

Navajo Vengeance



JOHN RUSSELL FEARN

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NAVAJO VENGEANCE

By
JOHN RUSSELL FEARN

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From a distance of a few miles from the yellow glow of light which marked the position of the town of Desert's End, the western night appeared calm enough. The soft wind was loaded with the odours of junipers, oak, and cedar; the stars were brilliant in the purple diadem of the sky. Over to the east the moon was just rising above the distant Piuga Mountains. Here was peace, carrying with it a torch of reverence, except when broken by the distant roar of a mountain lion or the wailing of a coyote.

Yet in Desert's End itself, mushroom town of southern Arizona, all the naked fury of man's inhumanity to man was being unleashed. The main street of the town was filled with a yelling mob, men and women both, their angry faces given a deeper mask of devilment by the crude kerosene lamps which vaguely illuminated the vista.

Shouts of fury, risen dust, a sweating team of horses dragging an ancient buck-board upon which stood a solitary man, his wrists pinioned behind his back and his gun-belts conspicuous by their very absence. To either side of him, to make doubly sure he made no break for freedom, stood a couple of cowpokes, grinning harshly in anticipation as they gazed ahead towards the giant cedar tree which marked the end of the street.

It looked as though everybody in Desert's End was abroad tonight—and why not? A necktie party didn't happen often. Those either in agreement or disagreement were mingled together, a senseless, fiendish mob, their emotions hardly their own but whipped into a frenzy by Whittaker Brice, biggest property owner—and therefore acknowledged boss—of the town.

At the moment Whittaker Brice was standing outside the batwings of the Painted Lady saloon. From this elevated position of the boardwalk he was able to have an unobstructed view of the dust and fury now passing down the main street.

Brice was as big in stature as in power. He stood a good six foot three, though his height appeared deceptive since his immense shoulders were wide and thick. As usual he was dressed in black, even to his stetson, the only relief being provided by the spotless white shield of his shirt front.

"Sure is a pretty sight," he murmured round his cheroot, as the grim cavalcade moved directly past him. "Mebe that'll show the critter whether he can do as he likes hereabouts."

"Just the same, Whit, it's liable to get you in bad with the folks!"

Brice turned sharply, half startled for the moment, so intent had he been on the crowd. Now he beheld Connie McBride beside him, a heavy coat seeming rather incongruous over the black, sequined evening gown flowing beneath it.

"Guess I'd forgotten you, Connie," Brice muttered.

"Not only me, Whit, but everything!" the girl retorted. "Everything that is, save this necktie procession."

Brice did not say anything for the moment. Connie McBride, the Painted Lady's hostess and singer was about the only person in Desert's End who said outright to Brice what she thought. And usually Brice took it. Deep inside him he had the idea Connie was 'that way' about him. Partly, he was right. His money was worth the consideration of any girl unexpectedly stranded in this undeveloped region of southern Arizona.

"If I get in bad with the folks, that's my worry," Brice said presently, returning to his survey. "Don't see why I should, anyways. Cal Rutter and that side-kick o' his deserve all

that's comin' to 'em. Case wus proved, wasn't it? All fair an' square in a court o' law."

"Court of law!" There was icy contempt in Connie's voice. "A shyster lawyer ready to lick your boots, a judge afraid to cross you, and a sheriff who's nothing better than a well paid 'Yes-man'. Court of law! You're not fooling me, Whit, even if you're trying to fool yourself. This necktie party's not only illegal, it's downright murder. An' some of the folks won't forget to say so when they have time to think about it."

Brice turned back to the girl again, measuring her with his hard grey eyes.

"The way you worry about Cal Rutter I could almost think yore carryin' a torch f'r him," he mused.

Connie did not betray herself by any expression in particular. She gazed back, her pretty face uncompromising. She had blue eyes which always carried conviction and a firm little mouth for added emphasis. Connie McBride was an interesting-looking girl but not entirely a pretty one.

"If you *are*," Brice added, knocking the ash from his cheroot, "you haven't much time to go to work, I reckon."

Connie turned back to the rail of the boardwalk, staring at the cavalcade as it reached the distant cedar tree. The crowd was commencing to break up, forming a giant circle round the death tree. Cal Rutter himself, the bound man standing on the buck-board, was still there between the cowpokes—but another man was being bundled up into the wagon from amongst the crowd—'Smoky' Jones, Cal Rutter's side-kick . . . Time was running out.

"Look, Whit—" Connie turned suddenly, a barely hidden light of desperation in her eyes. "Get one thing straight. I'm not carrying a torch for Cal Rutter, even though I admit I like him quite a lot. It's *you* I'm worrying about!"

"Yeah?" Brice slanted an eye at her. "Why?"

"Because you're the biggest man in this town and so far there's no record—no visible one anyway—of you having been anything but just. This *isn't* just! It's *fixed*! And if the fact ever comes out that you've had an innocent man hanged the authorities over in Phoenix or Tucson will bring down everything you stand for, and you with it. You *know* Cal Rutter isn't a killer!"

"I don't know anythin' of the sort. Yore ridin' mighty close to callin' me a liar, Connie."

"I'll ride even closer and say you fixed this because you're *afraid* of Cal Rutter! He could make for some mighty keen competition hereabouts and that's one thing you don't want. You've built up Desert's End from scratch, and you're its undisputed boss. Cal looked like giving you a run for your money before he was caught mixed up in that shooting business at the Double-Z."

"My boys came across Rutter thievin' cattle from the Double-Z—Rutter and 'Smoky' between 'em." Brice recounted the facts deliberately. "Old man Harcourt, owner of the Double-Z had been shot dead and his wife and daughter was hanged in the barn. What more evidence do we want than that?"

"The evidence that Cal and 'Smoky' actually *did* it—and that evidence hasn't been found. It's all too circumstantial. Cal may have been right when he said he heard Harcourt's calls for help, and he and 'Smoky' sailed in to help. At that point they were caught and things looked mighty different from what they were . . ."

Brice beat his fist gently against the boardwalk rail, his gaze fixed on the distant cedar tree. Two ropes had now been slung over its lowest branches, ropes whose nooses dangled ominously.

“All right,” Connie snapped suddenly. “If you won’t stop this murder, Whit, I will—and take the consequences.”

She turned to hurry down the boardwalk but Brice reached out a powerful hand and seized her shoulder. Perforce she had to stop.

“I’ll do all the orderin’ around here, Connie—remember that. A crowd like that’d never take any notice of you, anyways.” He released her abruptly, megaphoned his hands, and bawled at the top of his voice. “Hey there! Hold it! I’ve something to say . . .”

On the buck-board, timed to travel forward at any moment and leave the two occupants dangling at the ends of their ropes, Cal Rutter and ‘Smoky’ looked up with sudden hope. The nooses were already about their necks and they had been steeling themselves for the dive into eternity. Any respite was welcome, even though it would probably only be a brief one. Whittaker Brice was hardly the man to retract a decision once he had made it. Unless . . . Cal Rutter felt his heart thudding with a new-born hope. Brice was advancing down the street, and behind him came Connie McBride. Perhaps her woman’s influence had done something to the hard-hitting town owner.

“Wot’s the idea, Whit?” a cowpuncher demanded, as the big man pushed his way through the crowd. “We’re all set to give these two wot’s owin’ to ’em.”

“Take down those ropes,” Brice ordered, ignoring him.

The two men in charge of the ropes hesitated, then looked towards Sheriff Andrews for confirmation. The sheriff himself, fat and shifty-eyed, frowned in bewilderment.

“You on the level, Whit?” he demanded.

Brice glared at him. “How the hell many more times have I to give an order? Take down those ropes!”

Reluctantly, the order was obeyed. The crowd muttered among themselves. Brice looked about him on the hard, sullen faces and then up towards the two men on the buck-board.

“I’ve decided t’spare you,” Brice said finally.

Cal Rutter, tall and lean, with lank black hair falling aside from a bullet scar atop his skull, gave a cynical smile.

“Mighty big of you, Brice. I’m not askin’ for favours, an’ neither is ‘Smoky’ here.”

“Huh?” ‘Smoky’ Jones gave a start. “You speak for yourself, Cal! I ain’t aimin’ to play a harp if there’s any ways out of it.”

“Cut them loose,” Brice directed, and after a moment or two a couple of grim-faced cowpokes complied by leaping on to the buck-board and getting busy with their knives.

Once he was free Cal Rutter flexed his hands and then pushed back the tumbled hair from his forehead. His sharp blue eyes aimed questions.

“Well, Brice, what’s the pay off?” he demanded. “You ain’t the kind of man to just tell us we’re let off. Must be more to it.”

“There is,” Brice assented, and with that he vaulted up on to the buck-board, finishing up at Cal Rutter’s side. Both men were evenly matched for height, though Brice looked by far the broader and stronger.

“Wot’s changed everythin’, boss?” somebody shouted.

“These two saddle-tramps are murderers and cattle thieves! We heard the court say so.”

“At the last minute some fresh evidence has come in,” Brice said flatly. “There’s enough in it to make me think I might be doin’ these two men an injustice by hanging ’em. Anyways, I don’t want it on my conscience.”

“If they didn’t do it, who did?” a woman demanded.

"I don't know yet—but I'll find out."

Cal's wondering eyes strayed from Brice down to the girl Connie as she stood just below the buck-board. She gave her quick entrancing smile and it was at that moment that Cal knew whom he had to thank for his—and 'Smoky's'—deliverance. He smiled back, then reverted his attention to Brice as he went on talking.

"The fact that you two have escaped a necktie party doesn't mean I'm going to tolerate you kickin' around town and gettin' in my way. You've an hour to get out—and stop out. The sheriff'll give you back your hardware."

"Anything else?" Cal asked quietly.

"What more do you want, fella? Think yourself lucky!"

"Okay. Thought mebby you'd kiss us good-bye."

Brice clenched a fist, but he did not use it. The sardonic smile on Cal Rutter's lean face was profoundly irritating. Brice felt he had already made himself small before the populace and any more cracks from Cal were likely to make him lose control entirely.

"Quit arguin', Cal," 'Smoky' entreated, levering his short, podgy bulk over the buck-board edge. "We're free to go, ain't we? Do as the man sez."

Cal shrugged. "Okay—but though we're leavin' now, Brice, I'm not promising it's for good. This necktie party was a frame-up from start to finish, and I aim to find out one day who *did* kill old man Harcourt and his family and steal his cattle."

"Return here and you'll be shot down without any questions being asked," Brice said briefly.

"Mebby I'll chance that. I've my name to clear. Meantime, thanks for the respite."

With that Cal jumped over the buck-board edge and dropped beside 'Smoky', but almost immediately he moved over to where Connie McBride was standing watching.

"I reckon I've you to thank for this, Connie," Cal murmured, studying her.

"It was Whit who released you," she responded, and her blue eyes lowered.

"Mebby it was, but if I've got Whit figgered right he isn't the kind of man to let a prospective enemy escape a noose if he can help it. There's something queer about the set-up and I still think yore back of it."

Connie's eyes looked at him again. "Just as long as you're free, Cal, what's the odds? Innocent men *should* be free."

"So should innocent girls. Kinda worries me, you being in so thick with Whit Brice."

"I can look after myself, Cal—"

"Hey, you!" Brice looked down from the buck-board, one of his big .45's in his right hand. "Get moving! This ain't no time to pick a conversation with Connie McBride!"

Cal glanced up at him. "Any time's the time for that, Brice. She's a mighty nice gal—darned sight too nice to be mixed up with a tinhorn like you!"

Brice moved his gun menacingly but did not say anything.

"This way," ordered Sheriff Andrews, coming up from the rear. "I'll give you two hombres your hardware and then I'll see you on your way."

Cal remained no longer. He gave a final nod to the girl and joined 'Smoky', the sheriff coming up behind them. The sullen crowd fell aside to let them pass, then the grim faces were directed back to Brice as he leathered his .45 and prepared to jump down from the buck-board.

"This ain't going to do you any good, Whit," said a rangy axe-faced man, ambling forward. "Once you've given an order you shouldn't go back on it, leastways not because a girl says so."

Brice's face hardened. The rangy man had stopped now at the buck-board edge. Everybody knew him, in his seedy black suit. Everybody knew that incredibly narrow face with the flinty light grey eyes. Here was Edgar Waneson, the town's leading lawyer, the man who had twisted every conceivable fact in order to bring the necktie party into being.

"You tryin' to tell me my business, Waneson?" Brice snapped.

"Nope. I'm just saying that you're losing your grip. This girl here's influencing you, and that's a bad sign. A man who runs the town oughta make his own decisions."

"I do—and shall. And you can shut up."

Waneson lighted a cigarette unhurriedly. "Sure thing. I know when to keep the peace—but you'd better satisfy these good people around here that there *is* new evidence, otherwise they'll be thinking you let those killers go for reasons of your own."

"Yeah, that's right!" The town's leading store dealer came forward challengingly. "What *about* that new evidence, Mr. Brice?"

"I'll produce it when I'm good and ready!" Brice retorted. "I know what I'm doin' and I'll act as I see fit. As for you, Waneson, don't start talking outa turn if you know what's good for you!"

"Just lookin' after your interests," the lawyer shrugged.

"Like hell you are! Yore just tryin' to get me in the red so's you can run this town yourself. I'm wise to you, Waneson, and don't you forget it!"

The lawyer said no more, but his expression was quite enough as he lounged away. For that matter, Brice had spoken truth. The one ambition of Edgar Waneson was to control Desert's End in his own way—and he was in a strong technical position to do so as well. He knew Brice's activities inside out: he knew all the details of cattle 'disappearances', of changed brands, of illicit selling, every detail of the machinations which had served to enable Brice to build up this crazy little town and so continue to fill his coffers. If Waneson ever decided to open his mouth wide—well, probably the authorities would raise their eyebrows more than somewhat, believing that Desert's End was quite a properly run town, for what it was. Perched on the edge of nothing, with desert on one side and mountains on the other, it was not worthy of intensive attention anyhow.

"All right!" Brice called, looking at the still assembled men and women. "What are you waitin' for? The party's over so y'can break it up."

With that he jumped down from the buck-board and moved to where Connie McBride was standing. She gave him her steady look in the kerosene flare.

"What happens, Whit, if Waneson demands you produce the new evidence to please the townfolk?" she asked quietly.

"Waneson's in no position to demand anything, and if he does he'll get a bullet where it'll do the most good. Now let's get back to the Painted Lady. I need a drink after that, even if it's only as a pick-me-up to help me decide why I followed your advice tonight."

Connie began moving with him through the dispersing crowd.

"You followed my advice because I didn't want the folks to think afterwards you'd hanged innocent men."

"An' some good it does me! They're more suspicious about my releasing those two than if I'd let 'em be hanged. I've more people against me now than I had before, including Mayor Slater. Or mebbly you didn't see his look as he stood on the edge of the crowd?"

"No," Connie admitted. "I didn't."

Mayor Slater was another dubious quantity—a mayor in name only, taking his orders direct from Whittaker Brice. It had never occurred to Connie quite so clearly before how absolutely Desert’s End was the property of Brice alone.

She was still thinking about it as they re-entered the Painted Lady and went across to a corner table. The smoky haze of the place, which had dispersed somewhat during the necktie procession, was commencing to return as the townsfolk drifted back in twos and threes. Brice sat eyeing them, his heavy face grim. Connie for her part made no observations, and her duties as hostess had finished for the time being when she had joined Brice on the boardwalk outside the saloon.

“You prepared to be frank with me about somethin’, Connie?” Brice asked at length, when the drinks had been brought.

“Depends what it is.” Connie gave him her cool look.

“How thick are you and Cal Rutter?”

“We’re not thick at all.”

“Don’t hand me that, Connie. I saw the way he made straight for you the moment he jumped down from the buck-board. No man does that ’less he’s got some special interest. I also noticed you didn’t discourage him.”

“No reason why I should,” Connie shrugged. “After all, I’m free, white, and twenty-one.”

Brice fingered his glass slowly, musing. “Sorta doesn’t make sense to me,” he muttered. “You said you wanted those two saddle tramps released to save *my* face. Now you’ve got me wonderin’. Was it a woman’s subtle trick to save *Cal*, and not me?”

“I can’t help it if your imagination works overtime, Whit. And if you’re trying to figure out the workings of a woman’s mind I should stop right now. You’ll never make it.”

“I don’t aim to—but I’ll tell you this much. If I ever find that it’s Cal yore after and not me it’ll be just too bad . . . And anyways, what use is he to you? He’s only a wanderer from Oregon way or somewheres. No money, no prospects—”

“He had plenty of prospects, Whit, and you know it. You were afraid of him—not his money, since he hadn’t any worth mentioning, but his personality. Given time he could have given you a run for your money, and you knew it! Otherwise you wouldn’t have ordered him out of town.”

“Sure can sing his praises, can’t you?” Brice asked sourly. “Why don’t you be yourself and see what *I*’ve got to offer—”

“I reckon they’re on their way, Whit.”

Brice glanced up impatiently at the interruption to behold the fat, shifty-eyed sheriff beside him.

“You got men posted to see they don’t come back?” Brice asked.

“Sure thing—not that I think they aim to. Cal Rutter was sayin’ something about headin’ Nevada way. Mebby he’s got it in mind to finish up in Oregon where he came frum.”

“Okay,” Brice growled, and expected the sheriff to move away towards the bar—only he didn’t. Instead he rubbed his stubbly chins speculatively.

