rod answered, thinking. 'You've a clean mind and a happy disposition: you can't possibly see things as criminals see them. They've no eye for beauty. To them a rock is something to protect them from a bullet; the sunlight is something to be afraid of in case it shows up their evil doings; and the night is the only friend, under the cover of which they can sneak away from the accusing eyes of better folk.'

'Quite poetic,' Val said, with her gentle laugh. 'I never thought a man as ruggedly hewn as you could—'

She broke off and became alert as upon her ears there fell the unmistakable sound of distant hoofbeats. Rod heard it, too, at the same moment, the gentle vibrations carried up-wind and echoed back from the mountain walls.

'The stage!' Rod said abruptly, getting up and holding down his hand. 'Here's where we go into action. Keep well behind me, because you're not armed. Or, better still, keep your hand on your empty holster: that'll disguise the fact that there isn't a gun in it.' He threw away his cigarette and drew up his mask.

The girl did as bid, and she and Rod moved silently from their hiding place to the edge of the stage trail. Rod a little to the front, they stood waiting, Rod with his .38 levelled—and presently the stage, moving at a good speed amid the clink of the bridles and the rattle of the wheels, rounded the bend and came into full view. Immediately, Rod ran forward, noting at the same time that the driver's ramrod was making an effort to pull forth his rifle. The men

were plainly prepared for a hold-up, but not at this particular point, five miles before Mandrake's Creek.

'Hold it!' Rod commanded. 'Move that rifle, feller, and it's the last thing you'll do! Stop the stage—and I mean stop!'

The driver applied the brakes, and with a screech the iron-bound wheels skidded in the gritty trail and halted in a cloud of dust and blazing sunshine. Rod walked forward, the .38 still poised, and Val a yard or so behind him.

'Get down from there,' Rod ordered. 'Both of you! Quick!'

'Unless I miss my guess yore Rod Cameron,' the driver said, scowling under his broad-brimmed hat. 'And the gal with you's Val Shane. I'd know that hair any place. Sorta makes sense of what the sheriff's bin sayin' back in Little Pinnacle.'

'What the sheriff's been sayin' doesn't matter to me,' Rod retorted. 'Get down from that box an' don't try any tricks.'

Both men glanced at each other and then obeyed, clambering down into the dust and keeping their hands raised.

'Take two guns,' Rod said, glancing at the girl. 'Leave them one each with which to defend themselves. They may need it when we've taken over. Put the guns in my belt for the moment.'

Val did as she was told, and a puzzled look crossed the driver's leathery face.

'Look-ee here, Cameron—an' I'm durned sure you are Cameron—what's the idea? This supposed to be a hold-up, or what? If it is there ain't nothin' aboard this stage that'll do you any good. No gold, no mail, no nothin'. 'Cept three passengers we're takin' to Bartonville. Mebbe yore figgerin' on robbin' them?'

'Mebbe.' Rod's eyes travelled to them—three men, all of them well fed and looking in some alarm through the open windows. 'And mebbe not,' Rod finished. 'That's my business. You two can start walking back to Little Pinnacle.'

'What!' the ramrod gasped blankly. 'That's all of twenty-five miles or more——'

'Right,' Rod agreed. 'Sooner you start the better. I'm takin' over the stage from here. I've got uses for it. I'd take you two with me only you mightn't see things the same way as I do. Go on—*git!*'

The men hesitated. Rod waved the .38 menacingly.

'And don't try and draw on me,' he added. 'I've given you the chance to retain a gun each in case outlaws attack you. I'm not an outlaw—in the technical sense; I'm just borrowin' the stage, that's all. Draw while yore within sight of me and I'll let you have it—now carry on.'

More puzzled than anything else, the driver and his ramrod turned and walked away up the trail, still keeping their hands up, as Rod called after them sharply the moment they lowered them. He stood watching them fixedly, his gun still ready.

'Get the lariats and pepper bags from the saddle-bags,' he said to the girl, without looking at her. 'Make sure the horse is tied securely. We'll be back for him later I expect.'

'OK.'

The girl hurried away, and by the time she had returned the driver and his ramrod had disappeared round the bend in the trail. Then suddenly they became visible again—but the sight of Rod still standing, feet a little apart, and gun rock-steady, convinced them. They vanished again, and Rod gave a grim smile behind his kerchief.

'That should settle 'em,' he murmured to the girl. 'Nobody in these parts ever looks back more'n once if the other guy's on his guard. Up you get to the box.'

He gave Val a hand and she vaulted up lithely to the seat from which the stage brakes were controlled. Her hand settled on the rifle beside her and she felt more comfortable at the feel of its hard, cold outlines.

‘Hey you! What the devil’s the idea?’

Rod paused in his upward movement to the driving seat and looked at the florid face poked out of the stage window.

‘Of what?’ he asked calmly.

‘Takin’ over this stage. If yore supposed to be an outlaw why don’t y’behave like one? Rob us, and let us go on our way with the proper driver and ramrod. This sort of game don’t make sense.’

‘It will later,’ Rod said.

‘Not fur me! I’m gettin’ out——’

‘Stay right where you are, brother!’ Rod’s .38 whipped out again from the holster and levelled. ‘That goes for all three of you! I may have need of you later—but I’m not aimin’ to harm or rob any of you, so don’t start worryin’. I’ll only do somethin’ if you try an’ jump the stage. That clear?’

Apparently it was, for the florid-faced man withdrew. Rod gave a slight grin to himself and vaulted up into the seat beside the girl, keeping his gun handy. By glancing downwards and backwards he could soon see if one or other of the passengers tried to jump for it.

‘Don’t think we’ll have much trouble with ’em,’ he said, whipping up the horses into life. ‘They’re strangers around these parts, and for that reason I think they’ll obey orders. We want them as witnesses . . . Get those pepper bags?’

‘Uh-huh.’ Val handed him two. ‘I’ve got mine ready. The moment we see anything ahead that looks like outlaws we fix them ready for action in our palms. That it?’

‘That’s it. What about the lariats?’

‘Right there beside me, but if anybody’s going to use them it’ll be you. I can’t sling a rope to save my life.’

Rod said nothing. His attention was concentrated on his driving. He whipped the team of four horses into greater speed, and soon the stage was rocking and rumbling along the sunny trail in a cloud of dust, taking a gradual eastward curve which in time would bring it to Mandrake’s Creek. Now and again during the shaking, quivering journey there came howls of protest from inside the stage as the indifferent springs probably caused one or other of the passengers to hit the roof violently at times.

Then presently the trail began the long upward climb which led to Mandrake’s Creek itself. It was a narrow acclivity, rising ever higher to one side of the vast gorge which dropped sheer for three hundred feet to naked rock. Rod glanced towards it, only three feet to one side of the trail, and gave the girl an anxious look.

‘To be hoped this stage is in good shape,’ he muttered. ‘To find anything giving way now would have most unpleasant consequences, I reckon.’

Apparently all was in order, however, for though it creaked and the leather harnesses jingled and squeaked, the stage kept on moving, the horses straining and snorting at the effort thrown upon them.

‘Keep your hand glued on that brake, Val,’ Rod instructed, as they climbed ever higher. ‘We’ll be okay once we’re beyond the peak of the rise at Mandrake’s—but if anything gives way before then jam the brakes hard.’

‘You bet I will,’ the girl breathed, looking ahead of her anxiously.



The trail, though, took such a wide, sweeping curve it was impossible to see beyond five hundred yards ahead—then, suddenly, there were men in the track. Four of them, each with a gun in his hands, strung right across the trail.

‘This is it,’ Rod breathed, with a glance at the kerchief-masked faces. ‘Tim Fancourt’s boys, or I’m crazy—two of ’em on the watch some place mebber. Get your pepper ready.’

He took his own pepper packets into each hand and then drew to a halt as the gunmen ranged across the road in front of him. Val jammed on the brakes, fixed her pepper bombs swiftly in her palms, and waited for what should happen next. It was not long in coming. The centre-most gunman came forward, two heavy Colts pointed upward.

‘All right—git down!’ he commanded. ‘I guess we take over from here on——’ He paused, giving a start. ‘What’s the big idea of the masks? Git ’em off—!’

‘Now!’ Rod whispered to the girl, and suddenly flung his pepper bags from his raised hands. Just as he had calculated, the outlaws were not expecting them.

The one who had been talking received his full in the face and the contents burst into his eyes above the face mask. He coughed violently and dropped his guns to claw at his face desperately. The other men, aimed at deliberately by the girl, found themselves in a cloud of pepper which set them choking and sneezing as they tried to grasp what had happened.

But something else happened, too—something which Rod had never taken into account, or the girl either. The four horses found the pepper drifting into their faces and nostrils. They shied, whinnyed, and reared up violently. Rod swung round in alarm from gripping the lariats to look at them.

‘What in——’ he began; then he got no further. Maddened by the pepper dust and their smarting eyes, the horses plunged so violently they snapped the central shaft which connected to the stage. If anything this only served to increase their panic and, blundering blindly round with the broken shafting still fastened to them, they collided heavily with the stage—then they reared up and trampled crazily in the midst of the shouting, sneezing gunmen.

So tremendous was the confusion, and the rising clouds of dust blotting everything out, Rod had hardly time to comprehend what was going on—then it blasted through him that the stage was moving slowly backwards.

‘The brake, Val—the brake!’ he shouted at her, and reached over to grasp it.

Even as he spoke the stage gathered momentum, travelling backwards and unguided down the steep slope up which the four horses had so laboriously dragged it.

‘It’s on—full on!’ Val panted, dragging on the big lever-handle as Rod helped her. ‘It-it must have been when the horses hit us. Something gave way——’

Rod twirled round on the wooden seat and looked over the side. Almost immediately he saw what had happened. When the shafts had broken away they had taken with them a lynch-bolt which held the brake junction in place. Now the brake-blocks were hanging free, completely disconnected from the lever.

‘What do we do?’ Val demanded anxiously, clinging to her position with difficulty as the stage sped ever more swiftly down the slope, swerving crazily from side to side and at each swerve bringing the horrible vision of the gorge alarmingly close.

‘Darned if I know,’ Rod said, tearing away his kerchief mask and mopping his face with it. ‘We can’t jump from this thing: we’d break our legs——’

‘Hey there! What’s going on?’ It was a plaintive yell from inside the coach. Rod ignored it and looked about him desperately, trying to think of a way to stop the headlong backward rush.

Ahead—or rather behind since the stage was travelling back foremost—were the apparently endless curves of the trail, sloping ever downwards as they skirted the gorge. So far the coach had followed the wheel tracks in the sun-baked earth, but it could not go on indefinitely, and as the speed increased, so would the danger of plunging right off the trail into the gorge.

Whatever lay higher up the trail, from where they had come, was hidden in the clouds of dust which had been created. Possibly the outlaws were following; possibly not. It depended on whether they considered it was worth their while—

‘Rod—we’re going over!’ Val shrieked suddenly, her hands locked immovably on the steel hoop rail at the side of the driving seat.

She was wrong. The stage came right to the edge of the trail, seemed actually to hang over the abyss, and then swung back as stones caught the wheels and flung it back into the rutted track. Sweating, ears deafened by the din of the wheels and the rattling of the coach, Rod and the girl clung to their seats and stared ahead of them. The speed seemed to be tremendous—then it came. The trail bent abruptly, nearly at right angles, the worst corner of all. The wheels buckled and cracked in the dust and earth, the whole coach slewed round, rocked, and then seemed to actually jump sideways. In fact, it did no such thing. It simply fell apart under the strain, and the sundered pieces ripped and tore over the rock edges.

‘Jump!’ Rod yelled frantically, and slapped the girl’s hands mercilessly to make her let go.

She did not seem to understand. He stood up as the stage plunged its wreckage over the trail edge to the gorge. With one last tremendous effort, Rod seized the girl round the waist and threw her—he knew not where; then he jumped clear himself and felt sure he was leaping straight into eternity.

The coach was gone, his ears filled with the diminishing din of it as it tumbled in ruins down the cliff face, spewing from its shattered remains the three unfortunate passengers who had been trapped within it. Rod hit something which jarred a blinding pain up his spine. The something gave, sagged, swayed up and down, then became more or less still.

Anguished, his head spinning, it was several moments before he even dared to move.

## FOUR

He was lying on his back in the midst of an out-jutting tree in the rocks. Such trees were few and far between—outcasts of the wooded lands almost leafless, sucking moisture from somewhere deep in the rocks which made their roots of exceptional depth and strength.

Rod moved again, conscious of the fact that he was badly bruised, but otherwise unhurt. He looked below him upon the relentless crags, and at a dizzying distance could pick out the remains of the stage-coach, amidst which—or else scattered far and wide—would be the corpses of the three passengers.

But Val. Where was she? That was the thought which drove horror through him. He looked around and about him but could see no sign of her. The ghastly thought that she too had been flung to her death took possession of him.

‘Val!’ he yelled hoarsely, struggling up into a sitting position on the tough tree branch. ‘*Val!*’

There was no answer. He looked around him again. He was a good hundred feet from the top of the cliff face, with no possible means of getting up it—but it was not his own predicament which concerned him. Val—what had happened to her—?

He cupped his hands and yelled more loudly than ever, but only got the echoes back for his trouble—then a voice shouted to him, but it was not the girl’s.

‘Hey you, down there! Grab this rope!’

He stared up in amazement to see the head and shoulders of a man, his Stetson outlined against the blue sky. The kerchief mask over his face explained the rest. It was one of the gunmen—even Tim Fancourt, himself, perhaps.

Down came the lariat and Rod grasped it. Then he hesitated.

‘What’s the idea?’ he yelled. ‘What d’you get out of tryin’ to save me? Suit you better to let me drop when I’m half-way up, wouldn’t it?’

‘That’s a risk you’ve got to take, feller, ’less you want to stay out on that limb forever!’

Rod did not hesitate any further. The cold logic of the argument was obvious. If he did not die one way, he’d do so another—so he began climbing steadily, wincing at the wrenches given to his back in the process. The outlaw held the rope steady and made not the least effort to cut it or otherwise send Rod toppling to his death.

Panting, Rod finally scrambled over the edge of the cliff. The first thing he beheld, to his infinite relief, was Val, firmly in the grip of the remaining three gangsters. Except for a heavy bruise on her forehead and dirt on her shirt and riding pants, she seemed none the worse for her experience.

Rod started to hurry towards her, then paused at the voice of the outlaw who had helped him up the cliff.

‘Take it easy, Cameron. I want those guns you’ve got.’

Rod stopped. The guns were taken from his belt, and the .38 from his holster; then the outlaw nodded.

‘OK—talk all you want. Guess it can’t do much harm.’

Rod swung back to the girl. ‘What happened, Val? You OK?’

‘As far as physique is concerned, yes, but——’ She glanced about her anxiously. ‘We don’t seem to have made such a terrific success of things, do we? Thanks for throwing me

clear,' she added. 'I landed on the cliff top here and must have stunned myself for a moment. I recovered when these outlaws turned up.'

'Just as long as you're all right; that's the main thing.'

Rod looked about him at the four men and their horses, and finally to the outlaw who was slowly winding up the lariat he had dropped down the cliff. He was a tall, wiry man with light grey eyes gleaming over his face kerchief.

'I don't get it,' Rod said, puzzled. 'What good does it do you to rescue me? Seems to me you'd prefer wipin' me out—and this girl, too, come to that.'

The outlaw shook his head. 'You might be more useful alive than dead, feller,' he explained.

'You're Tim Fancourt, aren't you?' Rod questioned.

'Yeah—an' from what I hear of things the folks back in Little Pinnacle are blamin' you for plenty of things I done. That hands me a big laugh, believe me. Y'see,' Fancourt went on, throwing the looped lariat on to the saddle-horn of his horse, 'there's one or two things I want t'know about Little Pinnacle which only you can tell me. 'Sides, you an' me have a score to settle. I haven't forgotten how you gypped us out of gettin' that gold dust from the bank. Naterally, I know it was you by th' fact that you was arrested for the robbery—or attempted robbery—yuhself later on.' The light grey eyes travelled to the girl. 'As fur Miss Shane, I've somethin' t'settle with her, too. She's helped you plenty—including that blasted pepper you threw. I ain't th' kind of guy to stand fur that sort of thing an' do nothin' about it.'

'Whatever's been done, I planned,' Rod said grimly. 'You can leave Miss Shane out of this.'

'Yeah? Who's givin' the orders around here—certainly not you, Cameron . . . There's a horse right behind you. Get on it! Joe, put the girl up in that saddle, too.'

Val made a vigorous protest, but it did not get her anywhere. One of the men seized her in his powerful hands and lifted her up with ease. She half fell in the saddle and glared. Then Rod swung up beside her.

'Take it easy, Val,' he muttered. 'We're dealin' with killers, remember. As long as we're alive we've still got hopes: dead, we're finished.'

'We'll be that anyways before long,' she said bitterly.

Rod did not answer. He watched as the men took to their horses, Fancourt riding, double saddle with one of the other outlaws. The reins of the horse carrying Rod and the girl were seized and the journey back up the trail began. When they had reached the point where the pinto was tied, Fancourt called a sudden halt and peered towards the rocks.

'There's a cayuse fastened there, Joe,' he said. 'Must belong to these two. Get it out—an extra horse is always useful. You ride it: I'll stick here.'

Joe followed out orders, and in a moment or two reappeared on the pinto's back. The journey then resumed, following the upward trail down which the stage had plunged so recently.

'Why on earth didn't we think of the pepper affecting our horses?' the girl whispered, glancing at Rod as he sat behind her. 'We must be incredibly thick-headed, or something.'

'Just one of those things,' Rod sighed. 'I guess we were so busy concentratin' on the main thing the little side issues escaped us. Fact remains that Tim Fancourt has captured us instead of us capturin' him.'

'What do you suppose he can want to know about Little Pinnacle?'

‘No idea—unless he thinks I’ll tell him the layout so that he can plan some dirty work. If that is his idea, he hasn’t got much chance of getting any words out of me!’

Val said no more. Fancourt, in the forefront, kept on going steadily, glancing back now and again. Behind Val and Rod the two gunmen guarding them plugged their horses steadily forward. A little behind Fancourt was Joe on the pinto. As far as escape was concerned, the position was hopeless.

‘It isn’t pleasant to think,’ Val resumed, after a moment or two ‘that we’ve lost our witnesses. They went to their deaths with the stage, so any information they might have given to show we tried to overcome these hoodlums won’t be much use . . . It also gives me the uncomfortable feeling that we—sort of murdered them. Didn’t we?’

‘If you want to take that view, Val, I suppose we did—but it’s mighty far from the truth. The whole thing was an accident . . .’

‘We turn off here!’ Tim Fancourt shouted back suddenly, and Val and Rod both saw that they had reached the top of the rise and the floor of the monstrous cleft known as Mandrake’s Creek. Down the centre of the cleft there ran a small brook, fed by mountain snows, from which the area got its name.