“I ain’t at all sure you did the right thing lettin’ those two go,” he said finally. “That they’re bitter enemies of yours goes without sayin’, even if you *did* release ’em. They know they was framed and as he rode off Cal Rutter was still swearin’ to come back one day and even the score.”

“I’ll take care of him if he does—and don’t you start openin’ your mouth too wide about a frame-up, neither! Now get to the bar. Can’t y’see I’ve got company?”

The sheriff's roving eyes moved momentarily to Connie, then with a shrug he ambled away. Brice watched him go, his lips tight.

"Nice bunch of henchmen you've got," Connie commented, sipping her drink. "One slip on your part and the lot of 'em will tear you to pieces. Lawyer Wanesson, Sheriff Andrews, Mayor Slater—all waiting to pounce. All they want is a chance."

"And you're thinkin' that mebbe Cal Rutter could have given them that chance?" Brice's hard grey eyes were glinting dangerously. "I'm just beginning to see the light."

"If I didn't have some regard for you," Connie said patiently, "I wouldn't stop in this dump. I could easily move on to Yuma, Phoenix, Tucson, any of 'em, and get myself something a good deal better. I stop here because I believe in the future of Desert's End."

"And in me?"

"Could be," Connie shrugged.

Exasperated, Brice finished his drink and ordered another. He was just about to start on it when Sheriff Andrews came lounging back.

"Well?" Brice glared up at him. "How many more times do y'have to interrupt me?"

"I ain't apologizin' for that, boss, when I've somethin' important to say . . . I got to thinkin': s'pose Cal Rutter happens to find out in his wanderings—as he easily might—that Desert's End is built on a one-time Navajo encampment? If he discovers that to build this town you blotted out quite a few hundred Navajo he'll have a grand lever to work with."

"How will he?" Brice snapped.

"Navajos ain't extinct yet," Andrews answered. "They came as far south as here and went as far north as Oregon. Wandering tribes of 'em are still seen. If Rutter happened to find any of 'em and could work with 'em he wouldn't have much difficulty in organizing them to work against you."

"In reprisal for what Whit here did to the original Navajo encampment which stood here?" Connie questioned.

"That's the way I look at it, Miss McBride. I'm the sorta man who examines angles see, and if—"

"Like I sed before, you talk too much," Brice interrupted. "Leave us alone, can't you?"

Andrews took the hint and wandered away. For a moment or two there was silence then Brice lifted his eyes to find Connie studying him fixedly.

"I didn't know things were . . . like that," she said slowly.

"Y'don't haveta believe all Andrews sez, Connie."

"He didn't invent that bit about the destruction of a Navajo encampment; he hasn't the imagination. It's true, isn't it? You've built the foundations of this town on massacre?"

Brice gave a bitter smile. "You don't need to put it like that, Connie! Just as a man can't figger a woman's mind, neither can a woman figger a man's. You can't see why a few filthy Indians shouldn't be obliterated to make room fur something progressive."

"I can see that it was murder, Brice. I often wondered how Desert's End got started in this region, and you've always been cagey about it. I'm glad to know the facts."

"How much good do they do you?" Brice demanded. "It's all in the past."

"Maybe . . ." Connie reflected. "As Sheriff Andrews pointed out, the past sometimes comes up and hits you in the face. I'm not carrying a torch for the Navajo, believe me; they're a hard, cruel lot, what few there are still remaining in this region, but I don't like the thought of your having built a town on their bones."

Brice's mood seemed to have changed. "When somebody gets to the top, Connie, somebody else has got to be underneath—an' it might as well be Navajos. Desert's End is an up and coming town, and as fur Andrews' bright ideas about Navajos staging a reprisal—well, he's loco. They couldn't get close enough. Bows and arrows are no good against a rod."

"Apparently," Connie said, rising, "you've missed the main point of Andrews' intuition. He said that if Cal Rutter got himself mixed up with the Navajos—"

"He couldn't. He'd be killed first."

"Don't be too sure of that!" Connie leaned forward urgently. "Cal didn't have much money, but he knew quite a few things. He has a knowledge of the Navajo language among other things, and that could be useful. Remember how he talked the language one day in this very pool-room. I only hope for your sake—for all our sakes—that the sheriff hasn't got a hunch that may come true. A man like Cal at the head of a band of Navajo nomads could cause a desperate amount of trouble. I know that Indians and whites are at peace in a general way, but there are still countless renegades."

Brice laughed cynically. "Forget it, Connie; you're getting all het up over nothin'. Leastways, it sorta proves one thing, I shouldn't have let Cal go, or 'Smoky' either. An' I wouldn't ha' done but for you. I hope you're satisfied!"

"I acted in what I thought were the best interests," Connie replied ambiguously, buttoning up her coat. "I don't consider I'm responsible for what may come out of it . . . See you tomorrow, Whit."

Brice rose as she turned to go. He did not speak. He was too busy trying to work out where he really stood in Connie McBride's mind.

Once they had left Desert's End—or, more correctly, been escorted out of it by the sheriff and his deputies—Cal Rutter and 'Smoky' Jones just kept going, heading more or less aimlessly in a north-westerly direction. Here there was nothing but desert. Yuma, their intended destination, lay a full hundred and fifty miles away.

Around the two men there now pressed the penetrating cold of the dark hours, piercing even through the thick mackinaws they were wearing. Overhead was the cloudless dark of the sky, broken only by the emphatic diamond brilliance of the stars. The two horses, wide awake after long hours of rest in the stables, plodded on steadily through the sand, moving past the ghostly bulks of giant cacti, the only growing things in this forgotten waste. Of life other than plant the only trace lay in the occasional rustle of sand lizards or the far whirr of a 'side-winder' vibrating in warning. Of these latter the horses took full account and, having no guide from the reins of the men who rode them, they instinctively gave danger a wide berth.

"Do you figger to just keep on goin'?" 'Smoky' asked at length, and his tone sounded as though he were half afraid of having interrupted Cal's meditations.

"Yeah. Further away from Desert's End the better before we pitch camp."

'Smoky' breathed a little more freely. He was always a man who loved to talk, and if he couldn't do that he sang. Years of wandering in desert places had taught him how to keep himself company.

"Can't figger out Brice's attitude," he muttered. "Instead of being hanged we get sent off with our own cayuses, bed-rolls, hardware, and ammunition. Everythin' we need in fact fur a desert trek. How come he got so friendly all uv a sudden?"

"He didn't, 'Smoky'. It was Connie McBride. I thought you'd noticed."

"All I noticed wus you talkin' to her. That don't mean nothin' fur as I'm concerned."

"Connie an' I sort of understood each other, 'Smoky'. She never actually made a play for me—too high spirited and independent for that, I reckon—but in small ways she did her best to show me she thought of me as somethin' more than a friend. I'll gamble everything I've got that it was her who fixed it for us to be released."

"Didn't she say nothin' like that when yuh talked to her?"

"Nope. Hardly would, anyhow, in case Brice overheard her. Pretty plain he looks on her as his property, and no doubt she's stickin' with him 'cos he's the town owner and worth more money than you an' me is ever likely t'see . . . Jus' the same," Cal went on reflectively, "things might have bin more different if I'd stayed on in Desert's End."

"So that wus why you decided to stay there for a while?"

"Uh-huh. I had ideas about Connie an' me, 'til we got mixed up with that business at the Double-Z."

"Yeah," 'Smoky' agreed moodily. "Served us right mebbly for pushin' our noses in."

"What else could we have done?" Cal demanded. "We were out ridin' the trail at night, headin' into Desert's End from the mountains, when we heard that shindy at the Double-Z. Nothin' else we could do but horn in on it. Showed me a lot, though, did that . . ."

Long silence and the steady jog-trot through the sand before 'Smoky' prompted.

"Showed yuh a lot? How come?"

"It showed me, when I came to thinkin' on it, that it musta bin none other than Whit Brice's men who did that job—otherwise how did it happen that it was *his* men who captured us so quick? Nobody else could ha' known about it."

"Could be," 'Smoky' admitted, whose brain never worked very fast anyway.

"I'm sure of it," Cal muttered. "No chance to prove it, of course, but I'll take a gamble and say that all the cattle thievin' and murderin' that's goin' on in this region is the work of Brice, or anyways, that he's the directin' mind. A man doesn't have the money he's got the straight way—not hereabouts. That makes it clear why he tried to get us hanged, so's to keep himself safe. Only Connie queered it. Leastways, that's my way of thinking."

"Look . . ." 'Smoky' ventured after an interval. "You ain't aimin' to go back to Desert's End now we've gotten clear uv it, are yuh? We'd pack ourselves full of lead just tryin' it—but what I know uv you yore the kind of guy who'd risk it, if only to git evidence against Brice."

Cal shrugged in the starlight. "I may go back one day—I just dunno when. Not so much to get evidence against Brice, or to clear myself, as to try and get Connie McBride out of his clutches. She's too nice a girl to be tangled up with him."

"Mebby she thinks different. Got her own ideas."

"Not a case of that, 'Smoky'. What matters is Brice, and the menace he is to her . . ."

The horses plodded on, obedient and tireless. Away in the distance the yellow glow which marked the situation of Desert's End was beginning to fade.

"You aimin' to head for Yuma next?" 'Smoky' inquired presently.

"Uh-huh. Good a place as anywhere else. I know a man there who might give the both of us a job."

'Smoky' made a wry face in the starlight. Settling down to anything resembling steady work was anathema to him.

"Talkin' uv work," he responded, "what kind do you do? Ever since our trails crossed north of Arizony here and we teamed together I've never figgered what kind of a man you are—'cept that you come from Oregon way."

"Might call me a drifter," Cal sighed. "I was foreman of the Bar-Nine ranch in Acres Bend—which is in Oregon. The Cliff Williams spread. Got myself mixed up in a gun-fight and took a slug over the skull which creased me for six weeks. You'll have seen the scar on my head sometime mebby when my hair falls loose. During that six weeks another foreman took over and I got thrown out when I'd recovered. Seems like I was fixed there, just as Brice tried to fix me. Anyways, I had to hit the trail, and I've been hitting it ever since. I'd planned to settle in Desert's End and start again on one of the spreads, but you saw what happened . . . I've got to grab something in Yuma before what's left of my accumulated payroll disappears . . . That's my story, what's yours?"

'Smoky' laughed shortly. "Me? Just a sand louse—a saddle-tramp. I ain't worked at anythin' reg'lar for twenty years, an' I'm proud of it. Always seem to land on me feet somehow and I'm hopin' to go on doing it. I reckon never to work more 'n a month in one place. The grass grows under me feet—"

'Smoky' had hardly completed his sentence before the incredible happened. His horse, instead of stepping forward on to sand plunged into nothing! 'Smoky' gave a yell of alarm as the sky revolved wildly over his head, then he was tumbling head over heels into darkness, finally thudding heavily into something warm and yielding.

Dazed, he scrambled to his feet, realizing it was his horse which he had cannoned into. Whinnying nervously, the startled animal thrashed into an upright position.

"I'll be dog-goned," 'Smoky' muttered, staring about him on darkness—then he looked above and saw an irregular hole through which he had plunged. The stars were nakedly visible, with the silhouette of Cal Rutter's head and shoulders now partially blacking them out.

"You there, 'Smoky'?" he called anxiously.

"Sure—what's left uv me. Where the heck am I, anyways?"

"No idea. I'll come down and help you look."

In a moment or two Cal had levered himself through the opening, hung by his hands, then dropped the fifteen foot distance. He realized it was not sand which smote his feet, but rock. Gradually he straightened up, just able to see the face of 'Smoky' and the whimpering horse in the starlight.

"Lucky you didn't break your neck," Cal commented.

"Mebby I would have, only I fell on my cayuse here. Don't know if he's any bones broken —"

"He'd be making more fuss than this if he had. Probably only got bruised. Being longer and bigger than you the drop wouldn't seem as bad."

There was a momentary pause, then Cal lighted a tinder and held it up. The flickering yellow light cast on roughly hewn rock walls on three sides. On the fourth there was the yawning black hole of a tunnel, plainly man-made, crude though it was.

"I don't get it," 'Smoky' commented, as the light flickered out. "Plain desert around here, ain't it? How come there's tunnelling under it?"

"Tell you more later." There was an odd note in Cal's voice. "Mebby I'm more up in history than you are and can explain it. First, let's take a look down this tunnel. Better tie your horse to that rock spur there; don't want him following."

"How's about yours?" 'Smoky' asked, as he obeyed instructions.

"He's okay. I've hobbled him so he can't get far."

Another tinder flared—and so did several more before the two exploring men had finally traversed the length of the tunnel and come into a large cavern, sunken at some depth below the actual level of the tunnel floor. Viewing it from a high angle it appeared to be empty, since the tinder flame didn't cast far enough—but when they came into the cavern proper after a quick descent down a declivity they found the yellow flame dancing evanescently across wall inscriptions and all manner of queer stone effigies, some of them heavily jewelled.

"I don't get it," 'Smoky' confessed again, as they stood in the dark.

"Bin around these parts much, 'Smoky'?" came Cal's voice.

"Arizony, y'mean? Not much. Been more eastward. Why? What's that got to do with it?"

"Nothing; only it explains why you don't realize what all this means. These inscriptions on the walls are in the language of the Navajo Indians."

"Yeah?" Long silence. "Then what in heck are they doin' here? The Navajo live way to the north, a heck of a ways from here."

"The *civilized* Navajo do, sure, but the nomadic Navajo tribes still exist, those who cut free from the supposedly refinin' influence of civilization. Nomad Navajo still have their compounds in Arizony here, and they stretch as far north as Oregon, as far south as the southern Arizonian border—not far from Desert's End come to think on it—as far east as Texas and as far west as California. In every case they inhabit the deserted regions, for obvious reasons."

“Come to think uv it . . .” ‘Smoky’ mused for a moment. “I think I’ve seen ’em now and again. Small communities. But they ain’t ever given no trouble.”

“They wouldn’t dare. The forces against them are too great. This place here is part of an old Navajo burial ground—maybe bin here since the Spaniards were conquerors around here in 1520.”

There was a faint tremor of fear in ‘Smoky’s’ next words. “Look, Cal, let’s get outa here. I ain’t stoppin’ amidst a lot of tombs for nobody! Give me the fresh air and the stars—Come on!”

“In a moment.” Another tinder flared and Cal moved forward quickly whilst the flame lasted. ‘Smoky’ remained where he was, staring at the—to him—incomprehensible inscriptions on the ancient walls; then perforce his attention switched back to Cal as he saw him scraping investigatively at one of the many weird-looking stone idols. But apparently they were *not* stone. The grey look was caused by accumulated dust of ages. Underneath the surface, as Cal prodded gently with his gun, there came into view a bright streak of yellow.

The tinder expired. Cal gave a low whistle of amazement.

“What gives?” ‘Smoky’ whispered, feeling his way forward.

“Plenty, unless I’m plumb crazy! It was just a thought I got. In the old days the Navajos used gold—most of it plunder—to make their images and gods, and from the look of things that’s just what these things are. Six idols altogether, grey with age, but made of gold. Or anyways the surface part is gold even if it isn’t solid all through . . . There’s a sort of sacrificial stone and these idols around it.”

“So?” ‘Smoky’ breathed, awe-struck.

“So it looks as though this is more a sacrificial chamber than a burial vault. Yeah, mebby that’s it. Sacrifices used to be made here long, long ago.”

“Wish you wouldn’t keep talkin’ about sacrifices: it *does* things t’me! What about the *gold*?”

“Gold idols—jewels for eyes,” Cal muttered in the dark. “I reckon that ties up with ancient Navajo history, far as I remember it. And from the look of the floor in here—what glimpses I’ve had so far—this place hasn’t been entered for generations. Take a look!”

Yet another tinder flared and the two men stood looking down at their feet. Wherever they had walked they had left two-inch-deep imprints. The dust, caused by flaking from the roof above, lay densely thick over everything.

But now interest was profoundly stirred and Cal used up all but the last half-dozen of his precious tinders—since ‘Smoky’ did not possess any—on exploration of the place. By the time they had finished they were deeply shaken men.

“This ain’t real!” ‘Smoky’ declared flatly, in the darkness. “I fell down a hole and knocked meself out. This is a dream. It’s *gotta* be, Cal! There can’t be six large idols made uv gold with jewels for eyes. That sorta thing doesn’t happen!”

“It has this time,” Cal’s voice was quietly assured, even though there was an edge of amazement. “By sheer chance your horse stumbled on a weak part of the tunnel roof which gave way an’ in here there’s gold fur the pickin’ up with nobody to know where it came frum. When you hand a nugget of gold to an assayer around these parts he doesn’t ask where you got it from. Could have been got from panning like as often happens. There’s nothing to stop us,” Cal finished deliberately, “using all the gold we want from here. It’s plain the nomad Navajo don’t know of this place otherwise they’d have come here by now and got things

shipshape, mebby even continued their heathenish rites inside it. You an' me, 'Smoky', look like bein' mighty rich men from here on."

"Now I *know* I'm dreamin'!"

"Yore *not*, 'Smoky'. It's just good luck—one mighty big slice of it . . . Having figgered that out, let's look for the snags."

"Snags! In a set-up like *this*?"

"Sure—there may be some. I'm kinda suspicious of so much luck all at once, yet the more I think on it the more it looks as though it's a natural. First—the dust around this place. That makes it plain nobody's bin here for ages, an' that includes Navajos, who've a right to the place. Check?"

"Check," 'Smoky' agreed tautly.

"Which makes us more or less safe on takin' what gold we like. Second, it's a kind of unwritten law that gold around these parts is his who finds it. An' nobody ever got to know but what we've made a gold strike some place. You got that clear, 'Smoky'. *Nobody's ever to know* about this!"

"Sure, sure. You don't think *I'd* talk, do yuh?"

"Matter o' fact, I do. You talk a darn sight more 'n good for you sometimes . . ." Cal paused for a long time, then when he spoke again there was deep satisfaction in his voice. "Yeah, this is *it*, 'Smoky'. All the gold we want for the pickin' up."

"Where do you aim to get it assayed?"

"Yuma. We'll take all we can get and at sun-rise we're headin' for Yuma fast as we can go. Before we leave we'll mark that hole in the desert in such a way that only us c'n find it again."

"And once we've cashed all th' gold we can get? What then? I'm for settin' up some place with a nice spread—a wife mebby, an' a bit of peace an' quiet."

"What do you do with your own cash is up to you, 'Smoky'. I'd rather got to hopin' that you'd still throw in your lot with me and come back to Desert's End one day."

"An' fill meself full o' lead? I ain't that crazy!"

"We mightn't look as we do now. I've got ideas on the subject. Right now that's way off trail, though. We'll talk about it later. For the moment we're stayin' here to finish out the night—then tomorrow we're on our way . . ."

Just after sun-up, following a breakfast from the provisions they had with them, both men were on their way. 'Smoky's' horse had at first presented a problem, but finally it had been solved by Cal's own beast helping to drag the animal up the rubbly slope from the depths—and now, to both men, the morning had never seemed more beautiful.

They were loaded in every convenient spot with what chunks of gold they had been able to hack away with their crude 'tools', and were resolved to return with better equipment at a later date. Behind them, the hole in the desert had been skilfully bridged with rock, pieces of cacti, and slabs of stone from the buried Navajo cavern itself. Sand now covered the spot, and though it would be obvious if anybody came right up to it, it was a million to one against a soul going near it. Upon this both men were placing their hopes. From the position of the sun and the shadows from the dunes, they were reasonably sure that from Cal's sketch they could find their way back.

And now? They both sang as they rode—and at a far faster pace than the previous night. Whereas Yuma had formerly been a nebulous destination, neither of them particularly caring

whether they went there or not, it now had the attraction of a magnet. There they could see their precious metal change into healthy, usable money.

At present there was nothing but the desert and the blinding glare of the sun. By this time Desert's End was far out of sight, though the mountain range which overlooked it loomed in dazzling snow-capped grandeur, seeming hardly a whit further away than it had before. And across the shimmering distances lay the sage, the giant cacti, and the more distant glory of the lancing yuccas.

"S'pose," 'Smoky' asked, as they rode hard, "The assayer starts askin' awkward questions as to where we found all this gold? He might do that."

"We get round that by not turning it all up at once. If we did we might get ourselves in th' red and start a gold rush or somethin'—or some critter might think it worth his while to try and beat the senses out of us to try and find out where our bonanza has come from. They ain't such a tough crowd in Yuma as in some other places I could mention, but we're playin' safe just the same."

"Sure," 'Smoky' agreed promptly. "Anythin' you say, Cal."

And for a long while they rode on into the shimmering morning before a sudden remembrance seemed to strike 'Smoky'.

"Say, Cal, what was yuh meanin' about us goin' back to Desert's End not looking like we do *now*? You figger we might grow beards or somethin'?"

Cal's bronzed face broke in a grin. "Nope—though that would be a sight I wouldn't like t'miss. Matter of fact I was thinkin' of a Navajo I know pretty well—Chewonokee by name."

'Smoky' reflected, his eyes narrowed in the brilliant glare ahead.

"Chewonokee, huh? Seems t'me I oughta know that name. In fact I *do*, but I can't place it."

"Chewonokee is one of the Navajo nomad chiefs, and way back in the old days before th' peace he caused plenty of trouble. Right now he lives peaceably enough. I encountered him at the Bar-Nine in Acres Bend. Remember I told you I got mixed up in a gun-fight with cattle thieves? Well, when I got that slug across the skull there weren't nothin' the ordinary doctors could do around those parts, so Cliff Williams sent a man out to find Chewonokee, being on more or less friendly terms with him. Cuttin' a long story short it's because of Chewonokee that I'm alive today."

"You tryin' to tell me a no-good Navajo fixed you up where a proper doctor couldn't?"

"Yeah. Chewonokee knows tricks of medicine and surgery that are peculiar to his race. He c'n do more with a knife blade that's been sterilized in a fire than any white man can do with all his gadgets. And, queer though it may sound, I liked Chewonokee more than somewhat."

"I reckon you couldn't do much else since he put you right."

"It was somethin' else beside that . . ." Cal reflected over it as he rode on. "He's different to the average run of Navajos. Clever in his own way, which mebbey accounts for why he's leader of his own particular tribe—"

"Yeah, sure, but what's this gotta do with us goin' back to Desert's End lookin' different?"

"Just this; I think Chewonokee knows enough to fix our faces so we won't look the same. Most Navajos know a crude form of facial an' body surgery—they even inflict it on themselves as a tribal rite—so I'm more 'n sure Chewonokee might be able to work somethin' out for us."

'Smoky' smiled rather uncomfortably. "Anythin' you say, Cal, only I guessed our changed faces, if we git that far, won't alter our bodies. You'll still be tall and tough, and I'll still be fat

an' blubbery. Whit Brice wouldn't be fooled that easy."

"That depends on whether we was often seen together . . . I'll work that out later. Our programme is first—Yuma; then Chewonokee."

And it was a programme which was rigidly adhered to, 'Smoky' always following Cal's lead. In Yuma they exchanged a portion of their gold, and even though the assayer's eyebrows rose a little he did not ask any awkward questions. Altogether both men were several thousand dollars to the good when they set off again, rested and with fresh horses and ample provisions for a long journey. Cal's intention was to head for Oregon and the Bar-Nine, the only place where he could get information concerning Chewonokee—and since the Bar-Nine lay in southern Oregon it was obviously going to be a very long time before the trip was finished, demanding as it did travelling right across Nevada. Not that the time signified: Cal was quite prepared for a long interval before he finally made a return trip to Desert's End, and with the gold he and 'Smoky' still had there would be everything needful. They could cash the gold at the different towns they contacted on the way.

Such was Cal's intention, but as events worked out he met up with Cliff Williams of the Bar-Nine far sooner than he had expected—at the ramshackle town of Sandy Gate to be exact, some hundred miles south of Carson City. Both Cal and 'Smoky' had stopped here for a space on their long journey and, from natural habit, were spending the evening in the town's only saloon, when in walked none other than the powerful figure of Cliff Williams himself, covered in trail dust and cuffing his hat up on to his forehead.

"Huh!" Cal murmured, as he caught sight of him from the table where he and 'Smoky' were seated. "Looks like the luck's still holdin'!"

"Yeah? How?" 'Smoky' peered through the tobacco haze, but not knowing Cliff Williams anyway he couldn't observe anything unusual.

"That's the very man I want—Cliff Williams." Cal indicated him as he got to his feet. "Don't ask me what he's doin' so far south, but it sure oughta save us a long journey. Better come over an' meet him."

Cliff Williams had just downed a rye and called for another as Cal came up beside him. For a second he didn't seem to recognize the man who'd spoken his name.

"Cal Rutter," Cal said. "You can't have forgotten, Cliff!"

Light dawned. Williams held out his hand in greeting, but there was no smile on his bronzed, sun-dried face.

"Yes, I remember you now, Cal. Foreman of my outfit until you got things held up by getting slugged—"

"That's in the past an' I'm leadin' a different sort of life now, Cliff. Mighty glad I happened to see you, 'Smoky' here an' me were ridin' out to have a word with you."

"Out to Oregon!" Williams stared blankly. "Sure must be important."

"It is . . ." Cal ordered drinks and then continued, "I want to contact that Navajo who put me right. Chewonokee. How do I do it?"

Williams lowered his drink. "What d'you want *him* for?"

"I feel he oughta be rewarded for what he did for me."

Williams picked his drink up again, swallowed it, then drew the back of his hand over his mouth. There was profound wonder in his grey eyes.

"The only reward a Navajo like Chewonokee wants is gold, so he can keep on tradin' and livin'. Quite sure you ain't off trail somewheres, Cal?"

“Quite sure,” Cal answered quietly. “All I want to do is find him, and yore the only person who seems to know where he is.”

Williams shrugged. “That’s right enough, and a while back I’d have told you—but I can’t any more.”

“Why not? He’s not dead, is he?”

“Not as far as I know—but don’t forget he’s nomadic. He an’ his tribe get the yen to wander every now an’ again—an’ that’s just what they’ve done. A few weeks back I had reason t’send a man out to find Chewonokee—case of poisoning which I figgered he might cure—but there was no sign of him or his tribe at the mountain retreat they’d been using. An’ when a bunch of Indians vanish you’ve gotta be mighty clever to find ’em.”

Cal gave ‘Smoky’ a grim look, at which ‘Smoky’s’ shoulders rose and fell helplessly.

“Ain’t nothin’ to get steamed up about, surely?” Williams asked in surprise. “All it means is you can’t say a personal ‘Thank you’ to Chewonokee. Ain’t goin’ to lose sleep over that, are you?”

“I had more things in mind than just a ‘thank you’,” Cal responded. He finished his drink, then asked: “And you’ve no clue whatever as to where he might be?”

“I’ve no clue as to where he’s settled, but I did hear from my boys that he and his outfit headed southwards. They left plenty of traces of doin’ that—but I don’t haveta tell you that trails have a habit of losin’ themselves, ’specially when Navajos make ’em.”

“How far south?” Cal insisted.

“Their tracks started to vanish around the Warner Lakes—south Oregon.”

Cal was silently musing. ‘Smoky’ finished his drink and Williams stood waiting for the next.

“Well, thanks anyway,” Cal said at last. “Mebby I’ll find a way to contact him somehow. I’ve plenty of time on my hands.”

“Yore lucky,” Williams commented. “For my part I’ve more work t’do than’s good for any man—but most of it’s cattle dealin’ which I can’t trust to anybody else. Leastways, I don’t reckon it’d be safe to,” he added, thinking.

“More drink?” Cal asked, glancing towards the barkeep, but Williams shook his head.

“I reckon not. I’ve gotta be on my way. Sorry I can’t tell you more about Chewonokee—”

“Incidentally,” Cal broke in, “what brings you this far from your own territory? Where are you headed?”

“Desert’s End.”

Williams answered casually enough, obviously not having the least reason to suspect that Desert’s End meant anything to either Cal or ‘Smoky’.

“Desert’s End, huh?” Cal exchanged a brief look with ‘Smoky’. “I’m sort of surprised that a man with your interests can want any dealings with a dump like that.”

Williams rolled himself a cigarette. “You know the place, then?”

“Sure thing,” Cal assented. “Not much better than this town we’re in right now.”

“Can’t agree with you there, Cal. Whittaker Brice, who runs Desert’s End, is an up-and-coming man. A tough business man when it comes to cattle deals, too. I’m on my way now to fix up a big one with him.”

“Best of luck,” Cal said dryly.

Williams looked vaguely surprised for a moment, then he held out his hand.

“Best of luck to you, too, Cal—especially regardin’ Chewonokee.”

With that he went on his way across the saloon and after a moment the batwings were swinging shut behind him.

"I suppose," 'Smoky' said slowly, after ordering two more drinks, "that it won't matter if Brice gits t'know we're on the hunt fur Chewonokee? He's bound to hear about it. Williams will tell him."

"No certainty about it," Cal replied. "Williams doesn't know we've had any connections with Desert's End, and if he's got cattle deals on his mind he's hardly likely t'give us a second thought. He'll only say somethin' if our names come up in conversation."

"Yeah; an' that's the bit that worries me! It'll sort uv put Brice on the watch fur us doin' somethin'. He's smart enough to guess that we wouldn't be contactin' Chewonokee without some darned good reason."

Cal shrugged, downed his drink, and put the glass back on the counter.

"Quit worryin' about the things that *might* happen, 'Smoky'. You'll get no place doin' that. Our job from here on is to find Chewonokee, and the only way to do that is to head for Oregon-Warner Lakes, and see what we can find out from whoever we come across. A wanderin' tribe of Navajos must have been seen by someone, particularly as they wouldn't be at any particular pains to cover their traces."

"Might take us years to make contact," 'Smoky' observed.

"So what? We've all th' time an' money we need."

"Yeah, sure, I wus just thinkin' the same thing. Seems the helluva waste of good time when we could easily fergit the whole thing an' settle somewhere."

Cal gave a taut smile. "Mebby I'm selfish. I'm lookin' at this from my own angle because I want to get back to Desert's End and clean things up a bit. Besides gettin' to know Connie McBride better. If you want to quit, old timer, now's your chance an' I'll finish this by myself."

"I c'n wait a bit to settle down," 'Smoky' grinned. "An' anyways, even if I could find a woman who'd team up with an ornery cuss like me she'd probably only be a tarnation nuisance. I'm with yuh, Cal—fur the time bein' leastways."

"All right, then." Cal moved from the bar. "First thing tomorrow we get on our way for Oregon, more or less followin' our original trail. We'll inquire from everybody we can find if they've seen Chewonokee—an' we keep going until we locate him. Once we've done that we'll think further."

"Does he talk our lingo?" 'Smoky' asked, thinking.

"Not very well—but that makes no odds. I know enough of the Navajo language to make myself understood. Now let's go grab some sleep then we can start off fresh tomorrow . . ."

And with the dawn both men were on their way again, and in so doing they began a trek which was to occupy them for many weeks. On the fourth day of their ride to Oregon they encountered a mule and wagon team, about the first trace of human life they had seen on the trail since leaving Sandy Gate.

"Ridin' through?" Cal called up, to the leading wagon driver as he drew rein and looked down suspiciously.

"Sure aim to. I thought you wus hold-up boys fur a moment."

"Nothin' like that," Cal grinned. "I'm huntin' for a Navajo mob which was somewhere near Warner Lakes in south Oregon a while back. Seen any signs of anythin' on your

journey?"

The driver pondered and then glanced inquiringly at his ramrod beside him.

"We did see a bunch of Indians near Carson Sink a day or two back," the ramrod volunteered. "They was headin' south at the time but we lost track of 'em."

"Carson Sink?" Cal repeated. "That's north-east of Carson City, isn't it?"

"Sure is," the driver confirmed. "Come to think of it, I saw that bunch of Indians, too. Like Steve here sez, we lost track of 'em."

"Okay, thanks." Cal gave a brief nod. "But they *were* headed this way?"

"Sure thing."

Cal wasted no more time. With 'Smoky' beside him he got on the move again, but after a while he began to slow down again. Finally he drew his horse to a standstill and sat pondering.

"What now?" 'Smoky' inquired, gazing around the hot, rocky stillness.

"I'm just thinking . . ." Cal hunched forward, forearms on the saddle-horn. "Those Indians were seen at Carson Sink. And the time before that at Warner Lakes, which is two hundred miles further north. No guarantee it was the same bunch of Indians which was responsible each time, but I'll gamble it wasn't coincidence. Point is, 'Smoky', we may be goin' outa our way by keep headin' north. By this time, if we strike to the east, we might even be on a line with 'em, or anyways able to pick up somebody who's seen 'em."

"Supposin', though, they struck west towards California?"

"I don't think they did. They've been movin' in a south-easterly direction all the time—and in any case California isn't the sort of territory they like. Nope, I think they may not be very far from us—eastwards mebby. We're changin' course right now and see where it leads us."

To which 'Smoky' had no objections—and so the eastward diversion began; but this again was only the beginning of their search. They travelled desert and canyon, surveyed from high points, questioned lonely ranchers and whoever they happened to meet on the trail. They slept and ate under the sky. They stopped whenever they came to a lonely township—but little by little, as weeks drifted by, they pieced together the information that the wandering Navajos had been seen, moving still to the south, until one day it dawned upon Cal and 'Smoky', commencing to find the search monotonous, that they had come back once again in a wide detour to Arizona.

"Frum the look of which," 'Smoky' said, as the realization dawned on them, "we might as well have saved ourselves the trouble uv the run around. Three weeks an' more we bin ridin' and I reckon we're not very fur right now frum where that Navajo gold is."

"About a hundred miles," Cal said, and then became silent again, surveying the scenery.

They had come back into Arizona through the mountain range, in the midst of which they were now perched. Behind them was the canyon up which they had come: ahead, lay the mesa with its outcroppings of Saguaro cacti, distant ranches, drifting herds of cattle, and the eternal shimmering heat . . . On the mountains themselves there lay the silver-white draperies of the Apache plume flecked with scarlet mallow, until yet again bountiful Nature rang the changes with vivid lilac splashes from the loco-weed, or the undefiled white of the canyon anemone.

"I've bin thinkin'," 'Smoky' said at length. "If we're only lookin' fur a sawbones who can alter our faces why don't we go to an ordinary one? In Tucson, mebby, or some place. Save a lot uv trouble."

Cal glanced at him. "There are two good reasons why we don't, 'Smoky'. One is that in these parts doctors talk an' a job like a face change—even grantin' an ordinary doctor could do it, which I doubt—would very soon be common gossip th' length an' breadth of the territory. That'd queer our pitch to begin with. The second reason is that we want to open an attack on Desert's End when we're good and ready—an' for that we need strong support. From the Navajos we'll get it."