Fancourt directing the way, the horses picked out a scarcely definable trail amidst the loose rocks, heading gradually towards a farther corner of the cleft floor and reaching it some thirty minutes later. Here there was an enormous natural cave, well shielded on every hand by frowning rock face.

‘Down you get,’ Fancourt said, slipping from his saddle and glancing back at Rod and the girl. ‘You ain’t goin’ no farther—yet.’

Rod dismounted and helped the girl down after him. Fancourt tugged out one of his guns and motioned into the cave. Rod and the girl entered it and stood looking about them. It had all the evidences of a base camp. There were provisions, blankets, a tripod for a cooking cauldron, a brick-built fireplace—all that could be needed.

Fancourt came into the cave slowly, his gun still handy, and waited until his three cohorts had entered too. Then the outlaw said drily:

‘I guess four of us will be enough to deal with you two. We’ve a couple more men on the look-out for trouble amid the rocks, so if you’ve any fancy notions about bein’ rescued you’d best fergit ’em.’

Rod said nothing. He remained with his arm protectively about Val’s shoulder. He could tell she was scared, even though she made every effort to disguise it.

‘I want to know one thing, Cameron,’ Fancourt said, pulling down his kerchief mask so that his thin, cruel face was revealed. ‘Is that gold dust still in the Little Pinnacle bank?’

Rod still said nothing. He only smiled.

‘This isn’t meant t’be funny!’ Fancourt told him viciously. ‘I want an answer, Cameron—an’ I want it now!’

‘From me you won’t get it,’ Rod replied, shrugging . . . then he gave a momentary gasp as iron-hard knuckles struck him in the face. Unable to keep his balance, he collapsed in the dust of the cave floor. He gasped again as Fancourt’s heavy boot kicked him violently in the ribs.

‘Start talkin’!’ the outlaw roared at him. ‘I’m not shootin’ yuh becous I want that infurmation—but I guess I c’n knock you around so much you’d wish I would shoot yuh ’fore I’m through! Git on your feet!’

Kicked and shaken, Rod was hauled upwards, to have the massive fist crash again into his face. He collapsed weakly and shook his head.

‘Not goin’ to get you anywheres, Fancourt,’ he said, rubbing his bruised mouth.

‘Mebbe he ain’t kiddin’, boss,’ Joe said, reflecting. ‘He’s both obstinate an’ tough, an’ that means we’re wastin’ our time.’

‘I’ll find out what I want to know even if I kill him!’ Fancourt swore.

‘Yeah, mebbe—but why try? I guess the gal ought to know just as much as he does. She’s frum the same town, and there’s no reason fur thinkin’ she’ll be as tough as he is. Let me go to work on her.’

Rod sprang to his feet, regardless of guns and everything else. Whirling up his right fist, he aimed it straight at Joe’s jaw—but it never landed. Fancourt saw what was coming and whipped up a left uppercut. It struck Rod clean in the face, adding to the pain he was already suffering from the earlier blows. He stopped in his rush, half turned round, and then stumbled to his knees.

‘Try that again, Cameron, and th’ gal’ll get it back with interest,’ Fancourt said. Then he jerked his head. ‘OK, Joe—give it to her.’

With a sadistic grin Joe reached forward and dragged the girl to him as she made a frantic dive to get out of his way. His powerful hands seized both her wrists and turned them mercilessly, forcing her arms up her back. Unable to help herself, she went down on her knees, but not a word escaped her.

‘Up t’you,’ Joe said. ‘Tell the boss what he wants to know or I’ll twist your shoulders so far outa joint you won’t ever be able to use yer arms again.’

Val shook her dark head. Rod half got up from the floor and stared at her, then at the gun Fancourt was holding steadily.

‘Blast yuh—speak!’ Joe yelled, and he forced Val’s hands a good three inches further up towards her shoulder blades. She gave a little cry of pain, unable to keep it back.

‘Damn you, stop it!’ Rod shouted—and even as he spoke he catapulted upwards and slammed out his fist. This time he did not miss. The blow hit Joe clean on the nose and he staggered backwards against the cave wall. With murderous fury on his face, he recovered his balance and came rushing forward.

‘Hold it, Joe!’ Fancourt told him briefly; then he looked at Rod. ‘Up to you, feller—does Joe carry on with the gal or do y’feel like lettin’ your hair down?’

Rod helped the girl to her feet, and put his arm about her shoulders again. Her face was pale and strained.

‘You can leave her alone from here on,’ Rod snapped. ‘There is gold dust in the bank. It hasn’t been moved yet, far as I know . . . and I’ll tell you something: one of these days I’ll get you, Fancourt, for what you’ve done to Miss Shane here. Only I’ll not stop at twisting your arms: I’ll break your filthy neck.’

Fancourt grinned sardonically. ‘Talkin’ a bit outa turn, Cameron, ain’t you? Yuh don’t suppose I’m through with yuh—or the gal—yet, do yuh?’

‘Blast it, man, what more d’you want to know?’

‘Nothin’ more I want to know—but naturally I don’t figger on lettin’ you an’ the gal just wander off now yuh’ve talked . . . Yore takin’ a journey, both of yuh—in a while. First, though, there’s somethin’ else to attend to. Come here, Joe.’

Sullen-faced, and apparently not at all pleased at having been baulked in his resolve to make Val suffer to the full, the outlaw came forward. Fancourt glanced at him.

‘Yore pretty good on imitatin’ bird an’ animal calls, Joe: see what yuh can do to sound like this jigger.’

‘His voice, y’ mean?’

‘What in hell else? Yeah—start talkin’ like him an’ see what it sounds like.’

Joe hesitated for a moment and then rattled off a few sentences. Whatever else he was he was an excellent mimic, duplicating Rod’s matter-of-fact tones to perfection.

‘Good,’ Fancourt approved. ‘Yore about the same build as this guy, too, and wearing a check shirt and black riding pants same as he is. Take his kerchief: yours is a green one—an’ his hat.’

Joe did so and looked wondering. ‘What’s the idea, boss?’

‘Simple enough—yore goin’ to rob the Little Pinnacle Bank an’ yore goin’ to talk an’ behave jus’ like Cameron here. There couldn’t be a neater set-up. The authorities will figger that Cameron did it, an’ that’ll keep the heat off us in consequence. You’ll take Arthur and Slim with you—tonight.’

Joe shrugged. ‘OK—but what happens t’Cameron and the gal? I’d feel a darned sight safer if I knew they wus outa the way an’ not likely to give information somehow.’

‘That,’ Fancourt said, ‘we’ll deal with right now . . . Outside, you two,’ he added, motioning his gun, and Rod and the girl stepped out of the cave into the brilliant sunlight and stood waiting. In a moment or two Fancourt came out after them and glanced towards the pinto nearby—as it stood nodding lazily, its reins dangling.

‘I s’pose,’ Fancourt said, ‘it’d be a waste of time tellin’ two folks like you, who know the district, what kind of a place the desert is?’

Rod gave the girl a grim look, but he did not speak—and neither did she. Fancourt considered them for a moment and gave his sardonic grin; then turning aside to the pinto, and still keeping his gun levelled, he removed the saddle-bag and tossed it into the cave. Then he called Joe out to him.

‘Two lariats, Joe,’ he said briefly. ‘Bring Slim with you. We’re goin’ on a trip. Get on that pinto, you two!’

‘Is there nothing we can do, Rod?’ the girl whispered, as he turned to her. ‘Once out in the desert anything can happen. They mean to finish us—why can’t we fight for it, right here?’

‘Because he’s got a loaded gun and we’re outnumbered,’ Rod answered quietly, lifting her to the saddle. ‘As long as we live we stand a chance—dead, we don’t. Always remember that. Don’t fight when the odds are against you. Too dangerous.’

He swung up into the saddle behind her and sat waiting. Joe appeared with the two lariats in a moment or two and, at Fancourt’s instructions, jumped into the saddle of one of the horses—then with Fancourt leading the way, and Joe and Slim coming up in the rear where they could keep his eye on Rod and the girl, the party began to move away from the cave hide-out along the cleft floor.

In ten minutes they had mounted to the top of the acclivity, which gave them a view of the vast, sun-drenched desert on the other side of the mountain range. Fancourt halted for a moment and considered the waste.

‘Pretty, ain’t it?’ he asked drily. ‘Nothing but sand an’ sun. The sort of place, once yore in it, that nobody’s likely t’find yuh ’cept by the sheerest accident.’

‘Why don’t you come out straight with what yore gettin’ at, Fancourt?’ Rod demanded. ‘If yore meaning to take Miss Shane and me out there and leave us why not say so an’ have done with it?’

The outlaw’s only response was a grin, and he nudged his horse forward. So the descent of the awkward trail which led down to the desert began, and once the foothills were left behind

there was nothing ahead but the torrid waste with its hardly visible trail across it. The only sign of living things were the unsightly cacti bushes here and there. Infinitely far, a mere smudge on the horizon, lay Bartonville.

Without pause Fancourt kept on going, mopping his face at intervals and glancing through screwed-up eyes at the cloudless sun blasting down. Nowhere was there a sign of a water-hole. Such spots were few and far between, and even the most experienced inhabitant of the region could not say exactly where they lay. The desert was a death trap, unless crossed at a single journey from west to east.

‘How much farther do you figger on goin’, boss?’ Joe called, when the journey had been progressing for an hour.

‘Depends,’ Fancourt answered him briefly. ‘What yuh belly-achin’ about? Been in the sunlight before, ain’t yuh?’

Joe did not answer the question, but he mopped his face savagely and kept his tired horse going. Rod gave the girl a glance.

‘How’s tricks?’ he murmured; and she shrugged.

‘Okay—but I’ve been in cooler spots. What few brains I’ve got are about fried, I think . . . And you need protection from a sun like this,’ she added, glancing at Rod’s hatless head.

‘Show me how,’ he answered drily—and since she could not, Val did not continue the topic, but she adjusted the scarlet bandeau over her own head to mask somewhat the savage, beating glare.

‘I reckon this oughta do,’ Fancourt said at length, and drawing his horse to a halt, he slid from the saddle and waited for his henchman to do likewise. Then he motioned to Rod and the girl. ‘All right, you two—down yuh get!’

They obeyed and landed ankle deep in the sand, stumbling over towards Fancourt as he jerked his thumb at them. He murmured something to Joe as they came level, and with a nod he went back to get the lariats. Rod, toying with the idea of making a sudden dive at Fancourt, did not have the opportunity. A noose was thrown suddenly over his shoulders and drawn tight, pinning his arms to his sides. In a couple of seconds Val too was likewise fastened.

‘I s’pose I could fasten yuh back to back,’ Fancourt reflected, considering them, ‘but that wouldn’t be such a good idea. You might go to work on each other’s knots, an’ I don’t intend that yuh should ever get free. So we’ll try somethin’ else. Bring ’em this way, Joe,’ he added, and started off through the sand, pausing when he came to dead tree stumps of unguessable age, separated by a distance of about a dozen feet.

‘Just about right, boss,’ Joe commented. ‘With the sorta knots I tie, they won’t break free of them—ever.’

‘I wouldn’t spoil yuh fun for anythin’,’ Fancourt chuckled. ‘Get busy—an’ make it quick. I’m ’bout meltin’ away.’

Rod found himself seized and flung backwards. He crashed over with a jarring vibration against one of the tree roots, and there sprawled whilst with quick movements Joe went to work with his lariat, using his own peculiar kind of knots. By the time he had finished his job Rod found himself seated in the sand, his hands drawn taut behind him and held in place by the cutting tightness of the rope round the tree root. A second length of it under his chin made it impossible for him to sit up without being in danger of strangling himself—yet if he remained where he was he faced the sky and the intolerable glare of the Arizonian sun. It was subtle and relentless torture which Joe had devised, and judging from the grin on his leathery face as he surveyed his handiwork, he was well satisfied with his efforts.



‘Nice work,’ Fancourt approved. ‘Now fix the gal—an’ hurry it up.’

Joe obeyed, and despite her struggles and the use of her teeth with which she bit Joe savagely until a slap in the face quietened her, Val found herself secured immovably in exactly the same way as Rod, her face to the sun and her hands drawn taut round the back of the massive tree stump.

‘Be a bit longer for yuh than just shootin’ yuh outa hand,’ Fancourt explained, vaulting back into the saddle of his horse. ‘ ‘Sides, bullets have a way of bein’ traced if they’re found in a corpse. If yore found here there might be plenty of folk who’ll suspect who done it—but none of ’em’ll be able to prove it . . . Next time you try anythin’ on me—an’ there won’t ever be a next time—remember that I don’t forgive easy.’

Fancourt said no more. He jerked his head to his two cohorts and, trailing between them the horse which had carried Rod and Val, they set off across the blurred hardly distinguishable trail which led through the desert towards the remote blue of the mountains.

Behind them, as Rod and Val shut their eyes to the blaze and tugged frantically and uselessly at their ropes, specks appeared magically in the sky and circled. Now and again they squawked hollowly, until at last Rod opened his eyes and squinted at them.

‘Buzzards,’ he whispered. ‘Carrion eaters already—an’ unless I can think of somethin’ mighty quick they won’t have had a flight in vain either.’

He lay watching them for a while, feeling the naked blaze on his face, then he resumed the struggle to try and break the ropes pinning his hands behind the tree stump. Had the stake been rock he might have stood a chance of fraying the ropes through, but this massive old stump was perfectly smooth, the rope latched under an out-jutting knot and held there, by a double turn in the rope. Rod resisted at last, perspiration streaming down his face and the back of his neck.

‘You still livin’, Val?’ he called, twisting his head to look at her sprawled, motionless figure a dozen feet away.

‘Only just,’ she called back, a noticeable weakness in her voice. ‘This sun’s making me dizzy . . .’

‘Keep your eyes shut,’ Rod called. ‘You shouldn’t come to much harm if you do that—and the bandeau protects your head.’

The girl did not answer, and he knew too that he had only partly spoken the truth. A bandeau was no use at all against this torrid glare and the temperature of nearly a hundred shade degrees. Unless some way was found very quickly to move—to even dig deep into the sand for protection until the sun had passed the zenith of the afternoon, anything might happen. Rod had once seen a man come in from the desert after being lost in it for twelve hours. It was a recollection that made him shudder, and he fought again to release himself, his jaw setting at the lonely, dreary croaking of the buzzards circling lazily far overhead.

Finally, though, the uselessness of pulling on the rope was driven home to him. If there was any way of escape at all, it had to be something very different from his present method. He lay and thought it out, feeling the anguish of a brutal thirst as he did so. The sun was sucking him dry, parching his throat and lips.

‘Guns gone—jack-knife gone,’ he muttered, his eyes closed. ‘That doesn’t leave me with anythin’—’cept some tobacco and a box of matches . . .’ He stopped, pondering what he had said. ‘Yeah—tobacco and matches,’ he repeated. ‘If I could get that tobacco free it’d be bone dry in a few seconds in this sand. Then if I could drop a lighted match in amongst it . . .’

In theory it was a possible means of burning slowly through the rope, but the difficulty lay in putting it into practice. So he thought further—until the girl interrupted his cogitation.

‘Rod, for God’s sake, can’t you do something?’ she nearly screamed. ‘I can’t bear this much longer! It’s killing me!’

‘Take it easy,’ he insisted. ‘I’m trying to figger something out——’

But the girl did not take it easy. Hysterical, her control at last destroyed by the imminence of death and the implacable glare around her, she burst into a sudden frantic effort to free herself. It was a savage, desperate struggle which Rod watched in alarm. He could see that the wrench she gave to her hands cut through the skin of her wrists and made them bleed—but the battle was as futile for her as it had been for him. She sank back at last, panting, on the verge of collapse, her shirt stained black with perspiration from the vast efforts she had made.

Rod took his gaze from her at length and considered his shirt pocket where lay the tobacco and matches. It was about five inches from his chin—but to raise his head brought the taut grip of the rope across his throat. Just the same he risked it, forcing his head forward. His effort to reach as far as his pocket with his teeth produced such strangling pressure on his windpipe he had to stop—then another angle occurred to him, and instead of dragging upwards, he slid himself downwards as far as possible, wriggling and writhing until the rope was on a line with his chin. By thrusting his jaw forward he succeeded in making the rope move upwards across his mouth. Savagely he bit and gnawed into it, spitting out the taste of leather and dirt, working away at it until his jaws ached. But at length, nearly fifteen minutes later, by which time he was nearly immovable from cramp, the tough but slender cord parted.

Immediately he wriggled back into a sitting position and bent his head forward to the limit, also bringing up one knee—his ankles being untied—and using it to ruffle his shirt upward until the pocket came within the grasp of his teeth. With exquisite care he bit into the paper bag containing the tobacco and drew it free, dropping it so that it landed almost directly under the rope holding his right hand.

The matches he had to remove in their entirety, in the box. This he placed between his upraised knees and, for a while, gave himself a rest. Then a glance towards Val, lying exactly as she had fallen at the end of her struggle with her cords—and apparently unconscious—started him into action again.

Opening his knees, he let the matchbox fall, and instead took it between his feet. Doubling them up under him, he brought them round until they had reached the point where he had dropped the tobacco. Then, exerting all the pressure he could, he crushed the box between his heavy boots. Immediately there was a spurt of flame and puff of smoke as all the matches ignited under the pressure. He parted his feet immediately and allowed the blazing box to fall into the midst of the tobacco. Leaning forward, he blew savagely, and his eyes gleamed as under the draught, and aided by the parched sand, the tobacco started to smoke and smoulder brightly. Since there was close on an ounce of it, a glowing core soon appeared. Once that had expired, the last hope would be gone.

Rod wasted no time. He brought his right wrist down as far as it would go, holding it over the redness, and setting his teeth at the searing pain of the heat so close to his skin. He pulled and tore and ripped, dragging the rope ever lower. It began to smoke. Some of the more hairy strands whiffed into momentary sparks and vanished. The tobacco seemed to be consuming itself at an alarming rate.

But the rope was smouldering too. Rod could see that plainly as he paused for a moment, tears in his eyes at the anguish of the burned wrist. He fought again, throwing every ounce of

his strength into breaking the rope—and with a sudden snap it gave, leaving a glowing end hanging from his arm. He whipped up his wrist quickly, tugged the rope from it, then used a piece of his shirt to wrap around the savage stinging blisters which had been raised.

To complete his freedom was only the work of a moment, and he stood up quickly, surprised to find that he reeled dizzily. He steadied himself, licked his cracked lips, then with the rest of his shirt he made himself a makeshift turban and wound it round his head. Feeling a little steadier, he hurried across to where the girl lay.

Unfastening the ropes as quickly as he could, he supported her head and shoulders in his arms and shook her gently.

‘Val—wake up! It’s me! You’re free now.’

‘Huh?’ She opened her eyes and looked at him dazedly. Her lips were filled with tiny dry lines where the sun had blistered them. She passed a swollen tongue over them for a moment. ‘Can’t—can’t stand any more,’ she whispered, her head lolling.