"What makes yuh so sure?"

"Gold," Cal answered laconically. "Pay these nomads enough and they'll do anything."

"Okay, just as long as y'know what yore doin'. Looks to me like we've hit the end uv the trail. We know Chewonokee an' his outfit came this fur, but what comes next? We can't just sit here an' wait fur somethin'."

"That's an easy one," Cal answered, dismounting. "Smoke signals. Unless I miss my guess Chewonokee will be in these mountains some place, away from the ordinary white folk. If he sees a friendly signal mebby he'll answer it. I know enough on signalling to send a greeting."

'Smoky' also dropped from the saddle and for the next few minutes he and Cal were busy collecting dried twigs and branches from fallen vegetation, placing all of it on a prominent spur of rock. Once the stuff was lighted and smoking thickly, Cal went to work with his bed-roll blanket to smother and then release the smoke at intervals. As he did so he looked intently around him, 'Smoky' at his side.

"Anybody else likely to read these signals?" he asked. "We don't want a direct giveaway to any uv them ranchers down there who might pass the news on t' Desert End."

"No chance of it at all," Cal replied. "I'm only sending an Indian request for a pow-wow. If anybody interprets it on the mesa there they'll simply think it's one bunch of Indians contactin' another."

Silence again in the hot stillness. Cal persisted with his signals until presently the small bonfire had burned itself out, but there came no sign of answering smoke from any direction.

"Looks like we've lost the trail again," 'Smoky' said at length, disgusted. "That bein' so what's the—"

He did not finish his sentence. He had abruptly become aware of two Navajos standing nearby. They carried bows and arrow quivers on their backs and they were dressed more or less in their traditional garb. Presumably they had arrived with their accustomed silence.

Instantly 'Smoky's' hand flew to his .45 but Cal gave him a sharp look.

"Lay off, you dope! What are you tryin' t'do, get us killed before we start?" Then he turned to the small, wiry Navajos and raised his hand in the universal sign of peace. He began speaking in their own language, and since 'Smoky' did not understand it he just remained staring, his hands latched on his gunbelts, just in case.

"You belong tribe of Chewonokee?" Cal questioned.

"Chewonokee sent us," one of the men answered. "He ordered no answer to your signals until we had spoken with you. Chewonokee ask: what do you seek?"

"Chewonokee himself," Cal answered promptly. "My partner and I have been trailing you all the way from Warner Lakes. My mission urgent. I need help and must talk with your chief."

"You wait," the Navajo ordered. "We go and tell Chewonokee the message you have given."

Cal nodded and turned back to 'Smoky'. As silently as they had come the fierce little men disappeared again. In a while there came the fading sound of hoof beats, then all was quiet.

“Seems to me,” ‘Smoky’ said, plumping his fat figure on a nearby rock, “that we’re takin’ a hell uv a risk gettin’ mixed up with these critters, Cal. How’d we know they won’t sling an arrow in our backs, or knife us, the moment they get a chance? Whites an’ Navajos were never on what you might call friendly terms.”

“I’ll take that chance,” Cal responded quietly. “These warriors will only do as their chief orders, and Chewonokee isn’t the kind of man to tolerate any double crossing. And in the main, Navajos and whites *are* on friendly terms these days.”

“On the surface, mebby—sort uv uneasy peace brought about by signin’ a treaty. I don’t trust it. Up here in the mountains anythin’ can happen.”

“You can still back out if you want to.”

“After ridin’ all this way? Shucks, no! I’m only sayin’ what I think, that’s all.”

Cal let the matter drop. He rolled a cigarette and then began to smoke it thoughtfully. He was half-way through it when the Navajos reappeared.

“Chewonokee meet you,” announced the one who had elected himself as spokesman. “You follow us.”

Cal nodded, threw down his half cigarette, and vaulted to the saddle of his horse. In a moment or two ‘Smoky’ had caught up with him and their journey took them through mountain glades, up acclivities, through several small passes, and so finally into a wide plateau area surrounded by the lofty upper peaks of the mountains.

Cal surveyed the scene briefly, noting the numberless caves in the rock faces which presumably served as domiciles. Otherwise most of the plateau was occupied by the conventional hide and bark dwellings common to the race. About the area there was a general air of peaceful activity, both red-skinned men and women busy with various tasks.

“Some tribe!” ‘Smoky’ murmured. “Must be more’n a few hundred around.”

“Yeah. More than I expected . . .” Cal slid from the saddle as the spokesman Navajo motioned to him; then he and ‘Smoky’ crossed the area together, watched with passive interest by the men and women around them.

“You give guns,” the Navajo ordered, pausing before the entrance of a highly ornate dwelling.

Cal hesitated momentarily, then with a shrug he drew his .45’s from their holsters and handed them over. ‘Smoky’ was by no means as quick to comply, but he did so finally as he realized there was no alternative. This formality complete the Navajos motioned inside the dwelling and the two men stepped into the semi-gloom, their feet walking on matting and skins.

“Greetings,” a voice said, in passable English, and the two men turned as an Indian rose from a nearby skin-covered couch. As he came forward into the light shafting through the tent opening he became revealed as fairly tall for a Navajo, several inches above the average five-foot-two. He was naked to the waist, heavily muscled, and wearing skin trousers held at the waist by an ornate belt. Trappings there were none, save for a bright coloured cord around his forehead, holding back the lank black hair.

“Chewonokee . . .” Cal held out his hand in welcome. “Mebby you remember me? Cal Rutter? You fixed my head when—”

“Chewonokee remember,” the Navajo interrupted calmly, and shook the hand held out to him. “You seek Chewonokee for some good purpose?”

“Definitely so—and I never knew you had such a grasp of English.”

“Chewonokee make it duty to learn much of white man’s ways. How else can he preserve the peace? To know only one language—one’s own—is to know only one’s own people.”

“Meanin’ you prefer a broader vision, eh?” Cal nodded admiringly. “That’s what I like about you, Chewonokee—yore different from the rest of ’em. Oh, this is my partner, ‘Smoky’ Jones.”

Chewonokee’s dark, oblique eyes moved to ‘Smoky’ and he gave a slow nod and a faint smile of greeting. Then his dark, red-skinned face was back in its mould of teak-like immobility.

“We talk,” Chewonokee decided, sitting cross-legged on the floor. “Speak, Cal Rutter.”

Cal and ‘Smoky’ settled awkwardly into the Indian posture for reclining, then Cal went straight into his reason for being present. Chewonokee listened impassively, looking straight in front of him as though carved from wood.

“So that’s it,” Cal said finally. “Yore more than a good medicine man and surgeon, and you can see why I think you in particular should be able to help us. How’s chances?”

“Chewonokee honoured you think so much of his skill.” The penetrating eyes turned to Cal. “It would seem the gods have sent you in good season.”

“Oh?” Cal gave a puzzled glance. “How come?”

“You speak of attack on white men who rule Desert’s End. That is good talk.” A bitter light came into Chewonokee’s eyes. “It is because of white men in Desert’s End that I ordered we trek southwards to this mountain retreat.”

Cal waited, still mystified. ‘Smoky’ sat beside him, trying to ignore the punishing cramp in his thighs.

“White man Whittaker Brice destroy Navajo compound and kill many hundreds sending others to fight alone in desert,” Chewonokee continued. “That was many moons ago. These wanderers sent out a call for help and I made my decision. I would take them under my own rulership as part of my tribe . . .”

“Just a minute,” Cal interrupted. “Let me get this straight. You mean that when Brice built Desert’s End he wiped out a Navajo retreat—a *nomad* camp—in order to do it?”

“That is truth.”

“I never knew that, though I wouldn’t put it past him. Then the survivors went wandering for a fresh place to settle and not finding one asked for your help?”

“As leader of the biggest nomad tribe, and having knowledge of medicine and the ways of white men, yes.”

“Is that why you suddenly uprooted and trekked south?”

“That is why, Cal Rutter. I decided we would come south and absorb the wanderers. Also by coming south we would come within a day’s ride of Desert’s End. At a chosen time we would avenge ourselves of this white butcher, Whittaker Brice . . .” Chewonokee gave his slow, inscrutable smile. “The gods have favoured me and sent you to me. You too have a score to settle with Whittaker Brice. We shall work together.”

“My idea exactly,” Cal agreed. “Once I can get my appearance changed I can walk into the midst of Desert’s End and work out a plan. I can transfer information to you, and when we’re ready, we’ll put Whittaker Brice where he belongs. I know it runs against the code of peace between whites and Redskins, but this is a personal matter.”

There was a long silence, almost an uncomfortable one, as Chewonokee looked from one man to the other, brooding. At last he spoke.

“How does Chewonokee know he can trust you? You might have come from Whittaker Brice himself to know our moves.”

“Not very likely, is it, when Brice doesn’t even know where you are, or that you have moved this far?” Cal spread his hands. “At least, I assume he doesn’t. Besides, would I be asking for what will probably be a painful facial operation if I’d come from Brice?”

The Navajo reflected, his lips pursed. “Possibly not,” he admitted finally. “And if I make this operation as you ask, what have you in return? Chewonokee make money with his medical and surgical knowledge.”

“Here’s your return,” Cal responded, and from his shirt pocket he withdrew a handful of gold chippings and held them forward. Chewonokee looked at them, then raised his eyes. For one moment Cal had the panicky thought that the Navajo had recognized the gold as belonging to the buried vault. Then he consoled himself with the thought that this could hardly be. Gold must look the same anywhere.

“There is much gold there,” Chewonokee commented.

“Uh-huh—worth several thousand dollars. It’s all yours if you’ll do the job I want, both on myself an’ my friend.”

Chewonokee held out his big palm, then examined the gold as it was tipped into it. The shadow of doubt which lay on his powerful features was probably caused by wonder at the amount of gold the white man was prepared to part with, not because he knew its source of origin.

“You and partner pan for dirt, Cal Rutter?” he asked, after a while.

“Yeah.” Cal nodded briefly. “We struck it lucky up north: all the gold we want. And we’re not tellin’ where the bonanza is neither.”

“You are wise, Cal Rutter.” Chewonokee got to his feet with a lithe movement and crossed over to a small hide-covered table. From a cupboard beside it he brought forth a small skin bag, tipped the gold into it, and then stood considering. At length he nodded slowly.

“Chewonokee take your word,” he decided, wedging the bag into his belt. “I change you, and your friend . . .” He came forward as Cal and ‘Smoky’ struggled thankfully into an upright position. “There is one thing, Cal Rutter, which you may not have thought of.”

“What?” Cal questioned.

“Voices! I change the face, yes—but if the voice is still the same, what then?”

“I can alter it somehow,” Cal responded. “Pitch it higher or lower.”

“I don’t reckon that’s enough,” ‘Smoky’ objected. “Might work okay in the ordinary way when you’ve time to think out what yore sayin’—but supposin’ you git good an’ mad about somethin’? You’ll forgit all about yore voice.”

Chewonokee gave ‘Smoky’ a glance and looked back at Cal.

“He is right, my friend,” he said impassively. “But it need not worry you. If you can stand pain Chewonokee can make the voice change.”

“How?” ‘Smoky’ asked uneasily.

“The tubes in the throat which make the pitch of the voice Chewonokee can widen or narrow. For a time, great pain—” Chewonokee spread his hands. “Afterwards, new voice.”

“I’ll risk it,” Cal said. “I’ve more reasons for going back to Desert’s End than just to ditch Brice. There’s a girl in the business.”

The Navajo gave a faint smile. “So? Then I think, Cal Rutter, you will be able to stand much, maybe even as much as we of the Navajo race . . . For now you shall be guests. Tomorrow I shall start the operation. During tonight I have much study.”

Cal nodded and endeavoured to look satisfied. Indeed, in his heart he *was* satisfied; but just the same he could be forgiven an intense human trepidation at thus trusting himself to the surgical ministrations of a Navajo, however skilled he might be . . .

And, close on a hundred miles to the east, Cliff Williams of the Bar-Nine was about the close of his stay in Desert's End, and the completion of his big cattle deal with Whittaker Brice. Everything had gone according to plan—so far. Just how much of a double-crosser Brice really was was something which the more or less honest Williams had yet to find out. As far as he could divine up to now all was well.

"Right sorry yore goin', Cliff," Brice said regretfully, as he and Williams sat in the noisy, smoky pool-room of the Painted Lady. "Ain't many strangers one sees in these parts, specially those with propositions as good as yours. It's been a real pleasure to know you."

"Goes for me, too," Williams grinned, taking a drink. "For my part I'd say yore the most up-an'-comin' man I've met in a few years. Not many towns rely on one man for their prosperity like this one."

"Yeah . . ." Brice gazed around the ornate saloon and its motley assortment of customers. "It's a town I'm proud of."

"With reason . . ." Williams reflected over his glass for a moment. "Not like one man I ran into up in Sandy Gate in Nevada. He'd gotten the idea Desert's End is a dump."

"Mebby he'd been listenin' to some cowpokes I've had to throw out from time to time."

"Wasn't that." Williams shook his head. "He said he knew this place well. Come to that you might know the man—Cal Rutter."

Brice poured himself more whisky. "Yeah, sure, I know him. He passed through here a while back with a little fat critter called 'Smoky' Jones. Two of them were partners, I reckon."

"That's the two," Williams confirmed.

Brice did not appear deeply interested but he was thinking fast.

"Saw 'em ways up in Nevada, huh? Did they say what they were doin' there?"

"Sure did. They—"

Williams stopped and then got to his feet and tugged off his big hat as Connie McBride, resplendent in her evening gown, stopped beside the table. Brice, not so particular about manners, remained where he was.

"This is a pleasure, ma'am," Williams smiled. "I've bin meanin' to have a word with you before I hit the trail for home."

"With me, Mr. Williams?" Connie smiled at him. "Why?"

"Oh, jus' to say I like your singin' and everythin' else 'bout you. You give the place class."

Brice glanced up bleakly, then looked at the girl. "What do you want, Connie? Mr. Williams an' me were in the middle of important conversation."

Connie shrugged. "I stopped by to tell you I'm going home early. I don't feel too good. I've sung my numbers, so get Jenny Alcroft to be hostess for me . . ."

"Not too good?" Brice repeated. "You look like a million dollars to me. What's the matter with you?"

"This cheap hooch you sell, I think. It acts upon me sometimes . . ."

"Mebby I've a cure for it," Brice said grimly. "Mr. Williams here was just telling me a thing or two about Cal Rutter and 'Smoky' Jones when you interrupted us."

A look of interest leapt into Connie's bright face, then was as quickly stifled. Her bare shoulders gave a negative shrug.

"Why should Cal Rutter interest *me*?"

"He oughta, seein' as you talked me into lettin' him escape bein' hanged."

"Hanged?" Williams repeated in surprise.

"That's what I said. Sit down the both of you. Connie, you've got to hear this. I sorta want your reactions: they might tell me whether it's me or Cal Rutter you're makin' a play for. Have some of my best whisky and I'll guarantee you'll soon forget anythin' that's wrong with you."

Connie hesitated, glancing from Williams down to Brice's arrogantly compelling face; then she complied and seated herself beside him. Brice bellowed for another glass and then poured out the whisky.

"Now," he said refilling his own glass and Williams', "let's have the rest of it, Mr. Williams. For your information, Cal Rutter and 'Smoky' Jones were found guilty of murdering a rancher and his family, but thanks to Connie here I let 'em go. What did they say they were doing up in Nevada?"

"They were on the way to Oregon to look for me. Just chance we met up."

"Nothing extraordinary in that," Connie remarked. "Cal once told me he worked for you, Mr. Williams. I suppose he was going to ask you for another job."

"Anythin' but it, ma'am. He seemed pretty flush for money. He told me he'd nothin' to do but ride around as he chose. He was lookin' for me so he could contact Chewonokee."

"Who's he?" Brice asked, wondering.

"Self-appointed leader of the Navajo nomads."

Brice hesitated with his glass half way to his lips. Connie's eyes widened.

"And Cal was looking for *him*? But why?"

"Said he wanted to repay him for fixing his head up good when he got a slug across it. Chewonokee's a first-rate doctor and surgeon, even if his methods are those inherited from his tribal knowledge."

"Somethin' queer about this," Brice muttered. "I'll gamble Cal Rutter had more reasons than *that* for wantin' to find Chewonokee. Where does the dirty Navajo hang out, anyways?"

Williams shrugged. "Usta be close to my own territory, but he suddenly headed south. I don't know to where."

"South?" Brice repeated, staring. "*This* way?"

"I s'pose so, since Desert's End is south of Oregon, Nevada, and Arizona. Anyways, what's worryin' you, Whit? Doesn't make no odds with you, surely?"

"Eh!" Brice gave a little start; then he grinned. "No, course not. Just interested, that's all—here, have some more whisky."

Altogether it was a slightly tipsy and extremely cordial Cliff Williams who finally took his departure, intending to have a sleep before he hit the trail on the long journey home. He left behind him the grim, cold sober Brice and silent girl.

"I've more than half a mind to believe *you* put Cal up to finding Chewonokee," Brice said at last, slowly.

"Oh, be yourself!" she retorted. "I didn't even know there were Navajo around in any number until the sheriff happened to mention it—and Cal had gone then . . . Just the same it looks as though he's tryin' to get in touch with them, and that brings up that unpleasant business of your building Desert's End on a one-time Navajo encampment."

“Yeah—but forewarned is forearmed. Ever since I let Cal and ‘Smoky’ go I’ve bin lookin’ for a legitimate excuse to send my boys out after them and wipe ’em out. Now I’ve a darned good reason. If Cal links up with the Navajo it’s a sure bet he’ll come back here, and mebbby with Navajos behind him. I’m going to hit first.”

Connie did not say anything. She was so surprised by the whole revelation she had not yet had time to adjust herself. Brice gave her a look, waited, then signalled across to Sheriff Andrews as he stood at the bar. Immediately he came ambling across.

“I’ve work for you and your deputies and a *posse* of men,” Brice announced. “I’ve got the tip off that Cal Rutter and ‘Smoky’ Jones are tryin’ to contact Chief Chewonokee and the Navajo nomads. That can’t be fur any healthy reason far as we’re concerned—so try and find ’em. And finish ’em! After that see if you can locate Chewonokee’s mob. Last heard of headin’ in this direction from Oregon.”

“Oregon!” the sheriff ejaculated, starting. “Hell, boss, you don’t want much, do you? Between here an’ Oregon there’s hundreds of miles of territory an’—”

“Stop handin’ me a lot of arguments!” Brice broke in angrily. “I’ve told you what to do—so do it! If yuh don’t we’re likely one day t’have Cal Rutter, Jones an’ a mob of Navajos shootin’ us up.”

“With bows an’ arrows?” the sheriff grinned. “I can’t see them being much good against six-shooters.”

“I’m not interested in what you can see, Andrews. *You* once warned *me* what might happen if Rutter got in contact with the Navajo nomads. Now he looks like doin’ it you start beefin’. Just get busy an’ do as yore told.”

The sheriff shrugged. “Okay—but I’m warnin’ you, this may take some time . . .”

Cal Rutter stirred slowly amidst the warm skins of the bed on which he was lying. Behind his slowly awakening consciousness was a memory of movement, of intense pain, of blacking out . . . He opened his eyes slowly, tried to speak and could not. There was something apparently holding his throat and voice in a grip of steel.

“You feel better, Cal Rutter?” came the impassive voice of Chewonokee.

Cal turned his head very slightly, and at that moment Chewonokee came into his line of vision. As usual the Navajo had no expression on his red-skinned, high-cheekboned face, but there was thoughtful inquiry in his oblique dark eyes.

Since Cal could not answer he merely nodded his head very slightly. He was commencing to realize now that his face and throat were wrapped in wadding and bandages, from which floated a deadening aroma of strange antiseptics. What exactly Chewonokee had been using Cal did not know—probably healing juices and distillations which were a tribal secret.

“The work is done,” Chewonokee said quietly, squatting at the bedside. “Chewonokee do as you ask and change face and voice. At last night’s celebrations, in honour of your visit, drug was put in your wine. That was deliberate—so you would sleep through the operation. You did not feel much pain?”

Cal tried to say “a little . . .” but the words would not come. He lay looking at the Navajo’s strong features.

“You soon be well, Cal Rutter.” Chewonokee got to his feet. “When that comes it will be your partner’s turn. Until then, rest. You will be well cared for.”

And in every respect Chewonokee kept his word. Two women of the tribe waited on Cal hand and foot, to which indeed he was entitled after the gold he handed over, and little by little his strong constitution began to restore him to normalcy. In a week the constriction had left his throat and he was able to speak, to discover the words came forth—or seemed to—in a rusty bass, several tones lower than his former clipped baritone. So far he had not seen his face, though the wadding and bandages had been lessened considerably.

The zero hour came six weeks after the operation itself. Chewonokee came striding into the wigwam which was Cal’s own particular domicile during this period—‘Smoky’ Jones having another tent at the opposite end of the settlement—and announced that the bandages could be removed for good.

“This means I can see myself?” Cal asked quickly.

“Yes, Cal Rutter. Here . . .” The Navajo handed over a piece of broken hand-mirror. Cal looked into it and saw his eyes peeping through the bandages; then he lowered the mirror again as Chewonokee went to work. In a matter of moments the bandages were thrown aside and Chewonokee studied his handiwork carefully. A slow parting of the thin lips, his nearest approach to a smile seemed to suggest that he was satisfied with his handiwork.

“Look,” he invited, motioning.

Cal raised the mirror again and could not help starting as he saw his reflection. At first glance he found it hard to recognize the image as himself. The nose had been broken and reset slightly one-sided. The skin of the cheeks had been built up by manipulation of the muscles below it so that the normal prominent cheekbones were now no longer noticeable. The corners

of the mouth, which had turned up slightly, had been dragged down by incisions at either side, which had the effect of lengthening the lip line and giving a general look of dissipation . . .

There were other evidences which Cal noticed, the full effect of which could only register as time passed and the whole face ‘dropped’ into its new mould. But the fact remained that without any resort to skin grafting—as such—Chewonokee had performed a masterpiece of surgical manipulation, achieving his effects by increasing or decreasing the tension of muscles here and there, and adding incisions which automatically drew up the skin. But these were so placed that they followed the natural creases of the face and to the uninitiated could not possibly suggest scars.

“Yeah,” Cal sat at last, musing. “It’s the smartest bit of work I’ve seen in a long time, Chewonokee . . .” He lowered the mirror to look at his throat. On one side of it was a nearly healed scar which a kerchief would easily cover.

“With change of clothes and style of hair, you no longer Cal Rutter,” Chewonokee observed. “Your partner must see you.”

Chewonokee moved to the tent opening, clapped his hands and gave an order. Smiling to himself, Cal put the mirror down and rose to his feet. Quickly he drew his hair sideways, contrary to its normal position, and then stood waiting. In a moment the fat figure of ‘Smoky’ appeared.

“Yeah?” He glanced at Chewonokee. “Yuh want me, chief?”

The Navajo said nothing. Cal moved forward.

“No, ‘Smoky’, I do.”

‘Smoky’ glanced, and then he stared. His eyes round with amazement he came forward slowly. Cal was quite satisfied from the look on ‘Smoky’s’ face, who knew him so intimately, that the facial and vocal change was satisfactory.

“Hell’s bells, I don’t *believe* it!” ‘Smoky’ ejaculated at length. “Yore no more like Cal Rutter than my Aunt Sophy! That sure is one swell job. Yeah, even the voice. Never heard anythin’ like it!”

“If it fools you it’ll certainly fool the rest of ’em back in Desert’s End,” Cal said. “In different clothes an’ lookin and talkin’ like this I’ll get away with murder, if I have to.”

“You delay no longer, Cal Rutter?” Chewonokee asked. “You go now to Desert’s End?”

Cal reflected quickly. Before he returned to Desert’s End he had more gold to get. That would not be difficult by a detour, but it was essential that he move by night so his visit to the buried vault could not be observed by the hawk-eyed Navajos who were ever on the alert.

“Yes, I’ll go tonight,” he said finally. “First I’ll have to wear different clothes. I intend to pass myself off as a rich trader just passin’ through Desert’s End. Once I get there I’ll apparently like the place so much I’ll stop there. What you have to do then, Chewonokee, is hold everythin’ until I get word to you that the moment has come to wipe up Brice and his boys. That okay?”

“Chewonokee wait,” the Navajo confirmed. “Tonight you go, tonight your partner shall be changed as you have been.”

‘Smoky’ smiled uneasily. “Yeah—sure. I s’pose it is my turn next. I ain’t sayin’ I’m lookin’ forward to it, though.”

“Nothin’ much to worry about,” Cal reassured him. “Chewonokee here has some pretty powerful drug which acts like an anaesthetic.”

“Chewonokee give you wine, ‘Smoky’ Jones, to deaden your fears and your senses . . .” Then Chewonokee turned back to Cal. “Clothes need not worry you, my friend. We have

many here, stored from the past when stage coach hold-ups took place. I show you.”

Again Chewonokee moved to the tent opening and shouted orders. Accordingly, after a few moments, two braves came staggering in with a heavy wooden box which they dumped on the floor. Chewonokee dismissed them and pushed back the box lid.

“Take your choice, Cal Rutter,” he invited. “‘Smoky’ Jones, come with me. I have wine to give you.”

‘Smoky’ did not dare refuse, so with a rather hopeless look towards the grinning Cal he went out of the opening with Chewonokee striding ahead of him across the encampment. They finished up in Chewonokee’s own domain. From the cupboard near the table he produced a tightly corked stone flagon. Without speaking he poured some of the liquid into a vessel and handed it across.

“Fur—fur me?” ‘Smoky’ inquired.

“Drink,” Chewonokee ordered. “All of it. Later in the day you will have more. In no other way can you be as Chewonokee wants you to be when the operation begins.”

‘Smoky’ took the vessel, and despite his inner misgivings he drank the wine to its dregs. To his surprise he found he liked it; it was different from anything he had ever tasted before. He hesitated, wondering if he dare ask for more, when there came an interruption. A Navajo came hurrying into the tent, entirely ignoring the stern look of rebuke which Chewonokee dealt him.

Apparently something was urgent. Not knowing the language ‘Smoky’ had no idea what the conversation meant, but it ended in Chewonokee forgetting everything and hurrying out of the tent with the Navajo brave racing in front of him. ‘Smoky’ watched them go, then his eyes travelled slyly to the still open flagon of wine on the table . . .

Meantime, Chewonokee was striding lithely up an acclivity at the far end of the encampment, following the course of the brave slightly ahead of him. Presently they both reached the jutting eminence of rock used as a look-out post, giving as it did a commanding view of the mesa below.

“There!” the Navajo sentry exclaimed, in his own language, pointing. “I have watched them many days, Chewonokee. They search for something, and in this search they come ever nearer to us. Do you believe they are trying to pick up our trail?”

Chewonokee did not answer. Immovable, but keeping low so he could not possibly be spotted, he watched a party of some twenty men on horseback perhaps two miles distant on the plain. They were not riding through but going back and forth and studying the ground, plainly trying to pick up some kind of trail. And such a number of men all apparently hunting for one thing was most unusual. Chewonokee’s intent eyes narrowed.

“Keep watch,” he instructed finally. “If they come too near tell me. Do not attack; we question them first.”

“Do you think they look for the white men we have with us?”

“I do not know.” Chewonokee was obviously not going to commit himself. “We will see . . . Keep watch.”

Thoughtful, he left the brave on look-out and returned down the precipitous slope to the encampment. He could not quite understand the situation. Up to now he had felt reasonably sure in his own mind that Cal Rutter and ‘Smoky’ Jones were entirely genuine. But if there *were* some trickery—? If this face-changing business was but an elaborate hoax to finally lead up to an attack on the encampment and be rid of the last of the nomads? . . . Chewonokee shook his head to himself. This, as yet, he could not believe.

“How do I look, chief?”

Chewonokee came to a halt and glanced up. The big figure of Cal Rutter was standing right beside him, dressed in a black coat and trousers, fancy waistcoat, and shoe-string tie dangling down a somewhat off-white shirt. A big black sombrero completed the outfit. Cal looked exactly as he hoped he would look—like a prosperous cattle dealer or saloon owner. Or, maybe, a big time gambler. He looked like anything but Cal Rutter.

“Cal Rutter has gone,” Chewonokee said gravely. “I see a new man I do not know.”

“Good!” Cal smiled. “From now on the name’s Martin Wade, cattle king from Texas. Tonight I’ll be on my way . . . One thing I do need is a change of guns. My own would very soon be recognized since they were kept by the sheriff of Desert’s End for quite some time.”

Chewonokee nodded. “Guns will be changed, Cal Rutter. We have some on hand. Also you have fresh horse. In fact you go from here as new man entirely.”

“My idea exactly,” Cal assented. “If you could let me have the guns now I’ll get in a little practice with ’em. Every gun is different.”

Chewonokee hesitated, then with a shrug he crossed to his domain and passed inside. Immediately he paused in surprise. ‘Smoky’ Jones was lying prostrate on the couch-like bed, the fallen flagon of wine on the floor beside his dangling hand. Chewonokee looked at it, then at ‘Smoky’. A grim light came into his eyes as he went over to the paunchy saddle-tramp and prodded him in the ribs. Not that it had any effect. ‘Smoky’ went on sleeping heavily.

Chewonokee gave it up. He put the empty flagon on the table and from the inevitable cupboard produced two carefully cleaned six-shooters. Going outside again he handed them to the nearby waiting Cal.

“These should serve your purpose, Cal Rutter. Your gun belts are with Dawn Smoke for safe keeping. There he is . . .”

Cal glanced towards a distant brave busy with some task or other. Then he nodded. “Thanks, Chewonokee. I’m going to spend most of today on some target practice. No objections?”

“Chewonokee no objection. You will not see your friend ‘Smoky’ before you go. He drink all wine whilst I had to leave him.”

“And now he’s pickled?” Cal gave a grin. “About like him. You’ll probably find he’ll talk a lot when he comes to. Give him my best wishes: he’ll need ’em when he has his face fixed. See you later, Chewonokee.”

The Navajo said nothing, giving merely a slight nod. A thoughtful look in his eyes he returned into his domicile and spent a few moments mixing up a potion from his various queer medicinal resources. When at length he had the potion to his liking he crossed to the stupefied ‘Smoky’ and forced it between his lips. The first mouthful he spat out, but the second he swallowed. After a moment or two he stirred and opened his eyes glassily.

“My friend, you are a fool.” Chewonokee said deliberately. “Too much wine kill. You now be sick; I come and see you later.”

With that he left a vessel suggestively close to ‘Smoky’s’ side and then stalked outside . . . Out on the mesa, a mile perhaps from the foothills of the mountains where Chewonokee and his tribe had their retreat, twenty sun-burned and wearied men lounged at ease. They had chosen the only shady spot they could find, close to an outcropping of giant cacti, but even so the fierce heat of the afternoon sun was intolerable.

Sheriff Andrews was the first to speak, drawing the back of his hand over his flabby, perspiring face.

“I reckon it’s time we went back to th’ boss an’ told him he’s loco,” he said flatly. “We’ve bin chasin’ rainbows fur weeks now an’ we’re no nearer findin’ Chewonokee or Cal Rutter than we ever was.”

“I wouldn’t say that, Mr. Andrews,” one of his deputies remarked. “We’ve picked up enough from various homesteaders to know that Chewonokee and his tribe have bin seen in this region—which shows they’ve headed south. With yonder barrier range in the way I don’t see they’d go much further.”

“Mebby not, but we haven’t *found* ’em, and searching this blasted desert for a trail is enough to fry yuh brains. I’m for ridin’ back to Desert’s End when the heat cools off an’ tell the boss we’ve gotten no nearer.”

“An’ you know what you’ll get for that!” the second deputy said bitterly, unscrewing his water flask. “We’ll be sent out again . . . Come to think on it, sheriff, if you hadn’t opened your mouth so wide to the boss about the possibility of a Navajo attack if Cal Rutter got in touch with ’em, we wouldn’t be chasin’ around this desert fur weeks on end.”

“*Who* opened his mouth wide?” Andrews demanded truculently.

“You did! I was in the Painted Lady when you said it. Sat at the next table to the boss. You and your intuitions!” the second deputy sneered.

Andrews hovered over saying something further, then he abruptly checked himself as, faintly on the hot silence, there came the distinct sound of a gunshot. After a second or two it was followed by another. The sprawling men straightened up a little and looked about them. Nearby the ears of the heat-exhausted horses twitched.

“Hear that?” one of the men demanded.

“Course we heard it!” Andrews retorted. “But where’d it come from? Someone snipin’ at us?”

This thought brought every man’s hand to his gun, but Andrews shook his head.

“That ain’t snipin’. It’s not a rifle for one thing; sounds more like a revolver—”

Two more shots—distant, but none the less clear, and in the rocky regions near the Navajo encampment Cal Rutter smiled to himself at his test marksmanship with his new guns.

“It’s comin’ from them mountains,” the first deputy decided at length, preparing to stand up—but Andrews dragged him down again sharply.

“Don’t be a bigger fool than you haveta, Seth,” he told him. “We’ll get a darned sight more outa this by lookin’ as if we ain’t heard nothin’. That shootin’ doesn’t sound like Navajos. They use arrows. Mightn’t be anythin’ at all but a couple of punchers shootin’ it out with each other.”

“Or it *could* be Cal Rutter fightin’ it out with some Navajos,” one of the men suggested. “Yonder range is quite a likely place for a lot of stinkin’ Indians to hide out.”

“I’d thought of that,” Andrews said complacently, even though he hadn’t. “If there *is* Indians in them mountains they’ll have a look-out somewhere who might even be watchin’ us right now. We’d not get very far tryin’ to look into things in daylight.”

“Then what’s the angle, sheriff?”

“We wait ’til dark.”

“Might be too late, then!”

“It won’t be too late if there’s an Indian encampment there. It’ll only be too late if we’ve been listenin’ per’aps to shots fired by Cal Rutter or ‘Smoky’ Jones. They’ll have moved on by nightfall. Either way it’s too dangerous to go now, but when night comes we’ll look into it.”

“In that case,” the second deputy said, “we’d do best to get movin’. If we’re bein’ watched it’d look mighty suspicious if we just hung around here doin’ nothin’ til sundown.”

The value of the suggestion dawned on Andrews after a moment or two and he got to his feet wearily.

“Okay. We’ll ride south until we come to a depression. There we’ll stop until nightfall—Let’s go.”