Apparently she had not the least conception of what had happened; in fact she was half unconscious. Rod set his mouth, aware of the difficulties ahead. To even travel the thirty miles across the burning waste alone would have been bad enough, but with a semi-conscious girl as well . . .

None the less he heaved her on to his shoulder and then got to his feet and began staggering loosely through the sand, falling back a pace for every three he took. For several minutes as he started his eastward journey he was convinced he could never do it. The shimmering vastness seemed to be spinning crazily: the heat from the sand made it feel as though he were walking across the floor of a mighty oven—and there was the added weight of the girl and his tortured wrist . . .

Then he caught sight of the buzzards circling. They did something to him. He went on, swaying, staggering falling down at times—but always picking himself up. He kept going, because he knew he had to. Upon him depended his own life, and that of the girl who had taken such long risks to give him the chance of proving his innocence . . .

## FIVE

It was early evening when Tim Fancourt and his two satellites regained their hideout at Mandrake's Creek. They were saddle-sore and sweat-stained, irritable and headachy after the gruelling time they had spent in the desert. For fifteen minutes after their return they could do nothing but sit around in the coolness of the cave, slake their insatiable thirst, and then order the two men who were keeping look-out to see to the horses.

But in time their normal composure returned—particularly to Fancourt, who rather prided himself that he could stand most things without batting an eyelid. He had Joe rustle together a meal, then he and his men—leaving only one on the look-out—settled down to it in a more agreeable mood.

'Altogether,' Fancourt said, reflecting, 'the set-up's perfect. Gold dust in Little Pinnacle for the picking-up—an' you, Joe, taking Cameron's place. An' you've got to get that dust this time, even if you have t'shoot up the whole township t'do it. Don't matter if you do: it'll all be blamed on Cameron if y'take good care to talk like him—an' certainly nobody'll ever find him, or the gal, to find out otherwise. That was why I took 'em so far into the desert, well out of harm's reach.'

'Yeah . . .' Joe rubbed his chin and mused for a moment. 'Just suppose, though, they did happen ter get free?'

Fancourt stared at him. 'That all the faith you've got in them ropes you tied?'

'Nope; I'll guarantee them knots to stand up t'anything—but sometimes queer things happen. Just suppose Cameron did get free. He'd sure be on the prod for us.'

'Aw, shut up,' Fancourt growled. 'Fur one thing he can't get free—an' neither c'n the gal; and for another, s'posin' he did, he's thirty miles o' desert to cross, an' with no water, that would 'bout finish him, I reckon.'

Joe meditated for a while and then shrugged. 'Yore probably right,' he agreed. 'All right, then, what happens next? You sed you wanted me t'go into town with Arthur an' Slim and lift what gold dust there is—talkin' like Cameron so's anybody would say it were him.'

'That's it—an' what makes it all the easier is th' fact that we've got that pinto there. That'll be the one Cameron escaped on, along with the gal. If you use it it'll cinch it that you might easily be Cameron. The moment it gets dark y' start off. Understand?'

Joe nodded. 'Suits me. Workin' so's somebody else'll have to take th' blame is perfect. If there's a guard in the bank—as there might be after what happened—what do I do? Blast 'em?'

'Naterally. Don't let anythin' stand in your way. The moment we have that dust we're clearin' outa here for safer parts while that dope of a sheriff and his boys hunt around for Rod Cameron. Mebbe they'll find two skeletons in time,' Fancourt added, with a reflective grin.

'I'd better take some explosive with me,' Joe said, thinking. 'After the last attempt to blast the bank safe they may have tightened things up a bit. I'm takin' no chances.'

Fancourt said no more. He had given his orders and he expected them to be carried out to the full—and Joe knew it. The moment he had finished his meal, he set about making his preparations, loading up the pinto's saddle-bag in readiness. Then an hour after sunset he set off, Arthur and Slim, kerchief-masked as he was, on either side of him.

Before long they had left Mandrake's Creek behind and reached the main trail for Little Pinnacle. Without speaking to each other, they rode along swiftly under the bright stars, wary none the less for any sudden happening. Their lives as fugitives from justice had taught them to be on the alert for a stranger or a bullet at any second . . . But their journey was uneventful, and by the time they had reached the end of the trail and had the main street of Little Pinnacle before them, the overhead darkness was complete—but the town itself was as brightly lighted as usual with the string of kerosene lamps down the street.

'Plenty of light, but pretty deserted,' Joe said, surveying the scene as he leaned on the saddle-horn. 'Most of 'em in the Dancing Lady, I s'pose.'

'I guess we c'n take care of any guy who pokes his nose in,' Slim commented. 'What are we waitin' fur?'

Joe's response was to jog his horse forward, his gun at the ready. He took the first side turning he could find and his two henchmen did likewise. Thereby they reached the rear of the bank without being seen, drawing rein and contemplating its brick-built solidness in the starlight.

'Might try that office winder this time at th' side,' Arthur suggested. 'Same as Cameron did when he got th' drop on us. It won't attract as much attention as at the front—an' the front may be guarded, come to think on it.'

Joe turned his head in the gloom. 'You two guys seem to have gotten th' wrong idea,' he said. 'We want t'be seen, don't fergit—or leastways, I do. I've got t'convince them I'm Rod Cameron. How am I s'posed t'do it if I don't show myself?'

'But yuh surely don't aim to risk gettin' a bullet just to prove that yore Cameron, do yuh?'

Slim demanded.

'I shan't do that, Slim. I'll shoot first. We'll try the front,' Joe decided. 'Come on.'

He dug his spurs into the pinto's hide and led the way round the side of the building. As far as the frontage of the bank was concerned, there was certainly nobody on guard. The big glass doors were closed and the boardwalk was deserted. So for that matter was the rest of the main street.

'Nice dam' thing this is,' Joe growled. 'When y'rob a bank the thing yuh usually want is peace an' quiet an' now we got it it ain't what I want. Contrary, that's what it is—Arthur, you'd best stay with the hosses. Slim an' me'll tackle the bank. Keep the hosses so's we c'n make a dash fur it.'

'OK,' Arthur murmured, taking the dangling reins of the two animals—then he watched Joe and Slim as, with guns drawn, they moved lithely up to the boardwalk and stopped outside the bank doors.

'S'posin' there's an alarm system if we break the door?' Slim asked.

'T'hell with it!' Joe brought the butt of his gun down on the glass and smashed it, then he reached inside and undid the bolts. Apparently no such modern contrivance as a burglar alarm was fitted, for there was no sound of a warning bell and even less sign of a guard inside the bank rushing to see what was going on.

'C'mon,' Joe murmured, after a swift glance about him. 'I reckon the guys in this town are too trustin' to breathe.'

'I don't like it,' Slim said uneasily. 'I've the feelin' that we may be walking into a trap.'

Joe ignored his misgivings and strode swiftly across the dark area fronting the bank counters. In a few seconds he had reached the steel grille which barred the way to the main safe. As on the last occasion, so on this—the duplicate key for the grille lock, which Fancourt

had had made months before, did its job immediately and the barred door swung open. Joe, Slim at his side, tugged forth an oil lamp from the satchel he carried and lighted it. The safe door loomed in the carefully masked light.

‘Not changed the safe or anythin’,’ Joe murmured, his eyes gleaming. ‘This is goin’ t’be easy. Open as we did before, by listenin’ to the combination wheel. I thought they’d have fixed a new one which’d have needed that stick of explosive we’ve brought. Keep your eyes peeled while I go work.’

Slim nodded but he did not say anything. He was the kind of man who deeply mistrusted peace and quiet. He was only happy when he could get to grips with the enemy he was fighting, and the entire lack of action here had him jumpy. His guns in his hands, he kept peering about him in the still, dark silences of the bank, peering into every shadow, then bringing his attention back to Joe as he squatted before the huge safe door and listened breathlessly to the almost imperceptible clicking of the combination wheel.

At last he gave a little sigh of satisfaction, stood up, and swung over the door’s main lever. Pulling hard, he dragged the door open and the lamplight penetrated the space beyond.

‘All waitin’ t’be took away,’ he murmured. ‘Like stealin’ candy from a kid.’

‘Yeah—an’ hurry things up a bit,’ Slim pleaded. ‘I’m gettin’ goose-pimples stuck around here.’

‘Aw, stop beefin’. There ain’t nothing wrong . . . more’s the pity. I’ll have t’think of some way to let the folks know Rod Cameron’s on th’ job.’

Slim gave a look at the gold dust bags on the floor of the safe, then as Joe motioned him he began to assist in dragging them forward. In so doing, his attention was naturally diverted from watching the gloom of the bank behind him. A Stetson hat rose above one of the teller’s counters—then another followed it.

‘Cameron all right,’ Sheriff Turner muttered to his deputy. ‘I just heard him say so to that *hombre* with him. He’s got his gall coming back to finish this bank job—though I reckoned he would sooner or later. Bin worth waitin’ for it, time after time, stuck here.’

‘Shows what kind of a heel he is when he says he wants t’go outa his way to let folks know Cameron done this job,’ the deputy murmured.

‘Can’t make the critter out. Usta be a straight-shooter did Cameron.’

‘Not any more. Come on—time we dealt with him.’

Turner, who had been on the watch for just this happening ever since Rod had vanished from the jail with Val to aid him, crept silently from his concealment. At his orders, the bank had been left apparently unguarded—an open invitation. He felt pleased with himself that his bait had been snapped up.

‘Get your hands up!’ he commanded abruptly, halting in the centre of the bank.

Joe swung round and fired simultaneously. The sheriff dropped his guns, clapped his hands to his head, and crashed over on his face to remain still.

‘Take it easy, you!’ Joe commanded, firing a bullet which whanged within two inches of the startled deputy. ‘Fire your guns and you’re finished. Drop ’em, damn you!’

The deputy dropped them. Joe, his voice this time pitched at the same intonation as Rod Cameron’s, was giving quite a convincing performance considering he had been taken by surprise. On the first occasion when he had been overheard, his voice had been his own, but the deputy was quite prepared to swear that this was Rod Cameron back again, gone completely to the bad.

‘What in heck’s the idea?’ Slim murmured. ‘Why don’t yuh shoot the guy an’ ha’ done with it—same as Turner?’

‘Cos we want a witness to prove who done it—Cameron,’ Joe murmured; then aloud—‘Tie the guy up, Slim, an’ use his pants’ belt t’do it.’

Slim hurried forward to obey. The bank doors suddenly flew open and Arthur came hurtling in, a shadowy figure as he blundered to a halt.

‘What goes on here?’ he demanded. ‘Who’s firin’?’

‘I am,’ Joe retorted. ‘I mean t’let ’em all know I’m Rod Cameron—see?’

The situation penetrated Arthur’s thick skull. ‘Yeah—yeah, I see, Rod,’ he agreed. ‘I just wondered——’

‘Well, y’can stop wonderin’ right now an’ help get these gold-dust bags outa here. Come on—make it quick.’

Arthur nodded and whilst Joe helped him to haul the heavy bags to the door Slim took care of the deputy. The deputy did not struggle because he knew he’d probably only get a bullet if he did. He finished up securely strapped to the wire grille of the teller’s counter, the sprawled figure of Sheriff Turner in front of him. Grim-faced, he watched the outlaws drag every one of the dust bags outside and then the doors slammed.

‘Load ’em on to your cayuse, Slim,’ Joe instructed. ‘It’s the strongest—an’ hurry up. Anythin’ can happen now, and now I’ve let ’em think I’m Cameron my only wish is to hit the leather and git outa here quick.’

Slim followed out orders as fast as he could, Arthur helping him. As they worked, Joe kept his eyes fixed on the brightly lighted street, his guns ready. He tautened a little as three punchers came lounging out of the saloon a hundred yards away, walking three abreast along the boardwalk.

Joe’s eyes glanced at the sorrel. It was about loaded with the gold-dust bags fixed like pommels to either side of the saddle.

‘That’s enough,’ Joe said briefly. ‘They’ll hang on tight enough. We’ve got to get goin’——’

Glancing round, Slim and Arthur understood in a moment.

‘You two ride the mare,’ Joe said. ‘I’ll take the pinto—same as Cameron might ha’ done. Tail the sorrel along with yuh.’

He dived for the pinto as his two cohorts mounted double saddle. The sudden action in the light of the street lamps was sufficient to attract the attention of the three approaching punchers. They stopped, figured the situation out—the loaded sorrel in particular, and the near vicinity of the bank—then they glanced at each other.

‘A robbery!’ one of them shouted, and whipped out his gun. ‘An’ though I won’t swear to it that looks like Rod Cameron——’

He fired, and his two friends with him, leaning their revolver muzzles on the tie-rail for steadiness. They missed their prancing targets, but Joe, retaliating, was a better marksman. His first bullet missed, but his second got the centre-most puncher clean in the head. Without a sound he dropped to the boardwalk. His two companions fired back ruthlessly, but by this time Joe and his boys were beyond range, driving their loaded sorrel in their midst. In a matter of thirty seconds they had gone up the high street and vanished beyond the area of the lights, leaving behind them not only the two punchers, who picked up their dead comrade, but a gathering of men and women from the saloon, drawn by the sound of the shots.

‘What goes on around here?’ demanded the mayor, who by reason of his position in the community, considered it his duty to say something. ‘Who was doin’ all the shootin’ just now?’

‘Rod Cameron and a couple of owl-hooters I don’t know,’ retorted the puncher who had just risen from his comrade’s dead body. ‘He got Jake here—plugged him clean. He——’

‘Cameron, y’say,’ the mayor interrupted. ‘You sure?’

‘I won’t swear to it, but it was his figure, an’ hat, an’ kerchief—usin’ it like a mask. An’ the black pinto he were ridin’ is the one Miss Shane usta use when she came into town. I’d know it anywheres.’

The mayor’s face hardened. Outside the sheriff and his deputy he was the only man in town who knew the bank had been “baited”. He glanced towards it and motioned.

‘Better take a look in here,’ he said briefly. ‘C’mon——’

‘The place has been cleaned out, if you ask me,’ said the second cowpuncher. ‘Those guys had got gold bags on one of the horses. A tidy lot of ’em, too.’

The mayor pushed open the doors of the bank and hurried in, bringing up sharp at the dim vision of the deputy strapped to the teller’s grille, and the sprawled body on the floor.

‘Put the lights on, somebody,’ the mayor snapped, and his order was carried out, the massive triple oil lamps being quickly lighted in the ceiling.

It was only the work of a moment to release the deputy, and to pull the kerchief gag from his mouth. Then the mayor glanced up from examining Turner’s body.

‘Dead,’ he said grimly. ‘A direct hit—an’ right through the brain from the looks of it. All right, Bates,’ he added, looking at the deputy, ‘what happened?’

‘It was Rod Cameron, no doubt on it,’ the deputy said, and hurried through an explanation of what had happened. The mayor listened and then glanced at the men and women around him.

‘Up to now,’ he said, ‘Rod Cameron’s been a fugitive for attempted robbery—an’ because that wasn’t such a serious charge no partic’lar effort was made to find him. Sheriff Turner had the idea he’d come back and try again to rob the bank. Seems like he did—an’ made things a darned sight worse for himself. He’s wanted now for murder—an’ if every man-jack in the town has to go work, he’s got t’be found. Jake’s dead, and Turner here’s dead. Cameron’s been a bit too smart this time.’

‘We’ll get him,’ one of the men said, ‘even if we haveta search clean across the State.’

The mayor nodded. ‘And for that you need a sheriff as the leader of authority,’ he said. ‘That means that you, Bates, are sheriff from here on—an’ as Mayor I’m swearin’ you in right now.’

The mayor stooped, took the star badge from the dead Turner’s shirt, and fixed it on Bates’ left-hand pocket; then he went through the brief ceremonial which constituted the swearing-in.

‘I reckon that’s that,’ the mayor said finally. ‘All y’need now is to pick a deputy an’ I’ll see that Turner and Jake are buried decent soon as possible—after I’ve had Doc Manners take th’ bullets out to be used as evidence later,’ he reflected.

Bates, fully conscious of the high authority now vested in him, looked round on the circle of men. He selected the two friends of the dead Jake as his deputies, and then said:

‘We’ve a job to do, boys—fetch Cameron in. An’ the sooner we start out t’do it, the better. Let’s be goin’. He’s probably hidin’ out in the mountains somewheres.’

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Some two hours after sunset the brilliant Arizona starshine casting upon the desert picked out two stumbling figures, the one slender and small, the other tall and supporting her. They moved as though intoxicated, hardly able to drag one foot in front of the other.

‘No more than a mile now to water, Val,’ Rod whispered, and the words were a mere croak, so blistered had his lips and tongue become through thirst.

The girl could not speak at all; she was too utterly exhausted. Part of the murderous journey of thirty miles she had been unconscious, but with the setting of the sun and the refreshing coldness of the night wind blowing across the desert, her senses had returned. By a sheer effort of will she had forced herself to walk, thereby lessening the crushing load Rod had been carrying.

They had simply gone on and on, stopping at frequent intervals to regain a little strength, but coming ever nearer to the foothills of the mountains where at least there was fresh water and rest. After that . . . but first the water. That was the main thing.

Worn out though he was, Rod felt physically a good deal better than at the start of the journey. In fact he was chilled. With hardly any covering on his chest save a tattered singlet, the cold wind had a bite, but since it was nothing compared to his thirst, he gave it no heed. Then suddenly his grip tightened on the girl’s arm and he forced her along stumblingly.

‘The foothills!’ he panted hoarsely. ‘We’ve reached ’em, Val! We’ve actually done it—water can’t be far from here. There’s a freshet to the west of Arrow Head Peak as I remember, and there it is up there—look!’

The girl raised her head and stared with aching, sun-blasted eyes towards the stars. Faintly she could make out the familiar pinnacle, but she hadn’t the strength to pass any comment upon it. She simply allowed herself to be half-dragged along, Rod’s grip clutching fiercely upon her upper arm. In a subconscious, dreamy way she realized that at last she was no longer lurching through the sand but upon the hard, rocky earth, which formed the foothill base. It made progress easier, and brought home a sense of tremendous strain across the back and thighs from the hours of constant, uncertain walking.

‘It’s ahead,’ Rod panted, the sound of water on the still night air giving him the strength for a final spurt, which meant the girl was borne along with him; then suddenly she found herself lifted from her feet, turned over on her face, and feeling the cold, gurgling stream bubbling past her mouth and nose.

For both of them the world for the next few moments was composed of nothing but water. They drank it, they washed in it, they half laid their heads in it, and the life that had been nearly sucked dry from them returned with a swiftness which made their hearts beat painfully and gave them throbbing sensations in the throat and stomach.

‘OK—that’s enough, Val.’ Rod caught her shoulder and drew her up beside him. ‘Take it easy. Only just enough right now to slake our thirst. To do more would be dangerous.’