And, high up on the rocky eminence from which he was surveying the mesa, the Navajo look-out watched these manoeuvres, and wondered. He saw the men ride out to the southwards until they were lost to sight in the shimmering heat mist. But he did not report anything to Chewonokee. That would only be demanded—by Chewonokee’s own instructions—if there were any decided move in the direction of the mountains.

So the rest of the hot, sizzling afternoon passed quietly. Cal did not indulge in any more target practice. Entirely oblivious to how completely the wind direction had carried the sound of his shooting to the mesa, he was now sprawled at ease in a corner of the Navajo encampment, pondering over a cigarette as to the first moves he would make when he reached Desert’s End. Definitely his prime reason was to visit the buried vault before proceeding further, and as near as he could tell he would have to strike due south to accomplish it. *And* by night. It would never do for the Navajo look-out to perhaps learn something. Concealing knowledge of the temple was something Chewonokee would never forgive . . .

The sun had completely westered when at last Cal presented himself in Chewonokee’s dwelling. The Navajo was alone, busy sterilizing a knife over the flame of a crude kerosene lamp.

“I’m on my way now, Chewonokee,” Cal explained. “Thought you’d like t’know.”

“Chewonokee’s good wishes go with you, Cal Rutter. As soon as you have information worthwhile contact me. I wait. When time comes we will leave nothing unturned to destroy Whittaker Brice and those who work with him.”

“My idea, too.” Cal nodded; then his eyes strayed to the knife. “That being prepared for ‘Smoky’?”

“Yes. Very soon now I operate. He is sobering up from the wine. I’ve had him put in his own bed.”

“I don’t envy him,” Cal grinned; then he held out his hand. “‘Bye, Chewonokee, and thanks for everythin’.”

Chewonokee shook the hand firmly and for a moment the eyes of white and Redskin met. Chewonokee for his own part still could not believe that here was trickery . . . He withdrew his hand and smiled tautly.

“We shall meet again, Cal Rutter.”

Cal nodded and took his departure. Once having left the encampment it did not take him long to ride down the tortuous declivities until he reached the foothills—then he struck out in the intense darkness which preceded the moonrise, heading out into the desert due south. How close he came to being spotted by Sheriff Andrews and his outfit he never knew for, as it happened, they were following a narrow cleft up into the mountains as Cal descended, and the darkness and wall of rock prevented one from seeing the other . . . As for the look-out who had now been relieved by another brave, he failed to observe anything unusual since the dense mist which preceded the night proper had cloaked the desert. Of this fact Cal was well aware, and Andrews and his men had also taken advantage of it, too.

And Chewonokee? Still with a vague uncertainty in his mind he completed his preparations for the operation upon 'Smoky' and then went across the dimly lighted area of the encampment to fetch him. Entering 'Smoky's' tent he found him sprawled on the couch, exactly as he had left him. The vigorous shaking he got aroused him somewhat.

"Chewonokee ready," the Indian murmured. "Come with me. Can you stand?"

"I dunno . . ." 'Smoky' stirred lazily and yawned. "I feel as though a herd uv buffalo have bin at me—Okay, I think I can manage." He heaved to his feet, Chewonokee's powerful arm helping him. "Y'know somethin', chief? I ain't so sure but what I'm plumb loco goin' through with this."

"Cal Rutter said you should."

"Yeah, sure—but mebbe it's time I used me independence, huh? I don't aim t'go to Desert's End and muscle my way in the same as Cal figgers on doin'. If I do anythin' at all it'll be to ride with you boys when we clean the place up. Can't see it'll matter how I look."

Chewonokee shrugged. "Cal Rutter may yet need you to help him. Suddenly perhaps. If you are not changed you cannot go. You had better do as he says."

"Why *should* I?" The after-effects of strange wine and its following sickness had made 'Smoky' unusually quarrelsome. "I git kinda sick of doin' as Cal sez. I've got meself to think about . . ." 'Smoky' hiccuped solemnly as he reflected. "Mebby I should have gone my own way when I wanted to—some time back. I know where the gold is, same as Cal does. Reckon I was a sucker to come this far."

"Chewonokee waits," the Navajo said, a trifle impatiently. "Come . . ."

"Okay, okay. Let me git my sea-legs—I haven't felt as rocky as this since I fell in that durned vault and found the gold."

'Smoky' edged forward uncertainly, unaware of the change of expression which had come to Chewonokee's face. He reached out a hand and caught 'Smoky's' shoulder as he was about to pass through the opening.

"Chewonokee ask question. In which vault did you find gold? Cal Rutter said gold came from a hidden creek."

"Yeah, that's right. I—er—" 'Smoky' hesitated, confused even yet from the after-effects of wine and emetic. "I—guess I don't know what I'm talkin' about."

"Chewonokee make sure," the Navajo snapped, dragging 'Smoky' back into the tent. "Cal Rutter had much gold, more than is normal in a creek. What is this vault you speak of?"

"Nothin', Chewonokee. Nothin'—honest!"

Chewonokee reflected for a moment, his eyes narrowed. 'Smoky' waited, his heart thumping. He had gathered by now that he had said too much, and he just hadn't the mental adroitness necessary to extricate himself.

"Chewonokee think you lie," the Navajo said at last. "So much gold has puzzled me. Tell me about this vault . . ."

'Smoky' hesitated and his eyes travelled to the opening of the tent and the encampment beyond. Abruptly, without giving a thought as to how this act might appear, he made a dash for it, flinging his fat form past Chewonokee, hurtling through the tent opening, and then running for his life. By his very audacity he might have got away with it, had he not tripped over a guy-rope. Gasping, he fell flat on his face.

In a matter of seconds he had been hauled to his feet by the braves who had rushed around him. Chewonokee came up in the flickering light of camp fires and kerosene lamps. His expression was one such as 'Smoky' had never seen before.

"You run away," Chewonokee said bitterly. "No man run unless he be guilty. You will tell Chewonokee about the vault."

"There *ain't* no vault!" 'Smoky' panted, struggling to pull free of the braves holding him. "An' even if there wus a vault is no business of yourn! Gold is where yuh find it!"

"Not when it is in a vault!" Chewonokee retorted. "The only vaults existing in this territory were made by my race. There are many of them, some of them lost even to us. You will tell Chewonokee, where the vault is where you found gold!"

'Smoky' stared around him helplessly, by now fully sober. He knew too that the friendliness of the Navajos had vanished completely. Not that there was any wonder in this; it had only existed at all as long as gold had been forthcoming and there was no suggestion of a double-cross. Now Chewonokee's formerly unresolved suspicions were rapidly crystalizing.

"Speak!" Chewonokee commanded, and snatched a knife from his belt threateningly. "Chewonokee wait no longer. Do not forget that we have ways of learning things. Ways that can make a white man suffer!"

"I don't know anything!" Smokey yelled hoarsely. "You got me all wrong!"

For answer Chewonokee made a signal. The braves responded instantly and jabbering, sweating 'Smoky' was dragged across the encampment to where there stood a solitary dead tree with one massive branch protruding outwards. Presumably this had been used before for 'persuasive' purposes. Almost before he knew what was happening 'Smoky' found himself slung up to the branch by his wrists, the tips of his toes just touching the ground.

Chewonokee came forward and eyed him coldly. "The choice is yours, 'Smoky' Jones. You will tell Chewonokee everything or I shall give the order for fire to be built around you. Now *speak!*"

The threat of fire added to the muscle-wrenching strain he was already enduring was too much for 'Smoky'. He started to speak, then stopped short at the sudden whang of a gunshot from somewhere above. Nearby a Navajo gasped, clutched his chest, then dropped flat.

Instantly Chewonokee was on the alert. It flashed through his mind that this was Cal Rutter's work, endeavouring to save his friend—but the notion was dispelled as more shots came a second afterwards from a different direction. Since no man could move that fast it meant there must be several, presumably at a height in the rocks around the encampment.

In other words, Sheriff Andrews and his boys had things well mapped out. The flickering of the camp fires had guided them in the mountain fastness and the shouts of Chewonokee and angry cries of the braves had afterwards guided them unerringly. Now the twenty or so men from Desert's End were crouched in the gloom, their guns ready.

"Don't see no sign of Cal Rutter," Andrews muttered to the deputy beside him. "There's a fat critter strung to that tree there who might be 'Smoky' Jones. We'll grab him if we can an' mebbly learn somethin'. As fur the rest of this bunch, blast the daylights out of 'em! Okay—let 'em have it!" he finished in a shout.

And on that the overture of gunfire burst suddenly into a cracking pandemonium. Chewonokee and his men were at a disadvantage in that they could be seen in the firelight whereas the attackers were invisible. The Navajos moved fast, some dropping as they ran, and in a matter of seconds the air was thick with hurtling arrows as they flashed in the direction of the flaring guns.

"They ain't got no chance against us," Andrews grinned, firing savagely.

"Suppose this bunch ain't Chewonokee an' his outfit?" the deputy panted, reloading his gun quickly.

“So what? They’re Navajos, ain’t they? Earth’ll be a durned sight sweeter without ’em—An’ I think it *is* Chewonokee’s mob; don’t see who else.”

By this time fire and chaos were spreading quickly through the encampment as lamps were shot down and fires kicked to pieces by hurrying braves. ‘Smoky’ still hung where he was, grunting and groaning by turns, his ears deafened by the din of gunfire and the yelling of the braves. Where Chewonokee had gone he did not know; presumably he was directing the defence.

This indeed was so, though he knew he was fighting a losing battle. The attackers had the shelter of the rocks: he and his braves had little shelter at all and the glare of fire was like a searchlight. And by this time a grim thought had taken possession of Chewonokee, suspicious—as he always was—of white men. He felt convinced that Cal Rutter was responsible for this onslaught. He had ridden out of the encampment, gathered together the men which the look-out had seen earlier, and led them straight to this mountain retreat. Cal Rutter was as rotten as all white men and more audacious than most. He had told a clever story and got away with it. Naturally he would want to destroy Chewonokee and his men so they could never have any dealings with the lost vault which had evidently been found—

Vault? The thought made Chewonokee pause for a moment in his steady firing of poisoned arrows into the night. He glanced towards the gross, hanging figure of ‘Smoky’ not far away. So far no information had been gained. And it *had* to be. It *had* to be!

Chewonokee rose from his crouching position and sped across to where ‘Smoky’ was dangling. He was still quite conscious but groaning at the punishment his weight was throwing on his dragged-up arms.

“The vault!” Chewonokee snarled at him. “Where is that vault?”

“It’s—” ‘Smoky’ got the one word out, then he screamed and shuddered into silence. Chewonokee stared at him and after a second he beheld the small red spot in the centre of ‘Smoky’s’ forehead where a stray bullet had struck. ‘Smoky’ would say nothing more—ever.

Cursing his bad luck, Chewonokee swung round and fired two arrows savagely at random into the gun-blazing gloom—then he too gasped and dropped as a bullet tore with sickening anguish across the top of his shoulder. He lay still, fighting against unconsciousness, aware of the hell of fire, bullets, and shouts around him. Try as he would he could not overcome the deepening waves of blackness that surged over him . . .

Cal Rutter had ridden some three miles southwards when on the still night air he caught the far distant sound of gunfire . . . Had he not been hampered by mist in the earlier stages of his departure from the encampment he would undoubtedly have been out of earshot of the fracas in the mountains. As it was he drew his horse to a halt and sat listening intently to the mountain wind.

Since a pause followed the opening shots he believed after a while he had been mistaken and prepared to ride on again—but there was *no* mistake about the volleying which broke out shortly afterwards. A gun battle on a large scale was undoubtedly in progress. But why? Whom?

“I don’t get it,” he muttered, to the unnoticing horse. “I could stake my boots that lots comin’ from the range. Wonder if that bonehead ‘Smoky’ started somethin’ he couldn’t finish rather than have his face fixed?”

Cal wasted no further time on conjecture. He swung his horse’s head around and set off back the way he had come, at a fast gallop. In time, as he progressed, the gunfire died down and finally ceased altogether—but he did not stop riding hard. At least not until in the rising moonlight he saw ahead of him, against the white desert, a fast riding *posse* coming from the direction of the mountains.

He made the only move he could, detoured swiftly to a distant outcropping of giant cacti and dismounted beside it. With some difficulty he got his horse to lie down, and then settled on his face beside it, watching intently. If the raiders did not come too close he would escape detection. None the less he drew his gun in readiness and waited.

The thunder of the approaching hooves drummed into the silence, and at last the men swept by. The moonlight was not strong enough for Cal to identify them—any more than they noticed him in their hurry—but he felt reasonably sure there was only one place from which they could have come—Desert’s End. Then they were on their way and the noise of the hooves began to slowly fade.

Cal watched them out of sight, remounted, and rode hell for leather back to the range. When eventually he came into the encampment area he stopped, appalled. Slowly he slid from his horse and stared around him in the pallid beams of the low moon.

Apparently there was nothing left of the encampment at all—as such. Still unextinguished fires were flickering on the final embers. Braves lay sprawled in various attitudes amidst the remains of wigwams and supplies. Not one of them stirred as Cal moved to them and examined them . . . And so finally he came to the swinging figure of ‘Smoky’, to notice in a matter of seconds that his fat partner was finished.

“Massacre, I reckon,” Cal muttered, staring around him again. “Nothin’ else but! Wonder what happened to Chewonokee?”

A powerful Navajo with a badly wounded shoulder could have answered that question, but he didn’t. He was sprawled, conscious again now, amidst rocks bounding the edge of the encampment. With him were some half-dozen braves, the only survivors of the onslaught. They had heard Cal’s approach and moved themselves out of the way—exactly why, only Chewonokee knew.

“This is madness, Chewonokee,” whispered the brave at the wounded Navajo’s side. “Cal Rutter has come back to see what has been done and you let him walk! Give me the word and I will fire straight to his heart—”

“Wait!” Chewonokee muttered. “To kill gain us nothing. To let traitor Cal Rutter live give us much. He, like the fat one, must know of vault of gold, which belongs to the Navajos by heritage. Give him life and he will unknowingly lead us to it. I speak wisely, and you must heed . . . One of you will follow him when he leaves. Watch him, always, and report to me. When I am recovered again I think further . . .”

The braves said no more. The chief had spoken and they must obey . . .

Meanwhile, entirely unaware that he was being observed, Cal went to work to cut down ‘Smoky’s’ dangling body, after which he spent some time burying him and reciting a brief and somewhat crude funeral service. This done he looked about him again. The moon was higher now, but even so it did not reveal to him the spot where Chewonokee and the survivors were watching him intently.

For his own part, Cal could only sum the whole business up as a massacre. Possibly Chewonokee was somewhere amidst the dead, but it might take hours to find him, and even if he did no good purpose would be solved by finding a corpse. On the other hand he might have escaped, in which case he could be contacted later. It never once occurred to Cal that the Navajos were responsible for having strung up ‘Smoky’. He was quite sure the invaders from Desert’s End had done this, perhaps to find out where he—Cal—was. Which meant he would have to be particularly careful from here on in case those in Desert’s End knew exactly what he was up to . . .

So finally he took his departure, a much puzzled and very wary man—but he still intended to carry out his original programme, to visit the vault first and obtain more gold, then proceed to Desert’s End and see how the land lay. Once or twice as he rode through the silent moonlight he had the conviction that he was being followed, unless it was the faint echo of his own horse’s hoofs. Certainly he could not see anybody when he stopped once or twice and gazed back into the nebulous mystery of the moonlight. Finally he shelved his suspicions. With his mind in its present bewildered condition, and with the vastness of the desert around him, he was probably a victim of extreme imagination.

He reckoned it was in the region of midnight when he came to the area where he knew the vault was somewhere hidden, but under the present conditions it was difficult to pinpoint its position. It needed the position of the sun and the shadows of the dunes to give the right direction. To wait for the daylight, however, did not seem to Cal a good idea. It might put him too much on view for one thing—so he began a steady exploration in the ghostly glow, gradually assimilating into his mind the details he required—and finally, after a couple of hours searching, he came upon the spot he wanted, roughly disguised just as it had been left.

He dismounted, still unaware of eagle eyes watching him from a distance . . . To obtain more gold was simple. The job done and the gold in a little skin bag he had brought from the Navajo encampment for the purpose, he reset the camouflage and rode on his way in the direction of Desert’s End.

As he had expected, the town was dead when he arrived. It was in the early hours of the morning with the kerosene lights extinguished and every dwelling—even the Painted Lady—in darkness. For a moment or two Cal toyed with the idea of sleeping in the desert until dawn came, since he had all the necessary bed-roll and blankets with him—then it occurred to him that he might seem more convincing if he rode in in the dead of night and knocked up Ma

Hansen, who ran the rooming house on the main street. At least he had the advantage, having been here before, of knowing his way about.

The idea became action and he spurred his horse forward. He looked deliberately to either side of him as he rode down the street, on the off chance that some wakeful person might be watching him somewhere. A stranger would not ride straight to Ma Hansen's; he'd survey as he went. In every particular Cal knew his very life depended on carrying his deception through, and also he might learn from straightforward Ma Hansen if anything had been told by 'Smoky' and become common knowledge in the town.

As he had expected, his hammerings on the door of Ma Hansen's rooming house presently caused a window to fly up over the porchway.

"Who in heck are yuh bangin' the door at this hour uv night?"

"Martin Wade's the name, ma'am," Cal replied, in his newly acquired basso-profundo. "I'm passin' through, an' I'm mighty tired. I noticed your roomin' sign. Mebby you could put me up?"

"An' mebby I couldn't! Rousin' a hard workin' woman at this hour o' night! Oughta be ashamed of yourself!"