The girl nodded, wondering now why she had ever felt so incredibly weary. Certainly she was stiff and aching, but with thirst banished, at least for the moment, life could be faced again. She scooped her drenched hair from her face, pulled the sodden collar of her shirt away from her neck, and then looked at Rod questioningly as he lay sprawled amidst the rocks, a somewhat incredible figure in the turban-like head-covering and ragged singlet.

‘You need more protection than that, Rod, after the heat we’ve been enduring,’ she said.

‘Huh?’ He glanced at her. ‘Yeah, mebbe I do—though I cooled off gradually, so it shouldn’t matter so much. Still, I guess there’s no need for this headgear any longer. Might as well use what’s left of my shirt.’

He unwound it and, minus the sleeve, which he had wrapped around his burned wrist, he slipped it over his head. If it did nothing else, it broke the coldness of the wind. Not that he had any thoughts any more for himself. With his thirst appeased, he was ready to grapple with the situation.

‘And what happens now?’ the girl asked.

‘I’ll tell you . . .’ Rod’s voice was low, filled with a murderous calmness. ‘If it takes me the rest of my life, Val, I’m going to find Fancourt and settle an account with him. Him and that louse, Joe. Some day, mebbe soon, mebbe late, I’ll meet up with ’em and when I do . . .’ He clenched his fists silently in the gloom and said no more.

‘That’s in the future,’ Val said, completely practical. ‘What do we do now? No weapons, no horses, no provisions—and we’re fugitives from the town. Neither can we stay here forever just because there happens to be water.’

‘No, I suppose we——’ Rod broke off and gripped the girl’s arm warningly. In another moment she understood why, as downwind there came the sound of horses’ hoofs, and it seemed there were quite a number of them, too.

‘Behind this rock,’ Rod breathed. ‘Quickly! It may be Fancourt and his boys, and the last thing we want is for them to find us alive and kicking——’

He got up hastily, dragging the girl with him, and they had only just blundered into concealment, peering round the edge of the giant rock, before the horsemen came in view. There were at least a dozen of them, and some fifty yards away they pulled up and seemed to hold a conference in the starlight. What they were saying was not audible in its entirety, but here and there a sentence or two did float to the watching pair.

‘. . . waste o’ time searchin’ around here. We’ve checked up as far as we can an’ it’s gotten us no place.’

‘Yeah, that’s right!’

‘Best thing’ll be to wait fur daylight. Anybody can hide in these mountains indefinitely in th’ dark.’

‘OK,’ came the unmistakable voice of Bates. ‘We’ll quit for now, and be on the job again at sun-up. Let’s be gettin’ back into town.’

The horsemen moved on and gradually were lost to sight. Rod gave the girl a puzzled glance in the gloom.

‘That was Deputy Bates,’ he said, ‘with a posse. What goes on, I wonder. ‘Less they’ve suddenly started a real hum-dinging search for you an’ me, with Turner and another posse searchin’ elsewhere. I don’t quite get the angle. Far as I can see we didn’t do anything serious enough to——’ Rod suddenly snapped his fingers. ‘I get it!’ he ejaculated. ‘Remember Fancourt saying that he was going to have Joe rob the bank dressed up as me and imitating my voice?’

‘That’ll be it,’ the girl agreed. ‘Looks as though he must have done it, escaped, and now the sheriff and his deputies are hounding him, thinking it’s you they’re looking for.’

‘Which also seems to suggest that Joe got away with the gold. There’s only one way I can prove my innocence and that’s by trapping these skunks somehow and then making them confess when I’ve got the sheriff to ’em.’

‘Unless the moment he sees you, he claps you in jail and won’t even listen. Knowing Turner I should think that’s more than probable.’

‘There are ways to make men talk,’ Rod said grimly. ‘And Joe and Fancourt are no better’n other men when they’re in a corner; in fact they’re probably a darned sight more

scared. I reckon the best thing we can do is go to that hideout of theirs at Mandrake's Creek, an' see if they're still there. If they are, we'll think further—that is, if you feel up to it? It's about a mile from here.'

'I can stand it if you can,' the girl said, rising as he held down his hand to her. 'Let's be on our way.'

They moved from their concealment and again came to the rocky ground forming the foothill base. Then they struck out to the south, familiar enough with the territory to know that it would bring them in time to the trail through the rocks which led, by an upward twisting acclivity, to Mandrake's Creek; the trail indeed which they had taken that morning on horseback when headed for their ordeal in the desert.

Rod talked but little as he moved along, but in his bearing there was the stolid rigidity of a man whose thoughts are concentrated on one single purpose. Nothing much else in the world mattered to him at present except coming face to face with Tim Fancourt, the man who had been the cause of him becoming a fugitive, and the girl an outlaw, deprived of all the rights to which she was normally entitled. That, and the incident in the cave when Val had been forced to her knees by the loathesome Joe—and even more murderous effort in the desert—made of Rod a man of vengeance, determined to risk anything and everything as long as it brought Fancourt and his cohorts to justice. That murder had also been added to his list of crimes was something Rod did not yet know: though knowledge of the fact could hardly have made his fury any the more white-hot than it was now . . .

'Here's the trail,' he said abruptly, and taking the girl's arm led her leftwards. Immediately they began stumbling amidst the loose stones, following the twisting, hardly discernible, acclivity as it went up amidst the rocks and starshine.

It was a laborious climb, weary as they were, and an ascent which they would normally have covered in perhaps twenty minutes took them a full hour with rests in between—but at the end of it they had Mandrake's Creek spread out before them.

## SIX

'No camp fire in sight,' Val remarked, studying the dark vista intently.

'Hardly expected there would be . . .' Rod looked around him. 'They've no reason for quittin' that cave, though: it's well hidden an' up to now nobody seems to know that it's their base. Best thing we can do is see if there's anythin' going on.'

He took Val's arm and, using the rocks for cover, they moved from point to point, coming ever nearer the big gash in the rocks which marked the outlaws' hideout. Only when they were within a hundred yards of it did Rod pause suddenly and point in the starshine.

'That proves it,' he murmured. 'Horses . . . seven of 'em. And one of 'em's that pinto of yours from the look of it.'

Val looked and then nodded. The animals were only dimly visible, tied to a roughly made hitch rail formed of a long branch staked into the ground.

'Easy does it,' Rod whispered. 'If those horses get restive they're liable to give us away. There might also be a look-out around here somewheres. Stop a minute. Let's check up.'

They halted, keeping well down, and surveyed. The light of the stars was feeble. It made of the rocks a grey, sprawling mass with very little difference where the shadows lay. The lone figure of a man it would have been impossible to distinguish, had he been in the midst of the rocks. Against the skyline it would have been a different matter.

'Have to risk it, that's all,' Rod said. 'We'll try and——'

'Look!' The girl gripped his arm tightly. 'Something up there, to our left—— It's gone again now. I saw a red light of some sort.'

'Huh?'

'Looked like a cigarette. Watch; it may come again.'

Rod waited, staring in the direction the girl had indicated. Then suddenly he saw what she meant. For a second or two there was the momentary gleam of a red point; expiring again almost instantly.

'Yeah, a cigarette all right,' he murmured. 'There's a bright boy perched up there in the rockery, possibly with a rifle standing beside him. Good job he likes tobacco.'

'Have to be careful he doesn't see us,' Val whispered.

'He won't: I'm going to settle him before he gets the chance. I'm not pulling my punches with these outlaws any longer, Val. It's them or us for it from now on. Wait here while I——'

'Not likely. I'm coming with you.'

Rod did not argue the point. With the girl creeping behind him he advanced through the narrow spaces between the rocks, keeping low down; squirming ever nearer the point he had fixed as the look-out's position. In fact he came upon him so suddenly it was almost a surprise. The man was lounging against a gigantic boulder, smoking, his hand bent over the glowing end of his cigarette. The abrupt appearance of Rod and the girl behind him made him jump—then his hand dived to his rifle.

'No you don't, my friend,' Rod murmured, and made a flying leap forward. His right fist crashed with savage impact into the man's jaw and flung him back hard against the rock. Nor did Rod stop there. With the memory of what he and Val had recently endured still inflaming him, he battered relentlessly into the man's face until he dropped, knocked out.

‘How long do you suppose he’ll remain unconscious?’ Val asked, peering down at him. ‘He’ll give the alarm the moment he recovers.’

Rod shook his head, whipped off the man’s belt and used it to strap the outlaw’s ankles and wrists together behind him. His kerchief he used as a gag—then he removed the gunbelts and fitted them about his own waist. The rifle he threw away.

‘That feels better,’ he said grimly. ‘Now let’s see what’s going on in the hide-out.’

Easing the two .45s into his hands, he led the way through the rockery, taking care not to make the slightest sound as he came within range of the cave mouth. Across the intervening space the horses shifted uneasily, their animal instinct warning them that all was not as it should be. Then the pinto, sensing with its bright intelligence that his mistress was somewhere near, released a sudden whinny of joy.

‘Damn!’ Rod breathed, and drew the girl back flat against the rocks. ‘That’s the worst of an affectionate animal.’

He had only just finished speaking when a man came out of the trail and looked about him. Failing to see anything—and certainly not Rod and the girl pressed hard against the mountain wall—he went over to the shying, excited pinto and stared at it.

‘What in tarnation’s ailin’ yuh?’ he demanded. ‘Shut up, blast yuh—!’ Out came his foot and delivered a violent kick. It did not silence the little pinto, but it changed his tune to a gasping cry which slowly whimpered into silence.

‘The dirty brute,’ Val breathed stormily. ‘I’ll kill him for that if I ever get my hands on him.’

‘That goes for me, too,’ Rod murmured. ‘But not right now. Our own safety comes first. Unless I’m mistaken, from the build of him, that was our pleasant friend Joe.’

The outlaw returned into the cave, and after waiting for a few minutes, the pinto now too subdued to whinny any further, Rod crept forward again, until presently he and the girl had reached a point where they could peer round the edge of the rocks into the cave itself.

Within it, faintly visible by the light of a well-bricked fire which prevented any tell-tale glow outside, were five men, arguing among themselves. There was Joe, Tim Fancourt, and three others whom Rod and the girl had not so far seen. Nor were any of them making any effort to keep their voices low, unless the stress of the topic they were discussing had made them forget this precaution.

‘If yuh think yore gettin’ the biggest share of this gold dust, Joe, y’can think again,’ Fancourt was saying sourly. ‘Yuh seem to have forgotten who’s boss o’ this outfit.’

‘Y’may be the boss,’ Joe retorted, ‘but who took the risk of gettin’ the blasted stuff? I did—while you sat pretty ways up here an’ let me stick my chin out. There wasn’t nothin’ to stop me hittin’ the trail with Arthur an’ Slim and never comin’ back here with the dust at all.’

‘Y’knew that if yuh did that I’d get you somewheres—someday,’ Fancourt said coldly. ‘It weren’t honesty that brought yuh back here, Joe: it wus fear. An’ the fact remains that I’m the boss. There’s twelve bags there, and six of us to split it amongst, includin’ Clem who’s up on look-out. That should be two bags apiece if we split even . . . but we ain’t goin’ to split even.’

‘Then what do you reckon on doin’?’ Joe snapped, and the venom on his ugly face was plainly visible in the firelight.

‘I’m takin’ four of ’em—double quantity as boss,’ Fancourt said. ‘The rest uv you can figger out the remaining eight bags anyways you like. We’re goin’ our separate ways from here. With the dust we got we can live in comfort for th’ rest uv our lives.’

‘Yuh mean you can!’ Joe retorted. ‘If yuh think that sort of split is goin’ to carry yore plumb crazy.’

Something glinted in the firelight close to Fancourt’s hand. Watching intently, Rod and Val could see it was his gun. His cold eyes fixed Joe steadily.

‘I don’t aim to argue with yuh, Joe. I’ve told yuh what I’m doin’—an’ if yuh don’t like it and start any funny business I’ll blast yuh right where y’stand. Make one less to bother sharin’ with, anyways.’

‘All right, all right,’ Joe growled, who knew better than argue with the business end of a gun. ‘Jus’ doesn’t seem fair t’ th’ rest of us, that’s all.’

‘Any grief from the rest o’ yuh?’ Fancourt asked, glancing about him on the other men.

Apparently there was not, unless they were too leary of the loaded gun to say so.

‘That bein’ settled,’ Fancourt said—but he did not put his gun back in its holster—‘let’s get things clear. We’re gettin’ outa here as fast as we can now we’ve got this dust. We’re a team no more. We got all the money we need when we cash in this dust in a different State where the law can’t touch us. So I reckon we’d best leave tonight. Where we go is up to each of us. I know where I’m goin’—but I ain’t tellin’ any of you. In fact the sooner I quit roamin’ around with a bunch o’ boneheads like you lot the better I’ll like it.’

As the conversation of the men became inaudible for a while Val turned to Rod beside her.

‘If we don’t do something quick, Rod, they’re going to get clean away,’ she whispered. ‘And with them split up I doubt if the law will ever be able to catch up with them—and that also means that you won’t have the chance of forcing one of them to confess that Fancourt is responsible for the crimes for which you are being blamed.’

‘Yeah; that thought has me worried, too.’

‘But why should it worry you?’ the girl insisted. ‘You’ve got two loaded guns. You could take them by surprise—’

‘Mebbe I could,’ Rod admitted, ‘but how long d’you suppose I’d be able to hold on to my advantage? You know my policy, Val—never take anything on where the odds are too great—an’ they are here. There are five men here, all desperate. How long do you suppose I’d be able to maintain the upper hand?’

The girl was silent for a moment, then she said anxiously, ‘But you’ve got to do something—and you will have surprise on your side.’

‘There may be just one way,’ Rod answered. ‘That is, if I remember this district rightly, an’ it’s a darned sight safer to ourselves than risking these outlaws’ guns—come with me.’

Turning, he led the way back along the narrow pathway up which they had come until he struck an upwardly rising trail noosing its way through the rocks. Here he stopped and glanced at the girl in the starlight.

‘Got the strength left to climb?’ he enquired. ‘About two hundred feet up?’

‘Even if I hadn’t I’d still do it,’ she answered. ‘But I’m getting dreadfully thirsty again—’

‘It’ll have to stay that way for a bit: you can drink later. Might be harmful to go on drinking right now . . . all right, here we go.’

Rod stepped up into the rockery and reached down his hand to help the girl up after him. Tired though she really was, she fought her way up gamely, not having the least idea what Rod was driving at. The outline of his strategy only became clear to her when at length, poised perhaps two hundred and fifty feet above the trail he indicated a cluster of rock spurs,

standing on end, balanced that way by natural forces and belonging to a landslide in some unguessably distant past.

‘According to my calculations,’ he said, ‘we’re about dead over the cave mouth—and these rocks, pushed hard enough, will easily overbalance and take down tons of rubble with them——’

‘You mean—seal them in below!’ the girl ejaculated.

‘Just that—it all depending on whether sufficient rocks fall before they make a dash to get out. Give me a hand.’

Her weariness forgotten in her excitement, Val did not need telling twice. Under Rod’s directions, she pressed her back hard against the tall rock nearest the trail, and he added his own shoving strength to hers, both of them with their heels dug hard in the ground and their muscles straining to the utmost.

The task was not as hard as they had expected. Hair-balanced, the rock suddenly quivered and moved. Instantly Rod and the girl jumped back and breathlessly watched the spur toppling. It went end over end, bouncing amidst the other rocks in its journey and sweeping with it shoals of small stones, pebbles, and chippings.

‘Now the next one,’ Rod panted. ‘Quickly . . . those skunks below have got to think that this is a genuine landslide.’

He hurried to the next nearest rock and shoved hard, the girl choosing a smaller one and doing likewise. So between them they released a continuous avalanche of spurs, each of which in their turn carried down countless tons of debris to the trail below. At the end of fifteen minutes of frantic effort, they stopped and waited for the dust to settle—then an alarming thought seemed to strike the girl.

‘What about the horses—and my pinto in particular?’ she demanded. ‘Do you suppose we buried them too?’

‘I thought of that,’ Rod said. ‘They were well to one side of the cave mouth and I imagine we’d miss them, though of course they’ll be half-choked with dust and crazy with fright I expect. Soon tell what’s happened when this fog has cleared.’

The girl beside him, he stood looking down into the grey, dispersing cloud of dust. The moon was struggling up now from the east which lighted the scene with a leprous clearness. Then very gradually there came into view the group of horses, unharmed but shifting and whinnying violently—and something else, a lone man creeping towards them.

Rod frowned as he stared at him. ‘One of them’s got away—or else he was outside the cave when it happened,’ he said. ‘I’ve got to grab him quick.’

He turned and began to struggle swiftly down the rocks, jumping from ledge to ledge, unmindful of the girl following at a slower pace. He reached the end of the descent just as the man was climbing laboriously into the saddle of one of the horses. It looked from his behaviour as though he were hurt.

‘Hold it!’ Rod ordered, whipping out his right-hand gun; and at the same moment he glanced about him at the results of his handiwork with the avalanche. It had worked out just as he had planned it. The opening to the cave was completely sealed by massive boulders and tons of rubble. The horses and this one outlaw seemed to be the only ones who had escaped.

‘Say, it’s Joe!’ Val exclaimed, as the outlaw climbed down again from his horse in the moonlight and raised his hands.

Rod’s eyes narrowed as he moved. ‘Yeah—Joe! Just the guy I’ve been wanting to see.’

Joe remained motionless. That he was astounded was perfectly obvious. Probably the last thing he had expected was to discover the man he had tied up thirty miles away in the desert right in front of him.

‘Take his guns, Val,’ Rod ordered. ‘And throw ’em away over the trail edge.’

The girl obeyed and a sneering smile crossed Joe’s face.

‘Not much more y’can need, Cameron, is there?’ he demanded. ‘I got no guns, an’ my foot’s hurt with this blasted rock fall—what’s more needed to put a guy in shape fur bein’ killed?’

Rod holstered his gun and for a moment or two remained motionless, his fists clenched.

‘More I see of this—’ Joe nodded his head towards the blocked cave, ‘the more I think you musta been responsible fur it. I wus the only one who had th’ nerve to scramble out as the rocks wus fallin’. The rest of ’em are trapped inside.’

Still Rod did not move, and Joe shifted uncomfortably.

‘Y’don’t haveta just stand there starin’, do yuh?’ he demanded. ‘What’s the big idea?’

‘Just weighin’ something up,’ Rod told him. ‘I’ve a big score to settle with you, Joe—for what you did to Miss Shane here and me. I’d figgered on beating the hide off you, but two things are against it. I’m too exhausted to fight to a finish, and you say your foot’s damaged, OK—I don’t fight any man on those terms. But there’s another way—Val!’ Rod glanced at her and she came over to him.

‘Put this left hand gun in his right holster,’ he ordered, and to the puzzled Joe he added, ‘An’ keep your hands up, Joe, or I’ll blast the daylights outa you before you know what’s happened . . .’

The outlaw waited, his hands raised as directed, and the girl put the gun in his right holster and then stood aside, wondering what was coming next. She wondered even more when Rod also raised his hands slightly.

‘All right,’ he said quietly. ‘You’ve a loaded gun, an’ so have I. Draw whenever you feel like it. Whichever is the quickest and the straightest shooter walks away from here alive.’

‘Rod, it’s suicide,’ Val cried. ‘What’s the idea of making terms with a dirty murderer? There shouldn’t be any risk at all attaching to you. You ought to run him in and leave it at that.’

‘For the State to hang him,’ Rod answered, his eyes never leaving Joe’s moonlit form. ‘I’ve a personal score to settle with this jackal, and it’s the law out here that if two men have a gun each it’s the one who’s quickest that lives—an’ no questions asked.’

Both men might have been hewn from the rock itself for the next five seconds, for all the movement there was. The girl kept her distance, glancing from one to the other anxiously—then with a speed so swift it was nearly impossible to follow his hand, Joe flashed out his gun—but a split second before the bullet was fired, Rod’s own revolver flamed. Joe gave a hoarse shout, dropped his gun, lurched, and then fell over into the rocks and became still.

Val rushed forward, gripping Rod’s arm tightly. ‘Rod—did he get you?’ she demanded.

‘No. I guess I was a fraction in front of him and his aim went wide—an’ I don’t think I’m such a rotten marksman that I missed servin’ sentence on him, either.’

Rod walked forward, his gun cocked in case Joe were attempting a trick, but the next few moments made the situation clear. Joe was dead, a dark spreading stain on his shirt above the heart.

‘Justly done and carried out,’ Rod said, his face expressionless in the pale light; then he holstered his gun and picked up the one Joe had used. He handed it to the girl. ‘In case you



need it,' he explained. 'As for Joe, here, I s'pose he ought to be taken care of.'

Stooping, he seized the dead outlaw by the shirt collar and dragged him to the edge of the trail; then with a heave he lifted the body and gave it a shove, sending it falling slackly down the sloping side of the trail, where it presently vanished amidst the rocks below.

'As for the rest of 'em,' Rod said, turning to look at the blocked cave, 'I guess they're all nicely bottled up, and there isn't much else for us to do but fetch the sheriff and have 'em roped in properly. We'd better be on our way——'

'There's one man you've forgotten,' the girl interrupted. 'I mean the look-out. He was knocked out at the time, but he won't stay that way for ever. He may find a way to release himself when he recovers, and once he realizes what's happened he'll set to work to get these friends of his out of here.'

Rod gave a little start. 'I'd forgotten all about him. We'd better take care of that matter right now.'

'I shouldn't trouble, Cameron, if I was you!'

Rod swung round and the girl pressed herself tightly against him in alarm. Not six feet above their heads the long, cold line of a rifle barrel was gleaming, and behind it was a dim outline of head, shoulders, and a Stetson hat.

'I've bin watching yuh, Cameron,' the look-out said. 'I saw what you did to Joe—but I ain't beefin' 'cos I never did like that loud-mouthed *hombre* anyways. Pity yuh didn't fasten that belt around me a bit tighter, huh? Pity, too, I came on my rifle lyin' in the rocks as I came down here. Yore covered, both of yuh, an' this hardware's mighty fast in shootin'.'

Rod glanced about him desperately, grimly aware that the outlaw was only holding off shooting there and then for the sheer delight of watching his intended victims squirm. Nor, as far as Rod could see, was there any way of escaping. He and the girl were brilliantly illuminated now by the risen moon, and the outlaw had his back to it, his eye doubtless fixed on the gun sight as he pinpointed his objectives.

Then the pinto whinneyed mournfully, disturbed once again by the proximity of his mistress. The outlaw lifted his head, startled by the unexpected sound, and in that split second of grace Rod flung himself upwards, cleared the six feet which separated him from the outlaw and the rock edge over which he was looking, and seized the barrel of the rifle with both hands.

The outlaw fired wildly, and the impact of the bullet tearing through the barrel stung Rod's hands savagely—but he hung on, satisfied that the bullet had gone somewhere into the sky. Releasing one hand from the rifle, he flung it upwards and grabbed the man round the back of the neck, hauling downwards with all his strength until the outlaw over-balanced, slid down the rock, and crashed to the dust below, leaving his rifle behind him.

Unarmed, Rod having one of his guns and the girl the other, the man fought with the only weapons left—his nails, his feet, and his teeth—until a smashing right-hander in the face slowed him up for a moment; then Rod had whirled him to his feet and began delivering blow after blow with such systematic ruthlessness that the man could only jolt and gasp and stagger, unable for a single moment to aim a retaliatory blow or keep a semblance of balance. Finally Rod swung him round and delivered a pole-axing uppercut that lifted the outlaw clean off his feet and crashed him hard against the mountain wall. Half stunned, his face blood-smeared, he sagged over to the ground and lay there gasping.

'I guess we'll take him into town,' Rod said briefly. 'He'll be useful evidence to show we've really bin doing something. Give me a hand, Val, to——'

Rod stopped, and the girl turned her head sharply, too, at a sudden unexpected sound on the night air. It was a dull and remote rumbling, not unlike the overture of a distant thunderstorm. The pinto reared and whinneyed again, and the other horses also shifted uncomfortably.

‘What is it?’ the girl asked in puzzlement, as the sound deepened. ‘Sounds like an underground explosion or something——’

‘It’s an avalanche!’ Rod shouted hoarsely, drowning out her words. ‘It’s coming from up the mountains. That rock throwing we did must have loosened something and a whole lot more’s coming down—— Quick! We’ve got to move. Release the horses and set them going. Save the pinto and a strong horse, for myself and this guy——’

He stooped to haul the unconscious outlaw on to his shoulder, but there just wasn’t the time to act and carry the man’s dead weight. Already the first hail of stones from above, was rattling down. Rod swung, staggered, dropped the outlaw, and blundered to where the girl was releasing the horses. In one swift movement he ripped free the reins’ knots on each horse and sent the animal scampering to safety, then with the thunder of the avalanche in his ears he flung himself on to the pinto, whirled the girl up in front of him, and rode hell-for-leather down the trail. He had not covered a hundred yards before the ground shook and quaked under the onslaught of rocks and earth fallen from the greater heights of the mountain.

The commotion subsided almost as swiftly as it had come, and Rod slowed the pinto’s pace somewhat. Fast, game little animal though he was, the load was more than enough for his small frame.

‘Well, we got out of that all right,’ the girl said, ‘but it looks as though using that look-out for a witness is scotched. Funny thing—every witness we might have to help our cause seems to get rubbed out for some reason or another. I’m sure you should have kept Joe at the revolver point and walked him into town.’

‘Too dangerous with a sly devil like him,’ Rod answered. ‘I guess he’d have thought of some way to turn things to his own advantage long before we’d hit Little Pinnacle.’

The girl yawned wearily. ‘Look, Rod, do we have to go into town now?’ she implored. ‘I’m worn out—honest I am, after all I’ve been through. And I’m hungry and thirsty too. I can’t stand much more of this perpetual moving.’

‘Yeah . . . I could do with hitting the hay myself for a while,’ Rod admitted. He jogged the pinto on for a while down the trail, then when they had come to the thick outcroppings of cottonwoods which marked the end of the foothills and the beginning of the valley pasture land he seemed to have come to a decision.

‘Is there any reason,’ he asked, ‘why we can’t risk spendin’ the night at your spread, and then going on to the sheriff in the morning?’

‘It’s a glorious thought,’ the girl answered sleepily, quite beyond argument. ‘Why not, in fact? The rest of the outlaws are bottled up securely, and it makes no difference whether we go back to them tonight or tomorrow—and if the sheriff should turn up at our ranch and try and arrest us it will only mean we’ll have to tell him our story a bit sooner, that’s all . . . it’s a grand idea,’ she finished. ‘If I don’t get some sleep soon I’ll fall right off this horse.’

Nor was she joking, for in a few minutes Rod found himself supporting Val’s head against his shoulder whilst his arm held tightly around her waist. Utterly exhausted and with reasonable safety in sight, she had let go the driving urge which had been keeping her going. Rod grinned slightly at the gentle snores she gave now and again as he urged the pinto steadily onwards across the grasslands in the bright moonlight.

He looked about him constantly as he rode, on the alert for any sign of the sheriff's men—but the great, peaceful landscape remained undisturbed, soothing to his own jangled nerves after the experiences through which he had passed. He was so tired himself he could have fallen from the horse, but by an effort of will he kept his senses, chiefly because the girl's safety as well as his own depended entirely upon him. Otherwise he would have sought the nearest fold in the ground and curled up to sleep, using the warmth of the pinto to protect him in his semi-clad condition.

Such were the drowsy thoughts which passed through his mind until the sight of the Silver-9 ranch in the distance brought his senses to the alert again. He slightly increased the pinto's speed and reached the spread's gateway five minutes later. He rode the horse straight into the stable, then lifted down the sleeping girl and laid her on a pile of straw for a moment. It took him only a few moments to feed and water the animal and bed him down for what remained of the night—then once again, the girl in his arms, Rod walked silently across the yard in the mellow moonlight making no sounds so that the men in the bunkhouse would not be aroused.

There was a long interval after Rod had knocked on the screen door—and he had to knock again. Then an oil lamp flame came in view. The inner door opened and, hazily through the wire mesh, Val's father peered out.

'I'll be dad-blamed!' he ejaculated, and had the screen door open in a moment. 'God!' he cried eagerly, gripping his hand the moment he had put down the oil lamp. 'Is this somethin' to be glad about—? What's happened t' Val?' he broke off in alarm.

'Just sleeping,' Rod answered quietly. 'I guess she's been the grandest, toughest little helper any man could wish to have.'

'Yeah—I'll wager you're right too, boy. What else d'you expect frum a Shane, huh? But come in, come in—you can't stand holdin' her weight all night. Kinda forgetful of me.'

Shane led the way into the living-room, the lamp in his hand. He was roughly dressed in shirt and trousers, his grey hair tousled. But all traces of sleep had gone from his ruggedly hewn face with the excitement of the moment. He stood watching with a glow in his eyes as Rod laid the girl down gently on the couch.

'Better leave her just where she is,' Rod said. 'If you've got a blanket we c'n throw over her.'

'Sure have.' Shane went out of the room and came back with the blanket over his shoulder. He laid it carefully about the girl, tucked it in with masculine clumsiness, then straightened up and wagged his head approvingly. 'She's a rare bit of woman is Val,' he commented. 'I won't say she hasn't had me worried sick, though, while she's bin away—What's bin goin' on anyways? Yore not exactly dressed for a banquet yourself.'

Rod glanced down at his tattered shirt and torn pants and gave a wry grin. Then he unfastened his gunbelt and threw it on the table.

'Without bein' too candid, sir, we've been through hell—the pair of us,' he said deliberately, and the stony expression of hatred on Rod's face brought a frown to Grant Shane's forehead for a moment. 'I don't rightly realize how we've come out of it as we did. Providence, I s'pose.'

'What you need, feller, is a good meal and then a long sleep,' Shane decided. 'I'll fix the one, then y'can have the other. In the meantime, sit y'down.'

Rod gave a nod and sank wearily to a chair by the table. He was half asleep when it dawned on him that Shane had fixed a meal of hot coffee and sandwiches. With an effort he

stirred himself and took the coffee the grim-faced rancher handed to him.

‘All right,’ Shane said; ‘let’s have the story.’

Rod told it—in detail, with a glance now and again towards the profoundly sleeping girl. By the time he had finished he had eaten a dozen sandwiches, drunk three cups of coffee, and was lazily smoking a cigarette. Old man Shane sat with one elbow on the table, chin on hand, distance in his blue eyes.

‘Yeah, it looks as if you’ve certainly both had a tough time of it,’ he admitted. ‘An’ the Lord be praised y’came out of it as y’did. As for that skunk Joe—shootin’ was too good fur him. Dang it, if it’d bin me, I’d have torn him apart.’

‘I acted according to the law of the range,’ Rod answered quietly. ‘He’s dead—and that satisfies me. Seems to me all we have to do now is get Sheriff Turner to go and look at those men trapped in the cave with the gold beside ’em—then that will clear me from then on.’

Shane didn’t say anything, and after a moment or two Rod looked at him with the irritability of fatigue.

‘Am I talking to myself?’ he demanded.

‘No, of course not, son.’ Shane moved uneasily and shied from Rod’s questioning gaze. ‘Just the same, I think there’s somethin’ on which y’should be put straight right now. Sheriff Turner isn’t around any more.’

‘Isn’t around? How d’you mean? He’s the sheriff, isn’t he?’

‘He was . . . until you shot him dead.’

## SEVEN

Rod's sleepiness suddenly vanished and his blue eyes opened wide. He jerked up straight in his chair and leaned across the table.

'Until I what?' he ejaculated.

'The position's nasty,' Shane said slowly. 'The folks in town think that you rode to the bank after sundown last evening and cleared the bank of that gold dust which was lyin' around. There was you and two other fellers. In gettin' that gold you shot Sheriff Turner dead and also a puncher in the main street. That's the set-up—and the boys are out gunnin' for you. Or at least they were, earlier on.'

'Yeah—We saw 'em.' Rod brooded, his eyes narrowed. 'I saw 'em when Val an' I were in the foothills. There was Deputy Bates an' a crowd of 'em. They were decidin' to let things wait until daylight when they could see what they were doing. So that's what they were up to? I thought it was kinda queer to search so thoroughly when a jail-break and attempted robbery were my only supposed crimes. Now it adds up. I'm supposed to be a murderer as well, am I?'

'So the folks think, son. I was in town tonight when the whole thing happened, and I guess the evidence against you is mighty strong. Val wasn't mixed up in that particular hold-up, I'm glad t'say, but she's still wanted for aidin' you to break jail.'

Rod nodded slowly. 'I knew of course that one of Fancourt's boys—Joe—was aimin' to imitate me when the bank was held up, and I'd also guessed that he'd done it . . . but this is the first I've heard about murder bein' mixed up in it.'

'Bates is the sheriff now,' Shane said, and gave an ominous glance. 'I don't haveta tell you that he's nothin' like the man Turner was. Ain't got none of his discretion or commonsense. I guess he's got it in for you good an' hard, an' he won't be likely to listen to reason when you start tellin' him the facts, either.'

'He'll have to,' Rod said bluntly. 'As sheriff it's his job to be impartial, and I'll damned well tell him so.'

'Mebbe. Things are in pretty bad shape in town, son, as you'll find out if you ride there in the mornin'.'

'Not a question of "if",' Rod replied. 'I'm goin' to—the moment I've had a rest and changed into some decent clothes. I've all the evidence that's necessary by those outlaws being in that cave with the gold dust with them. They can be forced into a confession once they're released.'

The rancher gave a shrug. 'OK—run things your own way, Rod: I reckon that's best. You quite sure those skunks can't get out of that cave where you've sealed 'em?'

'Not after that second avalanche. They might ha' done with the first lot of rocks, which was why I intended goin' into town right away—but without explosives, and probably not even then, I don't see they can shift the rock in front of 'em. They'll keep all right till morning.'

'Less they have explosives,' Shane remarked. 'They might have, seein' they were plannin' on bustin' open the bank.'

'They didn't use explosive for the job, though, did they?'

'Nope—just fingered their way into the safe, I guess.'

Rod nodded and got to his feet. 'That's good enough for me, Mr Shane. They can wait. In any case I'm too tired to do any more right now. Which room can I bunk in for awhile?'

'Take mine,' the rancher said, rising and nodding towards a door on the farther wall. 'I always sleep next the living-room so's I c'n be handy if anything happens. I'll keep an eye on Val while you get some rest.'

Rod thanked him and turned away, heading into the adjoining bedroom. He remained awake long enough to drag off his boots, then flopped back on the bed and instantly fell asleep. When he awoke again there was sun dazzling his eyes and the smell of grilled ham and coffee floating from the adjoining living-room.

Completely refreshed and ready for action, Rod rolled from the bed and stood up; then he smiled as he found that during the night either old man Shane or Val had put a set of clean clothes on a nearby chair. From the size of them they were evidently the rancher's own. Rod examined them in satisfaction, then turned to the washbowl and borrowed the razor laid beside it. In twenty minutes he was re-dressed, spruce, and clean-shaven. He entered the living-room to find Val and her father at the breakfast table. The girl, too, was changed, and her thick dark hair carefully brushed. Gone were the lines of strain which had marked her face, the previous night.

'Hello, Rod!' She took his hand quickly as he went over to her. 'Feeling better?'

'Ready for anything—or anybody,' he answered quietly. 'An' you?'

'Likewise,' she said, and their eyes met for a moment.

Shane affected not to notice the endearment in their voices. Clearing his throat gruffly he said: 'Better sit y'down an' eat, Rod. I guess you must be needin' it.'

Rod smiled and took his place. He was not only hungry but ravenous. He found it a nuisance to even have to maintain conversation, but he did so out of politeness.

'You still aimin' to go into town and stick your neck out?' Shane asked him presently.

'I've got to, haven't I? I can't leave things as they are—and those outlaws have got to be roped in. I'm dealin' with the whole thing soon as I've had breakfast.'

'And I'm coming with you,' Val said.

Rod glanced at her. 'I'm not so sure that you should, Val. As far as I can see there's liable to be a bit of ugly talk when I see Sheriff Bates—I s'pose you know he's the new sheriff?' he broke off, and the girl nodded.

'Yes, I know. Dad's given me all the facts.'

'In which case you know how things are—anything but pleasant. If Sheriff Bates starts getting tough, as he probably will, I don't want you mixed up in it——'

Rod stopped talking and swung round as there were heavy footsteps in the hall of the ranch-house. In another moment Jenkins, the Silver-9's foreman, came in. He whipped off his Stetson and gave Shane a troubled look.

'Sorry to bust in like this, Mr Shane,' he apologized, 'but the sheriff and two of his deputies have turned up. They're makin' a tour round the stables and sorta weighin' things up. They didn't say nothin' and I had no power to stop 'em as they've a warrant to search if they like.'

The rancher exchanged a quick glance with Rod.

'Smells like trouble to me,' Rod said grimly, getting to his feet.

'I'll settle Bates,' Shane snapped, rising also. 'You can tell him to——'

'No, wait a minute.' Rod held up his hand. 'I've got to see him anyways and it might as well be here as any place else. In fact, mebbe it's safer here, come to think on it. If he's got a

search warrant, Mr Shane, there's nothin' y'can do to stop him.'

The rancher clenched his fists and then looked sharply towards the hall as again there were footsteps—heavy ones this time. The fox-faced Bates came in after a moment, his two deputies behind him. Rod's gaze lowered to the revolver in Bates' right hand.

'What's the idea?' Shane demanded angrily. 'You got your nerve comin' bustin' in my spread like this, Bates! I've a good mind to——'

'Take it easy, Mr Shane,' Bates interrupted, giving him a brief glance. 'I know you want t'protect your gal and Rod Cameron—wouldn't be nateral if you didn't, I s'pose. But I'm here on lawful business, an' nothin' y'can say will make the slightest difference. Yore comin' with me, Cameron, and yore under arrest for murder and robbery. Get your hat and we'll start movin' . . . Yore under arrest, too, Miss Shane, for aidin' Cameron.'