"I'm sorry for that, ma'am. Just one of those things."

Pause. Cal could dimly see a round face with a mob-cap; then Ma Hansen spoke again.

"You got money, stranger?"

"All that's needed, ma'am. Right now it's in gold, but tomorrow you can have whatever you ask—within reason."

"Wait there!" Ma Hansen commanded, and after a moment or two an oil lamp flame became visible bobbing behind the closed screen-door. At length the two doors were opened and Ma Hansen stood there like a feather bed, an old flannel dressing-gown girdled tautly about her plump figure.

"Let's see the colour of yuh gold, Mr. Wade. I get far too many four-flushers hereabouts."

Cal smiled and brought his skin bag of gold chippings and ingots into view. Emptying it on his palm he handed across a small nut of gold and then refilled the bag.

"That's yours for deposit," he explained. "Henceforth I'll pay in money. I'll see the assayer tomorrow."

Ma Hansen was no longer a doubting landlady but a gushing friend. Her round, homely face broke into a welcoming smile in the lamplight.

"Right sorry I was suspicious uv you, sir. A lone woman in these parts gets that way. I've got just the room fur you—over the main hall and porchway. This way . . ."

"And my horse, ma'am?"

"Don't give it a thought. There's a stable at the back. I'll see everythin's in order. Now come upstairs—how's about night clothes?"

"I must buy some tomorrow," Cal said. "I've been sleepin' out these last few weeks with only the things I got on. Like I sed, I'm a mighty tired man—"

"Yuh sure must be," Ma Hansen sympathized. "But don't let anythin' worry you. I keep a stock of clothes in, just in case."

With that she jerked the lamp significantly towards the stairs and Cal followed her up them. At the far end of the narrow landing he was shown into a comfortable enough room, the main appointments being a bed and an old-fashioned dressing-table.

"This do yuh? Everythin's aired, Mr. Wade. I'm always prepared for somethin' to happen."

“So, in a sense, am I,” Cal smiled. “Thanks, Mrs. . . .”

“Aw shucks, call me ‘Ma’. Everybody does hereabouts. An’ let me tell yuh somethin’ even though I’m doin’ it respectful like I’m runnin’ a select place here an’ I don’t want no upsets or gunplay. I’ve two old women, a retired rancher, a cattle-man from up north, an’ a saloon hostess stayin’ here. They’re all quiet, an’ I’d like you to be.”

“I will—I promise,” Cal responded; then he hesitated. “A saloon hostess? Would it be the Painted Lady? I noticed it as I rode past.”

“Yeah. Connie McBride. She usta stay at Chuck Rawlins’ small hotel down the street only some lug got fresh so she changed over to me. Don’t blame ’er. Nice girl. Too nice fur the low grade heels runnin’ around this territory . . . Well, I won’t be keepin’ yuh, Mr. Wade. Breakfast’s at seven-thirty. If you want an exception in your case—”

“No exception,” Cal interrupted. “I’ll be there.”

“Okay. Good night.”

The door closed and Cal was left in the murky reflected moonlight. He did not trouble to light the oil lamp on the rickety table beside the bed. Instead he sat on the bed edge and reflected. The news about Connie McBride had come as a surprise, and he was not sure whether it was welcome or not. On the one hand it would be nice to be so near her in the same building; on the other hand, if association became too close, her keen eyes and intuition might penetrate the disguise. Have to let things take their course, that was all.

Cal was also aware of something else now. He had, as far as he knew, lost Chewonoke and his tribe of Navajos, so any mass onslaught of Desert’s End at a later date was now out of the question. He would have to play a lone hand to uproot Whittaker Brice, and what form this ‘lone hand’ would take he had no idea at the moment. The one consolation was that he had all the money he needed, and with such an all-powerful weapon he ought to be able to accomplish almost anything . . .

At which point Cal’s thoughts began to drift to a stop. He was a good deal more tired than he realized. He kept alert enough to pull off his jacket and fancy waistcoat, then with his guns where he could immediately get at them he began to unlace his riding-boots.

A knock on the door startled him back to wakefulness. He opened the door warily to behold nothing more alarming than Ma Hansen with a big nightshirt over her arm.

“Mebby you put on,” she whispered. “Sorry to disturb you.”

Cal smiled his thanks, took the shirt, and closed the door. Ten minutes later he was dead asleep.

Cal kept to his promise and turned up at the breakfast table at seven-thirty, freshly shaved with a cut-throat razor from his own few possessions, and his hair carefully groomed in its new style, contrived to completely cover that bullet scar on the top of his skull.

As he came into the main dining-room amidst the appetizing aroma of frying ham rashers he briefly weighed up the situation. His eyes travelled without interest across two elderly ladies, the retired rancher and the cattle-man from up north, both of these latter as identifiable as though they were wearing placards proclaiming their vocations, and settled on the blue-eyed, fair-haired girl in the lilac silk blouse seated at the far end of the table. He smiled to himself. Connie McBride looked very crisp and fresh, but as usual missing prettiness. She glanced up as Cal came in and he read the thought that crossed her mind. She did not exactly *know* him, but was trying to place him.

By this time Cal had moved over to the empty chair opposite her, which he assumed was his place, and then smiled at her as he sat down.

“Morning,” he greeted, and the deep rumble of his voice seemed to decide Connie that she did *not* know him.

“Good morning,” she responded politely, and lowered her searching gaze. The others at the table also murmured something but Cal did not pay any particular attention. He was wondering if the high-fitting collar he was wearing, with the shoe-string tie dangling down the front, was sufficiently hiding the scar on his throat. Well, what matter? The scar might add to the illusion of his changed identity: certainly it was almost unlikely anybody—not even Connie—would suspect it was connected with his changed voice.

Then Ma Hansen came bustling in with the breakfast, staying only long enough to serve it and introduce Cal to the rest of the boarders. This done, Ma retired to her own busy region and left a clatter of knives and forks upon plates. Cal kept his eyes on his food and his ears alert. From the idle chatter of conversation between the old ladies and rancher and cattle-man he hoped he might learn how much was known in Desert’s End of the previous night’s Navajo massacre—and thereby gain an insight as to how he himself stood. But apparently the matter had not been heard of. The conversation could not have been duller.

“Passing through, Mr. Wade?”

“Huh?” Cal glanced up, finding Connie smiling at him as she ate daintily.

“I asked if you were passing through. It’s the usual overture to a stranger out here—or maybe you know?”

“Yeah—sure I do. Sorry.” Cal got himself in hand. “Yeah, I’m passin’ through. Leastways, I aim to. Depends on what I think of Desert’s End after I’ve looked around.”

Connie laughed shortly. “If your final opinion of it is anything like mine, Mr. Wade, you’ll soon be hitting the trail again.”

“That bad?” Cal shrugged and went on with his meal. “Can’t think why it should be. Isolated as it is it ought to be built up into a town worth knowin’—and worth visitin’.”

“Perhaps it could be even yet—by the right people.”

Connie left no doubt as to what she meant by the last remark, but she did not pursue it any further as the others at the table glanced in her direction. Instead, after a moment or two, she started off on a fresh tack.

“Where are you from, Mr. Wade? Or isn’t it any of my business? We get to asking blunt questions in a lonely spot like this.”

“No offence taken,” Cal smiled. “I’m from Texas. I own the Square-Acre spread out there—well on four thousand head.”

Connie lowered her knife and fork. “Four thousand head! That’s a lot of cattle! What are you—a millionaire?”

“Well, I ain’t lackin’ anythin’,” Cal replied ambiguously.

“And you come to a place like Desert’s End? Doesn’t seem to make sense somehow.”

“I aim to quit the ranch; had more than my share of it. I’m lookin’ for somewheres where I can perhaps start a small town of my own. Different line of business, as you might say.”

“I see.” Cal found himself almost flinching before the direct gaze of Connie’s eyes. “Quite a good notion.”

“Yeah . . .”

Silence again for a space and Cal wondered vaguely if he were saying too much. The trouble was, the girl being Connie—in whom he had far more than a passing interest—he

found it quite impossible to sidetrack her questions.

"I'm hostess and singer at the Painted Lady," she said at length.

"So Ma Hansen told me. Who's your boss?"

"Whittaker Brice, biggest man in town."

"Is that a general admission, or his own view of himself?"

"Both," Connie answered, then she terminated the conversation by withdrawing from her skirt pocket a small notebook. For a moment or two she was busily occupied in apparently writing something. Cal watched her as he proceeded with his breakfast. When at length she had finished she glanced up.

"This may be useful," she explained. "I've jotted down the points of interest in the town, and if there's anything more you want to know you can ask me—either here or at the Painted Lady. Now I've got to be going. I've a song to rehearse early."

"You haven't finished your breakfast," Cal pointed out.

"Doesn't matter. I'm not hungry."

Connie got to her feet and thrust her notebook away. Cal rose respectfully also and watched her leave the dining-room with what seemed to him unusual haste, her divided riding-skirt swinging. Then he sat down again and looked at the note she had given him.

It was then that he too decided he wasn't hungry any more. He forgot everything but the note and his brows came down:

I don't know what you've done to yourself and your voice, Cal, but it's very clever. It would fool anybody save one who knows you as well as I do—and even then you might have gotten away with it save for one thing. Don't bend your head so low when you eat; the bullet scar on your head shows if one looks for it. Better destroy this note, might be awkward for you if anybody found it . . . Don't worry about me. I'm interested, and very mystified, but you're still Martin Wade.

Cal cleared his throat and glanced about him. Then with a casual movement he pushed the remains of his breakfast to one side, finished his coffee, and got to his feet. He went up to his room, burned Connie's note, and then picked up his hat. A few moments later, his guns at his waist under his black coat in case of sudden necessity, he left the rooming house and wandered thoughtfully along the boardwalk. As yet there were not too many people about; Desert's End was only just waking up for the day's work . . . As for Connie's statement that she had to rehearse a song *this* early—Well, it was just ridiculous. A get-out, nothing more.

When he came opposite the Painted Lady Cal stopped and surveyed. The place was not open yet and as he well knew it was not likely Connie would use the back entrance. He had to find her, though, and get things straight—and it was just as he was considering the matter that he caught sight of her in her distinctive lilac blouse. She was mounted on a horse at the far end of the main street, evidently having just emerged from the livery stable.

"Dog-gone!" Cal muttered, snapping his fingers. "I should ha' remembered she always takes a mornin' ride to blow away the cobwebs of the saloon."

He wasted no further time. Hurrying back to the rooming house he got his own horse from the stable, saddled it, and within a matter of minutes was hitting the northward trail from town in pursuit of the girl. Since she was only riding leisurely in the blazing heat of the morning it was not long before Cal caught up with her. From the expression on her face it seemed more or less obvious that she had been expecting him.

“Morning, m’m,” he said dryly, touching his big black sombrero.

“Morning, Cal.” Connie gave him that direct look of hers and it struck Cal for the moment that she was on the verge of being pretty, unless it was the sunlight haloing her fair hair.

“We can talk freely here,” he continued, as the horses jogged on steadily. “Thanks for the tip off about the bullet scar. I’ll keep my hat on whenever I can—no use buyin’ a wig. Sudden fast action would dislodge it.”

The girl laughed outright. “Matter of fact I’d rather like to see you in one! But anyway, to get back to cases . . .” She became serious again. “What’s the idea of come-back and in this new get-up? And above all, how do you keep your voice pitched down in the graveyard like that?”

“I don’t. It’s natural. Whole story’s a bit complicated.”

“I can imagine.”

“As to my reason for coming back, I was sorta hopin’ that might be plain enough.”

Connie shrugged, a provocative look in her eyes. “Presumably it’s so that you can level the score with Whit Brice.”

Cal rubbed the back of his neck and wished that women didn’t have to be so difficult at understanding things. Then he realized that the girl had pulled her horse to a halt and was dismounting.

“Too hot to keep riding,” she explained. “Let’s get things sorted out in the shade here.”

She led the way to where giant trees overshadowed the trail and settled down in the cool grass. Cal dismounted also and, the reins of his horse in his hand, slowly returned to her. He decided she looked a highly delectable picture.

“You look a tremendously long way up from here,” she said archly, screwing up her eyes. “Why don’t you come down and make yourself more sociable?”

“Mebby I will at that . . .” Cal moved, tied his own horse and the girl’s to a nearby stump, and then came over and sprawled in the grass. Supported on his elbow he looked at the girl as she seemed to be waiting for him to say something.

“Well?” she questioned finally.

“Eh? Oh, like I sed, there’s a lot needs explaining. And I’m goin’ to tell you everythin’, Con, because you’ve found out who I am. Nothin’ to be gained by being secretive.”

“Nothing,” she agreed, lying back with her hands behind her head.

So Cal explained, giving every detail. He kept asking himself as he went on talking whether he was an idiot to give the girl all the facts, even including the information about the Navajo vault. Somehow, though, he felt he had to. If he didn’t trust her now he never would.

“And that’s it,” he finished, shrugging. “The main prop of my scheme has bin kicked away through Chewonokee an’ his boys bein’ rubbed out, to say nothing of ‘Smoky’. Whatever I do now will haveta be on my own. I haven’t yet figgered exactly how I’ll act, but two things seem essential to me—One is to find proof that I never committed that murder for which Brice tried to hang me, and the other is to stamp out the stranglehold Brice has on Desert’s End. If I can also prove he killed Chewonokee and his boys, and the others who died when Desert’s End was built, I’ll do it.”

“Backed by all the gold you need, eh?” Connie sat up and looked at him directly.

“That’s it,” he agreed quietly. “I’ll work somethin’ out. The only way I c’n fail is if somebody penetrates this disguise of mine. Be frank with me, Connie, d’you think anybody’s likely to?”

“No, Cal, in all honesty I don’t. The only thing that can let you down is that bullet scar. Watch that an’ I’d defy your own mother to recognize you.”

Cal was silent, playing idly with a wisp of grass and looking at the intense cobalt of the sky. He turned his head as the girl spoke again.

“You’re still hesitating, Cal. Is there something you haven’t told me?”

“Could be. It’s a sort of personal matter. I was rather hopin’ you’d have spotted it yourself and saved me a whale of a lot of embarrassment.”

“Oh, you mean you want me to say in so many well-chosen words that I’m in love with you! That it?”

Cal stared at her. “Hell’s bells, you sure are the most outspoken gal I ever did know!”

“The surprise to me is that you should ever think otherwise. Do you suppose I’d have warned you of the danger of your bullet scar showing if I hadn’t cared a rap about you? Do you suppose I believe that you really came back here just to knock the props from under Whit Brice? Not you! You’ve a more important reason, otherwise a man with the gold you can tap would be away from this region by sundown. You came because *I’m* here!”

“Uh-huh,” Cal assented quietly.

“All right then, I’m with you all the way. What happens next?”

“Only that I’m wondering how you stand with Whit Brice. He’s got you measured up for himself.”

“He’s got to *get* me first, Cal, and unless I consent he won’t get any place. I’ve only made a play for him this far because it suited me—because it meant a job, some money, and if the worst came to the worst I’d take him as a husband rather than be thrown on the ash heap. Which is just another way of saying that, as far as he’s concerned, I’ve been on the look-out for the best opportunity.”

“An’ you’ll go on that way, I s’pose?”

“I’ll have to, for the time being. I can’t abruptly switch my attentions to you. He’d very soon suspect something. I’ve got to continue to make a play for him if only to help you.”

“Yeah, I suppose so,” Cal admitted moodily. “I feel kinda sore that you ever got tied up with him at all.”

“Can’t alter that now. I’ve gone on being nice to him since you left town because I didn’t know that you’d ever come back. And remember something—if I *hadn’t* been well in with him you and ‘Smoky’ would have hung that night.”

The logic of this was something Cal could not side-step. His morose look changed to a smile, or as near a smile as he could get with his maltreated mouth.

“Okay, Connie, you win. We know where we stand—and come to think of it we’re perhaps lettin’ ourselves in for a lot of needless headaches. Since my original scheme’s busted wide open what’s to stop the both of us disappearin’ with enough gold to keep us happy for the rest of our lives?”

“And let Whit go on as he is, building on other people, taking what doesn’t belong to him?”

Cal shrugged. “Deep down, Connie, it isn’t my responsibility.”

“I feel that it is. There are any number of decent folk in Desert’s End, just as there are decent homesteaders running the spreads hereabouts. Given a free hand, Whit will crush the lot of them in time, just as he killed old man Harcourt and his family at the Double-Z.”

“You believe he was back of that, then?”

“I’m sure of it, only there’s no proof. He couldn’t have managed to get *you* accused so quickly if he hadn’t had a hand in it. Whit, the mayor, the sheriff, and lawyer Waneson are all as rotten as they come. As long as they’re running Desert’s End there’ll be no stopping killings, cattle stealings, and general double-crossing. One strong man with a purpose can flatten all that out and put Desert’s End on its feet.”

Cal said nothing. He knew the girl was right but he did not want to admit it. The greater pleasure of escaping with her from all responsibilities was much more alluring.

“And lastly,” Connie concluded, “there’s the personal side. As long as you are believed a guilty man—and don’t forget how news travels ways beyond this region—decent people will have no truck with you. You’ve got to prove yourself innocent and pin the guilt where it belongs.”

“Yeah . . . Sure.”

“If you want to run out on all this don’t ask me to go with you,” Connie added seriously. “Whit Brice, whatever else he may be, is at least a fighter.”