The girl opened her mouth to say something, then appeared to think better of it. Instead she just changed colour a little and did not move.

'How come you knew to look here?' Shane demanded. 'Wouldn't be givin' away any secrets to tell us that, would it?'

'You can thank one of the boys in your outfit for that,' Bates answered. 'Early this mornin' when he went to the stables he found the pinto bedded down there. He knows, same as everybody else does, that you, Cameron, rode that pinto when you robbed the bank last evening. So he came straight into town and tipped me off.'

The foreman, watching from the doorway, gave a start.

'Was it Callahan, Sheriff?' he snapped.

'Sure was,' Bates agreed. 'He's a good reason for wantin' to get even with Cameron. He's the brother of Jake Callahan, the guy who got shot as well as Sheriff Turner.'

'Which explains why I haven't seen Callahan around this mornin',' the foreman reflected. 'I wondered where the guy had gone. 'Fraid to show his face again, I s'pose.'

'Be that as it may, I came out here for a look-see on my own,' Bates said, 'an' I'm satisfied. C'mon, Cameron, you'd best be gettin'——'

'Wait a minute,' Rod interrupted. 'I'm not challenging your rights in this, Bates—but, I do have a say in things since I'm supposed to be a murderer.'

'Ain't no "supposed" about it,' Bates stated implacably.

'I think there is,' Rod retorted. 'As I've said right from the beginning, only one man is responsible for everything that's been happenin' around here, and that's Tim Fancourt. It wasn't me who raided that bank last night: it was Joe, and I've taken care of him since.'

'Murdered him, y'mean?' Bates asked.

'Nothing of the sort!' Val shouted. 'Why don't you give Rod a chance to defend himself, Sheriff? he and Joe fought it out clean—whichever drew the quicker lived, that's all. Joe was too slow. I was a witness to it.'

Bates eyed her. 'Uh-huh. OK. I'm not sayin' I believe it or I don't. I'm not interested in Joe, anyways—only Cameron. You say you——'

'When the bank was robbed Miss Shane and I were in the desert,' Rod insisted. 'We'd been left there by Fancourt and his boys, Joe tying us up.'

'Yeah?'

Rod went into every detail and the sheriff listened without moving a muscle—or lowering his gun. He looked finally at Rod's inflamed wrist as he unwound the bandage and exposed his burns for evidence.

'An' what am I supposed to do?' Bates asked finally.

‘Believe him, of course,’ Val retorted. ‘Every word he’s spoken is true. I only got him out of jail so that he could have a chance to turn round and defend himself. Unfortunately for us, everything’s gone wrong up to now—but at last we’ve got witnesses sealed up who can be forced to speak the truth.’

‘An’ you want me to go up to that cave and get these guys out?’ Bates asked, giving a cold smile.

‘It’s your duty to!’ Shane declared.

‘I reckon not.’ The sheriff shook his head. ‘Once I’d gotten into those mountains there’s nothing a killer here like Cameron mightn’t do. I’d never return alive—an’ I’m not stickin’ my neck out like that.’

‘But you must!’ Val implored. ‘It’s your duty as sheriff to give Rod Cameron every chance to clear himself.’

‘It’s my duty to act as I see fit—and don’t you fergit it, Miss Shane!’ Bates gave her an angry scowl. ‘I’m not walkin’ into a trap for nobody.’

‘Turner would have taken the chance!’ Shane snapped.

‘Mebbe—but I ain’t Turner. He was a darned sight too soft in some things. Sentiment don’t do in this business— Come on, you two,’ Bates broke off impatiently. ‘I can’t wait all day arguing. Get your hats and let’s be movin’.’

The girl turned and went towards her room. Struck by a thought, Bates followed her and remained in the doorway while she took her hat down and slipped it on, together with a fancy leather jacket. Rod remained as he was, hatless, and accompanied the girl, the sheriff and his two deputies out on to the porch.

‘I’m not standing for this, Sheriff,’ Shane said coming into view behind them as they descended the porch steps.

Bates looked back at him. ‘Yore not, huh? What do you figger you can do about it, Mr Shane? Yore already in the red for hidin’ two fugitives from justice, remember, even if one of ’em is your own daughter. You don’t want to make things any worse for yourself, do you?’

‘I’m not thinking about myself: I’m thinking of the innocence of these two, which could be easily proved if you weren’t so pig-headed.’

The sheriff did not argue any further. He went with Rod and the girl to the stables, saw that they saddled their horses, and then he gave directions for them to ride between him and his deputies. Shane watched them go, his hands gripping the porch rail, his craggy face grim.

‘Since neither of you is armed, I don’t need to keep you covered,’ Bates said, as the journey along the trail to town continued. ‘But I’m giving you fair warning that if either of you tries to make a break for it I’ll shoot—an’ to kill. That’s the law with an’ escapin’ prisoner, remember.’

‘We shan’t give you any trouble,’ Rod told him, ‘but when this business comes to trial, I’m going to demand the right to have that cave searched up in the mountains. As I figger it there ought to be a group of dead outlaws there among their gold dust . . . if they escape in the meantime my last bit of evidence to prove my innocence has gone.’

‘Be too bad, wouldn’t it?’ Bates asked drily. ‘I got all the evidence I need without walkin’ into one of your traps.’

Rod gave him a grim look. ‘You’re turning this thing into a personal issue, Sheriff—deliberately houndin’ me without givin’ me a chance to speak, and I’ve the right to know why.’

‘A murderer ain’t got the right to know anythin’.’



Rod gave it up and as he rode on steadily he tried to decide whether the sheriff was acting from a rigid sense of duty or because he really had a grudge. In truth, Bates had no grudge at all—but he had been made sheriff, and for him to rope in Rod and the girl where his predecessor had failed would make of him an official to be profoundly respected; and there was also the other fact that he really did believe Rod was guilty and that the story of outlaws in a mountain cave was pure moonshine.

Rod was still in the midst of trying to work things out for himself when the town's high street was reached. At first, the men and women on the boardwalk, engaged in their various businesses or going in and out of the stores, merely glanced—then it dawned on some of them who the sheriff's captives were. In consequence, long before the quintet had travelled half-way down the high street their course was blocked by a thickening circle of grim-faced townsfolk.

'So you got him, Sheriff—and the Shane gal as well!' one of the men said. 'What do you plan to do with 'em?'

'Put them in jail until there's another trial concernin' the murder of Sheriff Turner and Jake Callahan,' Bates replied. 'The gal goes in jail, too—as an accessory.'

'Yore gettin' soft-hearted, Sheriff!' a woman jibed, and Bates glared at her.

'Who's soft-hearted? D'you suppose I'd be takin' these two to th' jail if I was that?'

'This ain't no job for a trial and a lot o' big words from Judge Barlock!' somebody else shouted.

'Yeah, that's right! We're the ones who've suffered in this town! What about the business we lost when we had t'run fer it before that supposed twister?'

'And what about some of the valuables this feller and his men took?' a woman snapped. 'We haven't forgotten that, Sheriff, even if you have.'

'And there's two murders added!'

'Jake Callahan was one of the best guys hereabouts 'til this dirty murderer plugged him.'

The crowd was growing denser, moving and talking, hazed in the dust stirred by their shifting feet.

'Now, just a minute, folks,' Bates exclaimed, raising his hand and looking about him. 'This thing's got to be done legal. I know some of you've got plenty to beef about, but that doesn't mean y'can take the law into your own hands——'

'Who says it doesn't?' demanded a puncher in the forefront. 'This guy does—an' so does the gal with him. I reckon that we're entitled t'do a little hittin' back on our own account without waitin' fur a trial. This guy'll probably escape before then anyways.'

'No prisoner escapes from me,' Bates snapped. 'Now get outa the way an' let me carry on to my office an' the jail.'

He chose exactly the wrong tone for the people in their present ugly mood. Abruptly they surged forward overwhelmingly and Rod and Val found themselves dragged from their horses and imprisoned in the midst of the men and women. Completely outnumbered, their arms tightly held, they were forced up the high street. Sheriff Bates made a last desperate effort to ride through the angry mob and recover his prisoners, but several men grasped his horse and stopped him. The two deputies for their part did nothing. They were far less concerned with legal ethics than with seeing the man whom they imagined had murdered their friend Jake Callahan get his desserts.

Flung off their feet and borne along by the men and women Rod and the girl found themselves brought at last to the end of the street where stood a big outcropping of low-

branched cedar trees. Here they were set down and lariats were produced from amongst the crowd, with which their hands and feet were rapidly and tightly bound. 'Only one way with killers and those who help 'em,' one of the men explained. 'An' that's to string 'em up as a warnin' to others. T'hell with law. The sheriff or anybody else can't punish the lot of us . . . OK, that tree there!' he broke off, and pointed to one with a massive branch lower than the others.

Again Rod and the girl were lifted, borne to the tree in question, and set down beneath it. Two spare lariats were thrown over it, and the noosed ends were dropped about their necks.

Rod did not speak because there was nothing he could conceivably say which would make the position any the better. The mob was inflamed, intent on revenge, and determined—justifiably, perhaps—to stamp out the lawlessness which had struck their little town. Rod's eyes moved over the relentless faces, then beyond them to where Sheriff Bates was helplessly pinned in the distance, a revolver pointed at his stomach by one of his deputies. Bates, hard man though he was, could have saved the situation—but even he was not being given the chance.

Then Val spoke—desperately, hoarsely.

'Wait a minute, you people! Wait! You've got this whole thing utterly wrong! Rod didn't murder anybody and he didn't rob the bank, either last night or at any other time. To prove it you've only got to do one thing which the sheriff wouldn't do—and that's ride to a cave in the mountain foothills where the outlaws who are responsible are trapped along with the gold dust.'

'Aw, what the hell?' one of the men sneered. 'We s'posed to believe a yarn like that?'

'Yeah—get the gal strung up, and Cameron with her. We're wastin' time!'

'But I tell you it's true!' Val screamed . . . but without avail.

Several of the men came forward and took hold of the ropes in readiness to drag on them, then they paused at the crack of a rifle from somewhere near at hand. Rod looked around him in wonder, Val doing likewise—then the cause of the interruption became visible. He was a lone horseman, approaching the hanging party from the direction of the trail, having thereby missed coming through the town.

'It's dad!' Val gasped hoarsely. 'And alone . . .'

The men and women hesitated, impressed in spite of themselves by the nerve of the old rancher riding into their midst, with only a rifle to protect him. Within about a yard of the mob he drew to a halt, laid his gun across his knees, and then looked slowly around him.

'Finest bunch o' no account critters I ever did see,' he declared at last, and spat into the dust to more thoroughly express his contempt. 'What's gotten into you boys an' gals anyways? Lost your sense o' values or sump'n?'

'Best thing you can do, Mr Shane, is get outa here,' retorted the cowpuncher who seemed to have made himself the leader of the proceedings.

Shane eyed him stonily from under his broad-rimmed hat.

'An' the best thing you can do, Cal Roberts, is learn to respect your elders,' he commented. 'I know y'can do 'cos you've done it before. As to this necktie party, isn't it about time you folks learned some sense?'

'Dammit, Mr Shane, this is sense, and you know it. Cameron here—and your gal—are outlaws. Cameron's a killer.'

'He's no more a killer than I am, an' I don't aim to let yuh hang him for somethin' he never done. That's why I rode into town to see how things went when Sheriff Bates back there

took him an' my gal away from the spread and headed for jail. Knowin' the sort of folks you are, I rather thought somethin' like this would happen. Glad I came in time t'stop it.'

'You haven't!' a woman said curtly. 'We're goin' right ahead—an' we're not listenin' to your talk neither, Grant Shane.'

'Ma, I'm surprised at yuh,' the old rancher sighed, shaking his head. 'You who is always hollerin' out for justice an' who bakes the best apple pie west of yonder mountains.'

'What's my apple pies got t'do with it, I'd like t'know?'

'Plenty,' Shane said. 'You're a good woman at heart, Ma Grantham, only right now yore behavin' like the rest of these cattle an' not usin' your brains one little bit.'

'You callin' us cattle?' one of the men asked sourly.

'Yeah, Seth, I am,' Shane agreed blandly. 'That's what you are—all spittin' lot of yuh. One or two of you get a notion into your heads and th' rest of yuh follow without rhyme or reason. I reckon some of the steers in my corral show a darned sight more sense than you're doin'.'

The puncher turned leader moved forward and looked up at the old rancher angrily.

'Look here, Mr Shane, you know the facts—an' that bein' so we're only followin' out the law as we see it. We don't intend t'wait for a trial and get results. We did that before—an' what did it get us? Your gal got Cameron outa jail. Somebody might do the same again, and then there'd be more killings.'

'And you look-ee here,' Shane responded, still glancing about him. 'In this town I'm well known. I reckon there won't be a man or woman among you that doesn't know me well enough to talk to . . . that right? Own up to it! That right?'

Some of the men shifted their feet uncomfortably and gave each other sheepish glances. Then one or two of them began to give grudging answers.

'Yeah, I guess we know you all right, Mr Shane.'

'Sure do . . . but that hasn't anythin' t'do with what we're doing now.'

'It's got plenty do with it!' Shane's voice was perfectly calm, not revealing in the least the strain he was undergoing in forcing the mob to listen to him. Only his age and experience in handling men and animals made his position at all tenable. 'It's got plenty to do with it,' he continued, 'because in all the years you've known me I've never told you anythin' that wasn't true, and never handed any of you a phony story, neither . . . an' that's why the least y'can do is listen to me now. My gal and Rod Cameron are not guilty—an' if it wasn't for this pig-headed new sheriff we've gotten ourselves we'd have the evidence by now. As it is, like as not, it's escaped.'

The puncher leader gave a quick glance about him, then back to Shane.

'D'yuh mean outlaws trapped in a cave in the mountains?'

'I sure do. The sheriff was leary of investigatin' in case it was a trap—and mebbe we can't blame him at that. But if all of us go, far outnumberin' the outlaws who'll be there, it just won't be possible to spring a trap, will it?'

The assembly exchanged looks and the leader spoke for them.

'I guess not. That makes sense, Mr Shane.'

''Bout time somethin' did,' the rancher growled fiercely. 'An' look-ee here. I'll tell you what I'll do. If there's no signs of those outlaws, no traces of 'em havin' been in the mountains, an' no sign of an avalanche which Rod Cameron and my gal here started on their own, I'll let you hang 'em pronto. Yeah, I will that, even though the gal's my own daughter. I stand or fall by what I say. That's the way I do things.'

The leader looked about him questioningly. 'That OK, folks? Sounds fair enough t'me. Nobody can say we didn't give Cameron and the Shane gal a chance anyways.'

'OK,' acknowledged several of the men and women.

'All right then,' Shane agreed. 'Get those blasted ropes off'n their necks and get that sheriff over here. He'll have to come with us to make the arrests.'

That he had won his point was perfectly obvious. The men and women moved rapidly to obey his bidding and the sheriff and two deputies came over on their horses. Bates was not looking too pleased with the proceedings either.

'This ain't reg'lar, Mr Shane, an' you know it,' he said sourly.

'Neither is this necktie party which you couldn't stop,' Shane retorted. 'Stop arguin', Bates, if y'know what's good for you. If these good people were to hang my gal an' Cameron and then find the outlaws were in th' cave they'd probably hang you fur bein' such a bonehead in regard to evidence.'

Since this was the truth, Bates did not argue the point. Instead he turned to the men.

'Get your horses and let's be goin',' he ordered. 'And bring two extra ones for Cameron and Miss Shane.'

In ten minutes his orders had been carried out, then, about twenty strong, they all turned for the trail and sped along it in the direction of the blue mountains. Grant Shane rode as hard and erect as any of the younger ones, but there was a vaguely troubled look on his bearded face as he caught up with his daughter and Cameron.

'I got you both outa that one,' he said, keeping his voice down, 'an' I only hope the luck holds. If by some chance them outlaws have escaped it's goin' to be tough on us—an' certainly on you, 'cos I gave my word I'd attend your hangin' myself.'

'Even if they have escaped,' Val said, 'there'll be all the signs of the avalanche—and that should convince them.'

'Never will,' her father muttered. 'I only stuck that bit in on the hope that it would. Only one thing c'n save you both now, an' that's the evidence of one or other of them outlaws—preferably Fancourt—to prove them guilty and you innocent.'

'Seems to me, we'd have had more sense if we'd brought some explosive, with us,' Rod said, after a while. 'That rock is going to take a helluva lot of shiftin'.'

'I know—but the longer we take,' Shane replied, 'the more time it gives us to think of some way out of the mess if the outlaws should have escaped.'

Conversation finished here, in case any of the men around, or the sheriff, became suspicious—so, mainly in silence, the party hurtled on, leaving the trail presently and taking the shortest possible cut across the grasslands to the mountain foothills. In half an hour they had reached them and ascent of the rocky acclivity began.

'Better keep your guns ready, boys,' Sheriff Bates called, glancing around him. 'No tellin' what may happen, an' I still don't believe those outlaws is so bottled up they can't get out.'

'If they have gotten out it's your damned slowness which let 'em,' Shane growled.

Bates glared, cocked his gun, and said no more—and the steady upward climb went on. Then at length Rod, moving to the forefront to direct the course, held up his hand and swung down from the saddle. Immediately ahead was a towering hill of fallen rock and earth which marked the point where the cave of Mandrake's Creek was sealed off.

'Any more doubts 'bout the avalanche we caused?' he asked, looking around him.

'Avalanches ain't anythin' new,' Bates said suspiciously, also dismounting and coming over. 'It's them outlaws I want t'be seein'. We c'n only take your word fur it about the

avalanche.'

Old man Shane gave a significant look and then came over to inspect the rockery.

'Sure have got some job on here,' he commented. 'Sooner we get busy the better.'

He began dragging at the outermost boulders and throwing them on one side, and since he had set the example the other men followed his lead, Val helping too with the smaller stones.

'We'd have had more durned sense if we'd brought gelignite,' Bates growled presently, mopping his streaming face.

'Y'mean you would,' Shane corrected. 'As sheriff yore supposed t'think of these things. Not a job for us common citizens, I guess.'

Bates gave a snort and returned to his job of heaving stones and boulders. Even so, and with each member of the party working to capacity in the blazing sun, it was well over an hour and a half before any sign of a small tunnel through the collapse began to become visible—and at least fifty feet of rock and earth remained to be cleared.

'One thing more or less certain about this,' Shane said, as he worked. 'These critters inside the cave would never have bin able to move the stuff from their side of it. Takin' us all our time.'

'Plain enough that they haven't moved it, isn't it?' Bates snapped. 'Otherwise the stuff wouldn't be here.'

Shane did not answer him and the rock-heaving and shoving went on until at long last there was a three-foot wide tunnel in the debris with a black uneven hole at the far end. Bates peered towards it, his gun drawn and expectancy on his leathery face.

'If there's anybody in that cave, they're either dead or mighty quiet,' he commented. 'All right, come out!' he shouted. 'None of you mugs in there has one chance in a million of gettin' out unless we let you. Come on—out!'

His voice went echoing along the narrow bore, but there was no sign of a response. Bates straightened up and looked round at the assembled men and women. Then his flinty gaze turned on Rod.

'Anythin' t'say, Cameron?' he asked bluntly.

'Only that they might all be unconscious,' Rod answered. 'We don't know if they could get any air in that cave when the rock fell.'

'I think we're still wastin' time,' Bates snapped.

'Only one way to make sure,' Shane said. 'An' that's go into the cave an' find out. As Sheriff, it's your job t'go first.'

'Huh?' Bates gave a start. 'Me risk gettin' a bullet in my guts the moment I get into the cave?'

'Why should you if there ain't nobody there?' Shane asked drily.

Sheriff Bates was cornered. He could either admit that he was plain yellow, or else go down the tunnel—so with a bitter look he stooped, wriggled his way into the narrow space, and began to advance along the bore. Half-way along it he called back.

'Any of you mugs got a lamp? I can't see where in blue tarnation I'm goin'.'

One of the men went to the saddle-bag of his horse and took an oil lamp from it, passing it in to the sheriff. After a moment he had lighted it and he advanced again, watched intently by a ring of heads at the tunnel's entrance. When eventually his squirming journey was over and he presumably stepped into the openness of the cave beyond, anything could have happened—but nothing did.

For a while Bates' lamplight was visible flashing about; then he himself appeared—remote, like somebody in the wrong end of a telescope.

'Just as I thought,' he called. 'There ain't nobody here—an' it don't look as if there ever wus. Come an' look if you've any doubts on it.'

Rod and the girl exchanged glances with the folks around them. Their faces had become menacing again. Old man Shane's craggy features were deeply troubled once more.

'They must be there,' Rod insisted. 'They obviously didn't come out this way, and Joe himself admitted he was the only one who had the nerve to try and make a break for it and escape——'

'Sooner we find out what goes on the better,' Shane said, wriggling into the tunnel mouth. 'Come on.'

## EIGHT

After perhaps twenty minutes the cave was filled with men and women, Rod, Val, and her father in the forefront. In silence they stood looking about them, Bates moving his lamp in all directions and meeting nothing but dusty floor and rocky walls. Of the outlaws there was not the least trace—nor was there even a footprint, except those which the newcomers had made.

‘Satisfied?’ Bates asked sourly at last. ‘I hope next time you won’t all be so ready t’ doubt my judgment. I told yuh this was a bum steer—an’ I was right. When I first came in here there wasn’t a single mark on this floor dust—like, it had lain that way for centuries. If this has ever bin the hideout for a bunch of owl-hooters I must be crazy . . . or somebody must.’

‘I suppose,’ Val mused, ‘it isn’t possible for us to have somehow got the wrong cave—?’ She shook her head in quick denial of her own thoughts. ‘No, that’s impossible. This is the one all right. The only answer to that one is that the outlaws must have a secret way out.’

Bates eyed her bleakly. ‘How much longer d’you figger you can stall, Miss Shane?’

‘I’m not stalling! I——’

‘I’m sick o’ this!’ Bates declared flatly. ‘Let’s be gettin’ back to town. There’s work t’be done!’

‘Yeah, a hangin’,’ one of the men growled, and he gave old man Shane a significant look. ‘Seems like yuh’ll haveta eat your own words, Mr Shane—about bein’ present at the necktie party, I mean.’

‘I’m not satisfied yet,’ Shane replied, looking about him. ‘I think my daughter’s right: those owl-hooters must have had some other way out of this place—mebbe planned long ago in case of just such an emergency as this. I think we should start lookin’.’

‘Well, I don’t!’ the sheriff retorted. ‘This has gone on long enough an’ gotten us no place. What do th’ rest of yuh think?’

‘Yeah—sure has. Let’s be gettin’ back!’

‘Ain’t nothin’ here an’ never has bin.’

Evidently convinced that he had been hoaxed, Bates swung round and seized Rod and the girl by the arms, forcing them to the opening which led to the outside. They both stooped, preparatory to commencing the squirming journey—then an ejaculation from Shane stopped them.

‘Hey, wait a minute! Bates—give me that infernal lamp of yours. I just saw somethin’ here catchin’ the reflection of th’ light.’

The sheriff handed his lamp over and waited, one eyebrow raised sceptically. Shane hurried towards the back of the cave and held the lamp near the floor.

‘I didn’t imagine it neither!’ he cried. ‘Come an’ take a look for yourselves.’

Impressed by his urgency, the men and women did so. All they beheld on the sandy floor was a faintly glittering powdery trail which led towards a blank wall.

‘So what?’ Bates asked curtly.

‘Blast it, man,’ the old rancher roared, sweeping some of the stuff up and letting it sift through his fingers, ‘don’t yuh know gold dust when you see it?’

‘Gold dust!’

The sheriff went down on his knees and examined the gleaming powder more carefully. When several other men had looked too they had to admit the truth.

‘Yore right, Mr Shane,’ Bates confessed.

‘Then that proves we’re right, too,’ Val said eagerly. ‘Those outlaws were here but somehow they’ve got away . . .’

‘And mebbe the dust from the avalanche settled inwards and covered all traces of footprints,’ Shane said. ‘The second avalanche, I mean. If they wanted to try and show they’d never bin here, they’d take away all signs of their camp, naterally—but where’ve they gone? This wall looks like it’s blank.’

Without any by-your-leave he grabbed the sheriff’s lamp and directed the light on the blank wall—but now, under minute inspection, more interesting details were revealed. It was not smooth-faced, as natural rock should be, but made up of hundreds of small wedges jammed one on top of the other.

‘I get it!’ Rod exclaimed. ‘The outlaws must have had some explosive with them. They perhaps tried the rock in front of the cave and couldn’t move it—so they blew a hole in this back wall instead, and it gave. They went beyond it and then filled up the hole behind them, trustin’ to luck nobody would notice what they’d done . . . an’ in their hurry some of the gold dust must ha’ gotten spilled from one of th’ bags.’

‘That’s about th’ size of it,’ Shane agreed, and even the sheriff nodded.

‘Begins to look as though I’m a-goin’ t’owe you two a mighty large apology afore I’m finished,’ he commented. ‘All right—let’s get this barrier down an’ see where it takes us.’

‘Probably out to the back o’ beyond,’ one of the men responded as the stones were pulled away. ‘These mountains are thick with tunnels, an’ most of ’em lead to the open. If we ever catch up on those gunmen, I’m goin’ t’be surprised.’

Rod, for his part, did not pass any comment at all—and neither did Val. They were too conscious of the issue at stake. In silence, old man Shane beside them, they flung away the broken rocks and gradually a hole some three feet square was revealed with a stuffy, blank darkness beyond.

‘Doesn’t smell to me as though this goes very far to the outer world,’ Bates said, waving his lamp into the emptiness. ‘There oughta be a draught if that was so—an’ there ain’t.’

He eased his gun into his right hand and with the lamp in his left he scrambled through the opening and on to a rocky ledge beyond. When the others had joined him, they found that they were in a vast inner cavern, hundreds of feet across, the floor of it a good fifty feet below them. At the moment they were perched on a ledge above it, the lip of the ledge not two feet from where they were standing.

‘Nice set-up,’ Rod said grimly, gazing around him. ‘If those gunmen haven’t gotten away, they’ve still plenty of chance to hide in a cavern of this size. Rocks scattered around by the hundred, and dozens of natural galleries. It’s pretty certain they came on this by accident, otherwise they’d have used it long ago as their main hideout. Couldn’t be a better place.’

‘Time we looked around,’ Bates said. ‘C’mon.’

He led the way along the narrow ledge until he arrived at a point where they could safely descend. Each of them prepared for trouble—except Rod and Val who had no guns—they went in single file down to the cavern floor and then pivoted slowly, considering the rocks.

‘All right, Fancourt,’ Bates called at length, ‘if you or your boys are anywheres around you’d better come out. You’re covered.’

As far as voices were concerned there was no response, and the hundreds of rocks seemed to be deserted. Then Rod glanced around him in puzzlement.

‘Hear something?’ he asked, as Val glanced at him enquiringly.



For the moment it appeared that nobody did—then they began to catch the noise which had attracted him. It sounded very much like a hissing, as of a steady stream of water falling on a fire.

‘What in thunder is it?’ Bates demanded, gazing about him. ‘Sounds like a rattler—but I reckon there couldn’t be one, in here——’

‘Look!’ Val shouted abruptly, pointing overhead. ‘That’s what it is—!’

Every head turned suddenly and followed her pointing finger. High up in the rocks, obviously laid beforehand, was a long fuse, spitting and spluttering viciously as it progressed in the direction of some hidden explosives.

‘Then them outlaws is around!’ Bates ejaculated. ‘The dirty skunks have fired a fuse now it’s too late to get to it in time. An’ I s’pose they’ve gotten away safely some place—quick, we’ve got to hide somewheres mighty fast.’

The speed of temporary panic descended on the party and they dashed hastily away towards the protection of the rocks at the sides of the mighty cavern, not knowing even then whether they were running into danger or out of it. The explosive might be just anywhere.

‘Have to trust t’luck, that’s all,’ Shane breathed, squatting down beside Rod, Val, and the sheriff and watching the red spark progressing in the dark, high overhead. ‘Seems there ain’t nothin’ low-down these outlaws can’t think of.’

Bates extinguished his lamp and the tension produced at watching the travelling fuse spark was almost unbearable. When it vanished behind a rock and the hissing sound faded, the silence was of death itself. But it only lasted a matter of seconds—then with a monstrous concussion and unbearably brilliant flash of light, the explosion came, from a point high up in the cavern.

The ground rocked; the din of the disintegration stung the ear-drums of the party crouched behind the rocks below. They kept their heads down, not daring to move as boulders and dust came tumbling down upon them and the reverberations of the upheaval went rolling through the underworld, shifting the very rock strata itself.

Then, gradually, the immense disturbance began to subside. The party dared to raise their heads and peered into the darkness. Sheriff Bates’ lamp sent forth a yellow glow through a swirling haze of dust—and the light came up short against a barrier wall. It went up and still up—as far as the light could reach.

‘Nice goin’,’ Rod said grimly. ‘Looks like the roof or something’s fallen in and we’re stuck down here, the lot of us—hemmed in.’

Startled, the sheriff looked about him. Everybody was here, unhurt, but certainly hemmed in a narrow space between the wall of the cavern and the new wall which had been created.

‘Only one answer,’ Shane said, ‘an’ that’s to dig ourselves out—if we can. If we’ve done nothin’ else we’ve proved that those outlaws we want are around some place . . .’

The old rancher was quite right. At that very moment Tim Fancourt and his three remaining henchmen were rising up from concealment behind the rocks of one of the countless galleries. Fancourt had lit a lamp of his own and directed its light downwards into the monstrous cairn of rock which the explosion had created.

‘Worked out just as we figgered, huh?’ he asked. ‘Blown in part of the roof an’ covered the cavern floor—an’ if it hasn’t buried those damned fools who was tryin’ to follow us it’ll at least have trapped them fur long enough for us to get out.’

‘I got to admit it, Tim, you sure gotta brain,’ commented Slim. ‘I thought at first it was a loco idea to hang around here in the hopes them folks would come chasin’ us—’specially

when nothin' happened in th' night. Now I c'n see you wasn't so far wrong at that. Just walked into the trap.'

Fancourt nodded in the reflected light of the torch. 'Right! An' we've got nothin' to do now but walk out of this underworld by the first openin' we can find. There'll be one somewheres. There always is in these rock honeycombs.'

'To be hoped there is,' Slim commented, a trifle uneasily. 'That other entrance we came through is sure blocked up. Take a look at it.'

Fancourt looked. The lamplight had been casually trained upon it. The entire ledge which had lain beneath the rough opening in the wall had collapsed, and so had the wall behind it, sealing the opening completely.

'No way out there,' Fancourt admitted. 'We'd better move on into the cavern next this one an' see what we can do.'

He turned about, holding the lamp before him, and Slim and his two colleagues followed him. Exploration beforehand had satisfied them that this giant cavern gave on to yet another one contiguous to it, which by all normal geological laws should eventually lead to the outer world again . . . but Fancourt and his men received a profound shock as they entered the adjoining cavern and found their further progress across it barred by countless tons of fallen boulders.

'What in hell——' Fancourt did not finish his sentence: he was too astounded. He stood staring at the barrier, his lamp playing on it.

'In case yuh don't know it,' Slim said bitterly, 'we're not goin' to find a fresh outlet this way—ever. The vibration has brought the roof down.'

'But there's got t'be a way out!' one of the other men protested. 'That other hole's blocked, too.'

Fancourt flashed the light over the wall for the second time, then his face became grim.

'Yeah—we're stuck all right,' he admitted. 'OK—since we'll never get through this lot, an' have no guarantee we'll finally reach the surface if we do, we'd better try gettin' through that hole which we came through originally. Let's go.'

'Wait a minute!' Slim caught Fancourt's arm. 'Easy to talk, but what happens if some of those other guys wasn't entirely buried an' sneak up on us?'

'We can take care of 'em, can't we?' Fancourt asked sourly. 'We've got our guns an' all the ammunition we need. We've got to risk it 'cos there ain't anythin' else we can do. It also means,' he added, 'that we've got to cart those gold-dust bags right across the cavern to where the ledge was, instead of leavin' 'em back in the big cave there, to be gone back for when we'd found a tunnel to the outside.'

To crush all further argument, he turned into the major cave, walking back to the spot where he and his colleagues had hidden themselves from the explosion. There, well hidden among the rocks, were the gold-dust bags which they had intended to leave until a way to freedom had been discovered.

'Seems to me we'd ha' done better without that explosion,' Slim remarked, hauling two of the bags on his shoulders. 'If we'd ha' tried to find a way out once we got into this underworld an' not bothered to wait for those other critters, we'd ha' been miles away by now.'

'Yeah—an' still have them on our track mebbe,' Fancourt told him. 'Better to take care of 'em, as we have done . . .' He waved his lamp on the rubble below. 'Doesn't seem much doubt but what we buried 'em all right . . .'

Which assumption was, of course, premature. Behind the rock fall in the main cavern, Rod, Shane, Val, the sheriff, and the rest of the men were working desperately, clawing their way through the huge mass of rock and earth and seeming, no matter how hard they worked, to be coming no nearer to an end of it.

‘Tell y’one thing,’ Bates said, pausing in his efforts for a moment and wiping his face, in the semi-gloom. ‘The air’s gettin’ mighty bad in here. Doesn’t seem much doubt but what we’re sealed in all right.’

‘All the more reason why we should get this rubble outa the way fast as we can,’ Shane responded. ‘It’s no time to stand talkin’, man: it’s time to act.’

Bates nodded and resumed his task. It was rendered doubly difficult now for all of them by reason of the fact that Bates’ lamp, the only one in the party, was beginning to dim. It was next to impossible to see the rock and most of the removing had to be done by touch.

Val was the first to give up the effort. The stale air, the strain on her lungs, and the tremendous exertion got the better of her. She sank down weakly and breathed hard.

‘S-sorry, Rod,’ she panted, as he stumbled over to her in the dying light. ‘I’ve done as much as I can stick . . .’

‘OK,’ Rod murmured, his face gleaming with perspiration. ‘We understand. Just take it easy . . .’

He stopped as the light went out. For a moment a panicky fear gripped at his heart. The voices of the men, swearing mostly, came out of the void.

‘If this ain’t what’s meant by bein’ entombed I don’t know what is,’ came Bates’ voice, more irritable than frightened. ‘We can’t have much blasted sense, any of us, or we’d ha’ brought more’n one lamp.’

‘How could we?’ one of the men complained. ‘We didn’t know what we was gettin’ into!’

‘Aw, what’s all the yammerin’ about?’ demanded the voice of old man Shane. ‘You critters scared o’ th’ dark, or what? Sure the air’s bad—sure we stand a good chance of bein’ stuck down in this glory hole until we die . . . but not if we work until there’s no skin left on us and no air in our danged lungs. Help me get these rocks outa the way an’ stop thinkin’ so much about yourselves!’

His words, filled as usual with a rugged challenge, were enough to make the other men stir to action again. Though they could no longer see what they were doing, and every breath seemed harder to get, they pulled savagely at the unseen barrier in front of them, dragging away the stones and boulders—pushing, shoving, dragging—endlessly.

Then suddenly Shane’s powerful voice came forth again in a roar.

‘Dang it, we’ve struck fresh air again anyways! Smell that, you guys who thought we was finished!’

The fresh current of air was perfectly obvious without the need to smell it. Rod stumbled back down the rocky slope in the darkness, felt round for and then grasped Val, dragging her back with him until he felt her stirring as the gentle draught blew across her face.

‘Where d’you suppose that fresh air’s coming from?’ Bates questioned. ‘I thought this cavern would be so blocked up by the explosion the air there would be about spent too . . . this smells as though it’s coming straight from the open.’

In a sense it was. High up on the rock pile in the centre of the cave Fancourt and his three comrades were working hard on the rocks filling the opening through which they had come. They had got as far as moving the topmost stones, which automatically made an opening into the cave outside, through which the current of clear air was moving.

But Fancourt had heard the far-away, almost buried voices. He stopped his activities and suddenly extinguished his lamp.

‘What goes on?’ Slim asked impatiently. ‘How in heck d’you expect me to shift rocks if yuh don’t—’

‘Shut your trap,’ Fancourt snapped. ‘There’s voices below: I just heard ’em. Seems like we didn’t bury our friends as deeply as we’d thought.’

The others were silent, and before long the voice of Shane, and then of Rod, and afterwards, Sheriff Bates, came to them quite distinctly.

‘What do we do then?’ Slim asked. ‘Get this hole made clear and get out quick?’

‘No.’ There was a hard grin on Fancourt’s face in the darkness. ‘We’re stoppin’ right here, and as they emerge like rabbits we’re goin’ to pot ’em off. From what they’ve bin sayin’ they’ve bin buried an’ are makin’ a hole large enough to get out of. Also seems like they’ve no lamp, otherwise they’d sure be usin’ it to help ’em. That bein’ so, we’ll pin-point ’em with this one of ours and blast ’em one by one. If they don’t come up they die down there among the rocks; and if they do come up they die anyways. Couldn’t be a sweeter set-up, I reckon.’

Masking his lamp to the limit he searched round for a suitable rock cover and then settled down, pulling forth his right-hand gun and levelling it in a niche of the stone. One by one his three companions settled also. And down below, all unaware of what was awaiting them, the menfolk went on with their laborious job of making a passage wide enough to admit their bodies.

‘I guess it’s big enough now,’ Shane said at last, his voice carrying quite distinctly to the silent outlaws in the dark above. ‘Better get Val up first—she needs the air more’n any of us. All of you guys have got leather lungs, anyways. An’ if you haven’t you oughta—dang it, where is the gal?’

‘Here, dad,’ she responded, and caught at her father’s powerful hand.

‘OK, gal—up y’go.’ He seized her about the waist and thrust her forward up the narrow inlet, and almost at the same moment a glow of light illumined the end of the short tunnel silhouetting the girl’s head and shoulders. She paused in her forward clawing movement.

‘What in heck’s that?’ Rod demanded, astonished. ‘Can’t be the sun, surely—?’

He broke off at a sudden reverberating crack from a revolver. Stones and chippings, flew out of the tunnel opening. Had Val not paused in her scrambling the bullet would certainly have struck her clean in the head.

‘Come back here, gal,’ her father gasped, and catching at her feet he dragged her down again beside him. Then his grim voice resumed.

‘We’re not goin’ to find this so easy as we imagined. Those outlaws are stuck outside some place, waitin’ to pot us as we come out. They’ve got a light an’ we haven’t—an’ that makes it plenty tough on us.’

Tim Fancourt was having plenty to say, too, in his perch up in the rocks, and his invective was directed mainly at Slim.

‘Yuh thrice-blasted idiot! Why couldn’t yuh have waited until the gal showed up properly? I could have gotten her clean—an’ you had t’blow your top! If there’s any firin’ to do around here I’ll do it—an’ the rest of yuh when you get my say-so. That understood?’

Slim and the other two men growled an assent and waited. Tim Fancourt breathed hard, listened, then extinguished his lamp.

‘That shot’s given ’em warnin’,’ he complained. ‘Now’ we may have to wait a helluva time.’

‘Shot or otherwise, that lamp of yours gives us away,’ Slim objected. ‘They musta ha’ seen it.’

‘S’posin’ they did? They’d have come out t’look what it was, wouldn’t they? They sure won’t now, thanks to your damned gun.’

Silence dropped again between them, and down at the base of the rock barrier there was muttered consultation.

‘Only way outa here is by this tunnel we’ve made,’ Shane said. ‘An’ it’s plain obvious that as we get out those *hombres* mean t’blast us . . . but they can only do it as long as they keep that light fixed on us. Douse that for ’em an’ they’ll be as blind as we are.’

‘Which means we plug the lamp,’ Rod said. ‘We’ve plenty of ammunition.’

‘Right!’ Shane agreed. ‘An’ I’m the man t’do it——’

‘No, you’re not, dad,’ Rod interrupted. ‘I’ve a steadier hand and I’m a lot younger—but don’t think I don’t appreciate the offer. I’ll fix this . . . somehow. In fact,’ he added, raising his voice so it would carry, ‘I’ll get out no matter what these trigger men do.’

He tugged his borrowed revolver from its holster and with the gun ahead of him in his outstretched hand began to wriggle up the stony slope. As he had expected, the lamplight appeared suddenly, illumining the opening in a hazy glow. He wriggled himself a trifle farther, then dodged back as a bullet struck the rockery near his face simultaneously with a revolver report. He still wriggled himself further up, lying absolutely flat, his revolver trained dead on the glowing star high in the roof.

Again came a report, and dust flew in his face, so close came the bullet—then, the lamp fully sighted, he pressed the trigger three times in quick succession. The third bullet did it and the light went out to the accompaniment of a tinkle of glass and a howl of pain, presumably as one of the outlaws was shot in the hand. It was, in fact, Fancourt, who had been holding the lamp in his left hand, and firing with his right. Now in the darkness he could feel blood coursing from his shattered palm.

‘OK,’ Rod whispered, back into the tunnel. ‘We can deal with ’em now on equal terms.’

He scrambled out of the opening and amid the fallen rock on the cavern floor. Not that he was allowed to do so in comfort, for having a rough mental picture of the tunnel opening, the outlaws above fired relentlessly, the flashes of their guns and the whang of the bullets being almost synchronized. But, so far, their aim had misfired.

One by one the party scrambled up from below, deliberately holding their fire and deploying into position behind nearby rocks with which to shield themselves. Rod found himself at length with Shane, Val, and the sheriff beside him, the other members of the party not very far distant.

‘Let ’em fire,’ Rod counselled, low-voiced. ‘It all serves to make them use up their ammunition. We may not have as much as they have, since they’ve been using the cave outside for a base . . . and say—look at that dim light up there, like a hazy star. Mebbe that’s where the fresh air’s coming from.’

He was right. The glow he could see was filtering through the first small opening the outlaws had made in the barrier leading to the outer cave. It would have been a help if one or other of the outlaws had silhouetted himself against it—which each one of them took good care not to do; otherwise it was somewhat distracting . . .

Presently the firing from above ceased. Then came Fancourt’s voice.

‘All right, you mugs down there, how long d’you think y’can hold out against us? Y’may have busted my lamp but there’s this bit o’ light behind us shinin’ down on yuh—an’ any

moment we like we can make it brighter by shiftin' more rock.'

'Take careful note of his voice and its position,' Rod murmured. 'About a yard to the left of the glow I make it.'

'Right,' Shane verified.

'Y'may as well get it through your thick heads, the whole lot of yuh, that we're not leavin' here 'til every one of yuh is wiped out. That way we c'n be sure you won't start a pursuit after us when we hit the trail with this gold-dust we got. So you might as well——'

Rod fired, deliberately, at the point from where the voice came. He heard the whang of his bullet and the sharp ping it made on striking rock. Then Fancourt's voice came again.

'All right, if yuh want t'play rough—let's do it properly.' He turned aside in the gloom. 'OK, Slim, shift some more stones from that barrier,' he murmured. 'Let's see what we're doin'.'

Slim nodded—and Slim was not a man of great intelligence. He did not realize that as he moved to the stones the top of his head became visible in silhouette against the glow, his hands working. Shane smiled, kissed the barrel of the .45 he had borrowed—his own rifle having been lost in the rock fall—and then he took aim. Dead true went his bullet, and Slim screamed. His head vanished. There was the sound of loosely slipping rocks, a thud, and then silence.

## NINE

‘That takes care of him,’ Rod murmured. ‘As far as I can remember there can only be about three men left up there, including Fancourt. The rest have all been taken care of, one by one . . . Joe, then the look-out, and now that one——’

He stopped talking and looked up intently as there were the sounds of movement high above. One of the outlaws, even Fancourt himself perhaps, was doing the job Slim had intended doing—but this time without making a silhouette.

‘Jus’ the same he must be there, even if we can’t see him,’ Shane murmured. ‘Here I go——’

He levelled his gun, steadying it on the rock in front of him, and fired. There was the sharp ching of the bullet hitting rock, but nothing more. The outlaw concerned was evidently a good deal more wary than Slim had been.

‘Say, Fancourt,’ Rod shouted, ‘there’s one thing you seem t’have forgotten. There’s only one way out o’ this cave—an’ it’s that way up there where the hole is. If there were any other way you’d ha’ taken it long ago—but how do you figger you’ll ever get through that hole without us seein’ you against the light? Just try it, any one of you, and we’ll blast you.’

‘I’m leavin’ here when I’m good an’ ready—an’ when I’ve taken care of you mugs down there,’ Fancourt retorted, and the direction of his voice showed that the rock-moving was not being done by him. ‘Once I’ve gotten all the light I need things are goin’ t’start happenin’, to you lot down there in partic’lar.’

It was just as he finished speaking that there was a sudden roar. The rockery in front of the opening above slipped in a sudden miniature avalanche, and daylight, passing through the external cave, came stabbing in amidst a haze of dust. The giant cavern was no longer dark. It was possible to see the galleries, the partly collapsed roof, and even the dull gleam of three revolvers high up and pointing downwards.

‘This c’n go on forever,’ Sheriff Bates murmured. ‘I’m all fur lettin’ ’em have it and get it over with. Rest of you with me?’

‘Let’s go,’ Shane agreed, and simultaneously every man who had a gun fired a relentless hail of shots upwards. Rock chippings flew in all directions, the fumes of cordite rose on the dusty air, the din stung the ears.

Fancourt and his men fired back deliberately, and for quite ten minutes the cross-volley went on. Then, one by one, the revolvers of the men in Rod’s party began to click on empty chambers. It was forced on them that their none too large supply of ammunition was exhausted, and without anything having been achieved. Fancourt and his men were still there—and from the occasional shots they fired they were not without ammunition either.

‘Blast!’ Shane muttered, pushing his gun in the holster. ‘I reckon that does it. We’re at their mercy now since they’ve got slugs and we haven’t.’

‘Which leaves only one way,’ Rod murmured. ‘That’s to get behind those thugs somehow and nail ’em before they have a chance to realize what’s happened . . . And other things apart, if there’s one thing I’ve a hankerin’ after it’s to deal with Fancourt myself. I owe that skunk plenty.’

‘But you can’t tackle the three of them single-handed,’ Val protested, wide-eyed in the dim light.

‘I might—if the rest of you take their attention whilst I work my way round the cavern. Call to ’em—do anythin’ you like, but keep their eyes this way. Even perch your hats over the rocks for them to fire at, but don’t let them look behind if you can help it. I’ll do the rest—or else never come back.’

‘Good luck,’ Shane murmured, entirely matter-of-fact, and withdrawing his gun from its holster again he perched his hat on the barrel in readiness to raise it as bait over the rock in front of him.

Rod gave a gentle pat to Val’s arm and then, taking off his useless gun-belt in order to give himself greater freedom of movement, he began to glide silently away. The endless clusters of rocks, both fallen and natural, gave him all the protection he needed as he worked his way round the cavern in a huge semi-circle. All the time he advanced he could hear the exchange of threats going on behind him, and occasional outbursts of firing as Fancourt did his best to ginger up the proceedings. Matters had definitely reached a stalemate, with both sides in a virtually unshakeable position.

Then, after perhaps twenty minutes, Rod found he had reached the ledge, the far end of it, whereon the trigger men were crouched. He moved silently and low down, flitting from rock to rock, advancing ever nearer to them until he could actually see them just beyond the opening they had made into the external cave.

Twenty yards away from them he paused, thought the position out, and looked about him. In the meantime, Fancourt’s derisive insults floated across the silence and his gun cracked viciously. Peering at him round the edge of his sheltering rock, Rod could distinguish the bloodstained bandage—part of his shirt—with which the outlaw had wrapped up his hand.

‘One-handed,’ Rod murmured. ‘That’s a help, mebbe. And the other two in good shape.’

He searched around for two comfortable-sized chunks of rock, weighed them in his hands, and then got to his feet. He knew that his next action was going to be crazy, but it had the paramount advantage of surprise.

‘Hey, you three!’ he roared suddenly, and so violent was his voice and so near at hand, the three outlaws visibly jumped. Rod jumped, too, in a different sense, clean into the midst of them, bringing down his rock chunks on the heads of Fancourt’s two colleagues. The force he put behind the blows was sufficient to half-stun them and they sagged helplessly into the rocky dust of the ledge.

Fancourt twisted round, flashed up his gun, and Rod lashed out his foot. It caught Fancourt a savage crack on the jaw and knocked him backwards. Moving at top speed, Rod yanked a gun from the nearer of the two men struggling on the floor and twisted it butt foremost in his hand. With complete ruthlessness, he slammed it down hard behind the ear of each dazed man, beating them into unconsciousness—then he straightened, feet apart, the gun trained steadily on Fancourt as he half lay, his blood-stained hand fingering his chin.

‘On your feet, feller,’ Rod ordered coldly. ‘Drop your gun!’

Fancourt’s pale, cruel eyes travelled to his fallen comrades, then up to Rod’s merciless face. He made to drop the gun from his right hand, but instead whipped it up again at the last moment. Rod was ready for it and brought down his boot hard on the outlaw’s wrist. He howled as the heavy nails bit into his flesh, and the gun, unexploded, was jolted from his grip. Rod kicked it sideways and down into the cavern out of reach. As he did so he caught a glimpse of the distant figures of Shane, Val, Bates, and the others who had emerged from hiding to watch the proceedings.

‘On your feet, I said,’ Rod snapped.



Fancourt got up, dishevelled, and with a murderous glint in his eyes.

‘All right, so yuh beat me,’ he panted. ‘I’m not beefin’. Git on with it and hand me over. Think I care? I knew I had it comin’ some day—don’t make no odds whether it’s soon or late.’

Rod took two paces backwards, removed the guns from the fallen men on the floor, and threw them far away into the cavern’s reaches. Then he did the same with the gun he himself had been using.

‘What’s the idea?’ Fancourt demanded. ‘You crazy?’

‘No,’ Rod told him calmly. ‘Just gettin’ ready to pay off some of the account I owe you, Fancourt. Remember that I once warned you that I’d pay you in full for everythin’ you did to Miss Shane an’ me when we couldn’t protect ourselves?’

The outlaw licked his lips and glanced briefly behind him. All he saw was the endless waste of rock and, in the immediate foreground, the gold-dust bags with which he had intended to retire to peace and comfort.

‘What more d’yuh want?’ he blazed. ‘Yuh’ve got me—yuh c’n hand me over to th’ sheriff down there any time yuh feel like it—an’ now yuh start ramblin’ about wantin’ t’pay off old scores. Anyways, I can’t fight—me hand’s busted.’

‘One of them is,’ Rod acknowledged. ‘The left one—which you use least. I’m putting mine out of action, too: I never fight a guy, even a dirty murderer like you, on unequal terms. Isn’t my code.’

Fancourt stared at him blankly. That any man, with all the aces in his hand, should deliberately throw them away was something he could not understand. He watched in wonder as Rod pushed his left hand in his pants’ pocket, and kept it there. Then he doubled his right fist.

‘I’m ready, Fancourt,’ he said, shrugging, not a muscle moving on his taut features. ‘Plenty to pay off, I reckon.’

Fancourt hurled himself forward, convinced that the advantage was entirely his. He had also weighed up the fact that outside the cave there would be horses waiting. If he could reach one of them, he could at least get away in safety. If he could smash Rod down, by no matter what means, he could perhaps lift at least one gold-dust bag and get away with it. This lanky Arizonian with one hand in his pocket was stark crazy—nothing else.

Such were the outlaw’s thoughts as, in leaping forward, he brought up his right fist with all his strength. It should have landed on Rod’s jaw, but for some reason he was not there at the moment of impact. Calculating things to a split fraction, he jerked back his head at the vital moment, let the outlaw go stumbling past him with fist upflung, then landed him a right-hander on the back of the neck that flattened him hard against the rock wall of the ledge.

Dazed, his ears singing, Fancourt turned around dizzily.

‘There’s a little matter of a kick in the ribs you gave me, a blow in the face, and the twisting of Miss Shane’s arms,’ Rod outlined, his hand still in his pocket, and his right fist doubled for further action. ‘Ladies first, huh—so this one’s for Miss Shane. . . .’

The fist lashed upwards and outwards with such terrific speed and violence that Fancourt hardly had the chance to see it, and certainly not to dodge it. It landed on top of his right eyebrow, drawing blood, and making him see an infinity of flaring sparks for a moment. It goaded him into savage activity and he struck out with both his sound and injured hands—but everywhere he hit he met the merciless punishment of Rod’s single fist. It struck with the speed of a snake and the force of a pile-driver.

‘That for the kick in the ribs——’ Rod snapped, and Fancourt found himself flying backwards along the narrow ledge, his mouth salty with blood and one eye no longer functioning, so swollen had it become.

‘That for the blow in the face——’ Rod added, and gasping and choking Fancourt was dragged up, battered relentlessly about the mouth and nose, then hurled with shattering force against the rock wall.

‘That for good measure,’ Rod added, and whipped up a haymaker. Fancourt took it right under the chin. It snapped his teeth together and only just missed guillotining the end of his tongue. Utterly beaten, he sagged, dropped to the ledge, and clawed helplessly at his battered face.

‘Hey!’ roared Sheriff Bates’ voice from below. ‘What goes on up there, Rod? You playin’ games or sump’n?’

‘Just softenin’ this coyote up,’ Rod called back. ‘I’ve bin writing “paid” across an account I had with him—an’ I haven’t finished yet. Keep your ears pinned back, Sheriff: he’s got more t’say yet.’

‘I haven’t!’ Fancourt shouted huskily, staring up with his sound eye. ‘Fur God’s sake, Cameron, don’t yuh know when yuh’ve licked a man? I’m beaten—finished. I admit it.’

‘Partly,’ Rod said. ‘But there’s one trifle you’ve left unfinished—an’ it means a lot t’me and Miss Shane t’get it done. Right! On your feet!’

Fancourt had not the strength to rise. Rod took his left hand from his pocket, seized the gunman under the arms, and jerked him upright. There he held him, facing downwards limply towards the cavern where the sheriff and the rest of the party stared upwards.

‘Now, tell ’em,’ Rod breathed. ‘Tell ’em you faked that story of a tornado! Tell ’em you fixed that first and second bank robbery. Tell ’em it was Joe, or one of the boys with him, who wiped out Turner an’ Jake Callahan.’

Fancourt did not say anything at all. His bruised and bleeding mouth set in an obstinate line.

‘So, that’s it?’ Rod enquired. ‘Want softenin’ up a bit more, huh? Like you did to Miss Shane?’

Fancourt shook his tousled head obstinately. Rod shifted his hand grip and suddenly forced the gangster’s right arm up his back. With a howl of anguish, he fell on his knees.

‘Start talkin’ ’fore I break it,’ Rod ordered.

‘Yeah—yeah, all right!’ Fancourt’s voice was nearly a scream. ‘OK—it wus me—an’ Jake—— The gold bags are here. C’m an’ get ’em, but fur God’s sake leave me alone . . .’

Rod released him and he sagged, a crumpled, gasping heap.

‘Pity I ain’t your breed,’ Rod said, ‘otherwise I reckon this’d be a good time t’give you a kick in the ribs.’ He turned away in disgust and motioned to those below. ‘OK, down there. Time you came up and fixed things.’

His injunction was needless for the party was already coming up to the ledge by the nearest route, Sheriff Bates in the lead. When he finally arrived, he took one look at the three fallen men, two of them unconscious and Fancourt only just holding on to his senses; then he turned to Rod and gripped his hand.

‘I said I’d be owin’ you an’ Miss Shane an apology afore long,’ he said. ‘Now you’ve got it—both o’ yuh. This is a nice, tidy job you done, Cameron.’

‘Been all the quicker if you’d have listened to reason in the first place,’ Rod grinned. ‘But I’m not goin’ t’make an argument outa that. Only thing I want to do is get outa this

confounded place and then Miss Shane an' I have got some business t'discuss.'

'No secret what it is, either,' old man Shane commented, grinning through his beard. 'An' I'm still tellin' you, Rod, that's a one hundred per cent woman you picked yourself.'

'I didn't get such a bad sort of man, either,' Val said, as Rod looked suddenly awkward. 'He's not exactly what you could call the drawing-room type, is he?'

[The end of *Tornado Trail* by John Russell Fearn (as Marvin Kayne)]