Cal got to his feet and held down his hands. “That does it,” he said briefly. “If Whit Brice is goin’ to be held up to me as an example it’s time I gave you a run for your money, young lady! Up you git!”

He hauled her to her feet and held her tightly for a moment. “Like I sed before, Connie, you win. Between us we’ll give these no-account hoodlums somethin’ to remember . . . You ride back into town without me and durin’ the rest of today I’ll decide what I’m goin’ to do, besides buyin’ in some odds and ends I need. I’ll keep you in touch somehow, but otherwise we are strangers—and that also applies to Ma Hansen’s place. Okay?”

Cal spent the morning making his purchases and generally gleaning information from the populace by listening to conversation. The upshot of all this was that he gathered nobody knew anything about the Navajo massacre the night before, and certainly it did not seem that anybody had heard his own name, or 'Smoky's' mentioned. So, far as he could see, the way was more or less clear. As for people's reaction to him, it was favourable. Even those who had known him as Cal Rutter failed to penetrate the veil of his changed face and rumbling voice. In every way the transformation was complete.

Meantime, Whittaker Brice himself was in the midst of a conference in the sheriff's office at the back of the town's little adobe gaol. And Brice was not in the best of tempers either.

"Seems t'me," he growled, "that all you and your boys did last night, Andrews, was shoot up a bunch of Navajos and let the biggest fish get away. *Two* biggest fishes in fact. Chewonokee and Cal Rutter."

Andrews' flabby face was indignant. "I'm more'n convinced that Chewonokee was amongst those Indians we blotted out."

"Well, I'm not! How d'you know when you didn't even look at the encampment closely?"

"He *musta* bin there," one of the deputies insisted. "It wus his mob all right, otherwise what wus 'Smoky' Jones doing there? I tell yuh, boss, Cal musta contacted Chewonokee, so of course 'Smoky' would be with him. That means . . ."

"It don't mean *anything!*" Brice snapped, banging his fist on the table. "'Cos 'Smoky' was there doesn't mean Cal Rutter was. 'Smoky' could easily have broken with Cal and gotten himself mixed up with Navajos. They wus torturin' him, wasn't they? Or had bin?"

"Yeah," Sheriff Andrews admitted uneasily.

"Very well then! Don't sound as though they were friendly, does it?" Brice bit the end from a cheroot savagely. "I tell you you've bungled the whole job. We're no wiser as to where Cal Rutter is, nor Chewonokee neither! For all we know there might *still* be a Navajo attack on this town."

"What's the answer then?" Sheriff Andrews asked sullenly.

"Get out an' keep searchin', of course! There'll not be any peace of mind for any of us 'til we know what's happened to either Rutter or Chewonokee. Don't yuh see that if Chewonokee *is* still alive, he'll probably raise hell with us when he finds what's gone on in the mountains . . . Seems to me the best thing you mugs can do is take a look at that mountain retreat by daylight an' see who got what. Never know, you might find Chewonokee's dead body. That'd make things easier."

"And how are we supposed to know him?" snapped the second deputy. "These Indians all look alike."

"You'll know him by his regalia, you dope! Now get to hell on the job, the lot of you! A damned kid could do a darned sight better 'n you."

Scowling, the men looked at each other and then loafed out of the office. When they reached the boardwalk the sheriff said briefly:

"We ain't goin' anywheres near those mountains by daylight, too dangerous. If any survivors saw us comin' it would be the finish."

"What do we do then?" the first deputy asked.

“That’s an easy one. Wander around the desert for a few days and then come back and tell the boss we’ve bin to the range and found Chewonokee’s dead body. It’s worth the risk. Don’t see why we should fry our brains in the sun just to satisfy the big fellow.”

The other men nodded, only too willing to fall in with the idea, then they lounged forward again towards the tie-rack where their horses were standing. At the same moment Cal Rutter came along the boardwalk from the opposite end, his arms laden with various purchases.

“Who’s the critter?” muttered the first deputy, glancing up. “I ain’t seen his face around here before.”

“Stranger in town.” Andrews said, by which time Cal Rutter had reached the trio. He had been sizing them up during his approach and here, he knew, was the acid test. If he could get past the shifty-eyed sheriff and his no-account gunhawks he’d get past almost anybody.

“Howdy, sheriff,” he greeted, pausing. “Glad to meet up with you. Always make it my business to know the sheriff of a town, no knowin’ when he might be wanted.”

“Yeah, sure thing,” Andrews admitted surlily. “You passin’ through here?”

“That was my intention, but I’m now thinkin’ again. I rather like this little place . . . Oh, Martin Wade’s the name. I’m from Texas. Got a big spread out there.”

Andrews eyed him. “That so? Ain’t often cattle kings waste their time in Desert’s End. Or mebbly you got business here?”

“Plenty of business,” Cal confirmed dryly. “I’ve also got an interest in some gold around here, too.”

All three men pricked up their ears immediately. Here, evidently, was a trusting, big-mouthed stranger who saw no reason to keep things to himself.

“Gold?” Andrews repeated, affable all of a sudden. “I thought gold around here wus more or less finished with.”

“Not in one partic’lar place. But I’m not the sort of man to stop other men tryin’ to get gold if they want. I’ll give you a tip . . .” Cal leaned forward confidentially over the boardwalk rail. “Them mountains to the north ain’t just all rock! I’m sayin’ no more than that. Just think it over.”

“Who do yuh think yore kiddin’?” demanded the second deputy.

For answer Cal brought his skin bag from his pocket and into his palm tipped what remained of his gold dust and fragments. The remainder he had turned into cash at the assayers.

“What does *that* look like?” he inquired, then after the envious eyes had rested on the precious metal he tipped it back in the bag. “Plenty for everybody, boys, but them mountains are good at holdin’ their secrets.”

With that, wondering if his bare-faced strategy had succeeded, he nodded and went on his way, presently crossing the street and entering Ma Hansen’s rooming house.

“That guy loco, do yuh think?” the second deputy asked.

“If not,” the first deputy responded, “he’s the only man I ever heard uv who didn’t keep the whereabouts of a gold bonanza to himself. Mighty generous minded. A few words like that is enough to set everybody in town off on a gold rush to the mountains.”

“Grantin’ *everybody* hears about it—which they ain’t a-goin’ to,” the sheriff decided. “That guy’s just plain askin’ fur it, comin’ out with infurmination like that.”

“Meanin’ we should go to the mountains, just the three uv us, and see what we c’n find?”

“Like hell! We’d mebbly waste weeks searchin’ and then be no nearer—and besides we’d be targets for any Navajos who might be lyin’ around. Heck no! We keep an eye on that critter

an' when he strikes for the mountains—as mebby he will sooner or later to get some more gold—we'll follow him. If we don't follow him all the way we can grab him in the desert and make him tell us where the gold is. Simple as that . . .”

“Time you mugs were outa town searchin', isn't it?” Whit Brice came along the boardwalk, the stub of his cheroot smouldering fiercely. “Get goin'!”

With the big fellow watching so intently the three men had to obey. They mounted their horses and, muttering among themselves, rode up the main street, glancing back ever and again as they went on the off-chance that ‘Martin Wade’ might appear on horseback and head for the mountain range. There was no sign of him, however.

Actually he had watched the whole proceeding from his bedroom window which overlooked the street. He felt pretty sure he had judged the low-grade mentality of the sheriff and his cohorts correctly: that they would have the itch for gold from now on and would probably go to any lengths, even to following and killing him, to get their hands on the precious metal supposedly to be found in the mountains. Cal was thoroughly prepared for this. He was taking a gamble on the fact that if he could rid himself of the sheriff and deputies at one sweep he would considerably undermine Whit Brice's band of strong-arm men. The less support he had, the better.

Smiling grimly to himself Cal saw the three men nudge their horses with some reluctance up the main street, then his eyes followed the big figure of Whit Brice as he marched along the boardwalk to the Painted Lady and passed beyond the now open doors. If Brice followed his usual procedure—with which Cal had become acquainted when he had been in the town as himself—he would now remain in his office back of the saloon for some time, checking through his accounts. Possibly this was as good a time as any to lead three low-grade morons to destruction.

Cal nodded decisively to himself, inspected his guns, then went downstairs and out of the building. In a few moments he had crossed the street to where he had left his horse at the tie-rack outside the general stores, and as he unfastened the reins he glanced out of the corner of his eye to the street's further end. He didn't have a chance to notice anything unusual but within him was the conviction that he was being watched very closely.

He swung casually to the saddle, nudged his horse forward, then set it into a gallop as he passed down the main street and out at the northward end . . . Down at the opposite end Sheriff Andrews and his deputies looked sharply at each other.

“Looks like he may be hittin' the northward trail fur the mountains quicker 'n we thought,” Andrews muttered. “Or it may be just for the ride around. Either way we keep our eyes on him.”

“We'd best detour round the back of the town,” the second deputy said quickly. “If the boss sees us ride past the Painted Lady he'll want to know what in hell we're doin'.”

Andrews jerked his head briefly and they set off at top speed round the backs of the ramshackle dwellings. In a matter of ten minutes' hard riding they had cut across the pastureland to the northward trail, and the vision of Cal Rutter—or rather Martin Wade—became visible to them a mile ahead.

“Keep him in sight but don't overtake,” Andrews ordered. “When we get to the open desert mebby we'll have to catch up on him, but only then if he sees us.”

“Yeah,” the first deputy growled, “an' supposin' we're just takin' the helluva lot for granted? Mebby he's only givin' himself an airin' and not goin' anywheres near the mountains.”

“We’ll find out soon enough.”

Cal kept on at the same pace, fully aware by now from a brief over-shoulder glance that he was being followed. He effected not to notice and continued riding, until at length the trail lost itself in the wilderness of desert, at the horizon limit of which lay the mountain range. Once he had the open space around him Cal abruptly put on speed—to such an extent that three following men stared in frustrated annoyance.

“Hell, but he sure c’n ride,” the first deputy ejaculated.

“Okay, so he can ride,” Andrews retorted. “We can do just as good. Let’s go.”

But the sheriff was talking out of turn. The horse Cal was urging onwards was as fresh as paint, to say nothing of being a good deal younger than the three trail-weary animals used by the sheriff and his men. Inevitably the distance began to widen and Andrews swore at the sight of the retreating speck in the dust haze ahead.

“That critter sure *can* ride,” the second deputy confirmed in admiration. “Else he’s dug up a racehorse from somewheres.”

Andrews did not answer. He was too anxious. The obliterating dust ahead was blotting out the view of Cal—and at length the obscuration was complete. There was only dust to show where Cal had forged ahead . . .

His need of getting well in advance was essential. There was one particular acclivity in the mountain foothills which he remembered, from the time when he and ‘Smoky’ had first entered the range. It ran up into a small cleft backed on either side by sheer walls of rock. It meant there was only a very narrow pass through and if things worked out as Cal hoped they would . . . Well, three very much unwanted men would be wiped out, and by their own hand . . .

Smothered in dust and tired from the blaze of the sun, the sheriff and his men kept riding as fast as their horses could make it, still following the dust cloud ahead of them—and it was just as they were commencing to wonder whether the animals could keep it up that they saw the dust disappearing as their quarry evidently came beyond the desert to the foothills rock. Very dimly they could discern him riding hard, a not easy detection since he was attired completely in black. Only his piebald horse made any change in the uniform grey of the landscape.

“One thing’s certain, he’s spotted us,” Andrews said. “He wouldn’t have rode that hard otherwise. Havin’ gotten this fur after him I reckon we’ll go on doin’ it.”

“Sure we will!” the first deputy glanced in surprise. “Any reason why not?”

“I was only thinkin’ of Navajos.”

“Forget ‘em,” the second deputy snorted. “If there’s gold to be gotten outa this it’s worth any risk—an’ what sort uv a plan are you figgerin’ on, sheriff? Now Wade’s seen us he’s likely to perch on a rimrock an’ pot us off as he thinks best.”

“We’re goin’ to try and get close enough to him to strike a bargain. We’ll make him talk somehow as to where that gold is; yuh leave that to me.”

The deputies were willing to do so, though not with any great confidence. They kept their eyes on that dappled speck as it went up an acclivity in the rocks and then vanished from sight.

“Frum the look of things he’s headed through Jackson’s Cleft,” Andrews commented. “That leads right inter the mountains proper. Okay, we’ll follow through.”

Despite the second deputy’s scornful dismissal of the danger of Indians, all three men kept their eyes alert as they kept on riding through the foothills. Perforce they travelled less swiftly

now, all of them constantly on the alert as they followed the only acclivity which ‘Martin Wade’ could possibly have taken. So, automatically, they came to the narrow region of Jackson’s Cleft, with its sheer walls and loftily perched rimrock.

“Hold it!” commanded an echoing, rumbling voice.

Instantly the three riders dropped their right hands to their guns and drew rein with their left.

“You can’t see me,” the voice continued, and there was no mistaking its basso-profundo quality. “I’m a good distance above you an’ each one of you is covered. If you think I haven’t seen you three boneheads followin’ me you’re crazy!”

Andrews looked at his men briefly, then his shifty eyes surveyed the apparently deserted heights.

“I ain’t got no likin’ for being followed,” ‘Martin Wade’s’ voice resumed. “When I sed there was gold fur the pickin’ up in these mountains I didn’t expect you’d start gunnin’ for me—an’ that’s what you *are* doin’! So, you can git right back where you came from. Make one further advance move an’ I’ll blast hell out of the lot of you!”

“Who does he think he is?” the second deputy growled, slowly withdrawing his gun. “We’ve come this far an’ we’re goin’ to finish it. That right, sheriff?”

“Yeah,” he assented tautly. “It’s three against one. We c’n make a dash for it through to the other end uv this pass, then we’ll have room to turn around and mebby spot him—”

“*Get movin’!*” Cal’s voice thundered.

Andrews spurred his horse forward, then almost instantly drew rein again.

“Take a look,” he whispered, withdrawing his gun quickly. “There he is!”

The deputies did not need telling. They had already spotted the crown and brim of ‘Martin Wade’s’ distinctive black sombrero and they did not hesitate another moment. The fact that they might kill the goose which laid the golden eggs—the only man who could be perhaps forced to tell them where gold was to be found—did not occur to them. It seemed it was their lives or his if they advanced.

Andrews fired first, and missed. The first deputy was more accurate and the hat vanished amidst a splintering of rock in a puff of dust. The narrow pass echoed ear-splittingly to the shots. A split-second behind the first deputy’s shot came the fire of the second deputy’s shot.

Up on the rimrock above Cal Rutter grinned to himself and withdrew his hat from the piece of old branch on which he had perched it, then at a muttering rumble from above him he dived to the back of the narrow rimrock, pulling his horse with him. A few seconds manoeuvring and he was tightly pressed against the rear wall, keeping his horse’s head and flanks well in.

The rumbling grew. It smote on the ears of Andrews and his men as they tried to figure out whether or not ‘Martin Wade’ had been hit or not.

“What’s that racket?” the first deputy demanded. “Sounds like an earthquake—”

“Hell—*look!*” Andrews screamed. “Get out, quick!”

His colleagues glanced up momentarily towards the awe-inspiring vision of boulders, giant rocks, and clouds of dust sweeping down in a mind-numbing crescendo from the heights.

“Avalanche!” the second deputy gasped. “Those shots we fired! Musta loosened somethin’—”

He was jabbing his horse savagely with the spurs even as he spoke, stabbing the frightened animal forward in the wake of the fleeing Andrews and first deputy. But fast though they

moved the force of gravity outweighed them and the avalanche got there first.

Cal, flattened against the cliff wall, saw the Niagara of rocks and dust descend in front of him and heard the monstrous concussions as the deluge landed in the pass below. Then he waited for several minutes to make sure that the disturbance set up by the air vibration of the revolver shots had ceased. Only then did he move forward and peer over the rimrock into the depths below. Of men or horses there was no sign—only a tumbled waste of fallen boulders and slowly settling dust.

He was not the only one who looked, either. At the opposite side of the pass, almost on the same height level as himself and concealed behind a rock, a lithe Navajo was taking note of the proceedings. Though he clearly saw Cal Rutter and could have shot him down with an arrow had he chosen, he made no such move. Instead he retreated silently, mounted his distant horse, and then sped through the winding ways of the mountains until he came upon a well-concealed natural plateau where lay a small encampment.

Chewonokee, seated before a campfire and musing to himself, glanced up as the scout appeared. He dismounted and came over quickly.

“Many strange happenings, Chewonokee,” he reported. “Cal Rutter rode into the mountains followed by three pale-faces from Desert’s End. He threatened to shoot them down and instead they tried to shoot him. Their shots brought down rocks in much thunder and killed all of them.”

“Including Cal Rutter?” Chewonokee asked impassively.

“No. He still lives. He was high up on the rimrock and escaped. I could have shot him down but your orders were to leave him free.”

“I heard the shooting and noise of the rock fall, and I wondered,” Chewonokee said. “You have watched well, Eagle Foot. You and Desert Wind will remain on watch, relieving each other as need be. I will strike in my own good time, and that will not be until Cal Rutter shows us where the buried vault is. I have also to make myself well again.”

“Chewonokee is much better,” Eagle Foot pointed out. “You man of great medicine.”

“True,” Chewonokee acknowledged, feeling his shoulder. “But broken bone takes Nature’s time to knit—Now go. Do not lose trail of Cal Rutter—ever!”

It was early afternoon when Cal rode back into Desert’s End, and it was only by a good deal of cajolery that he succeeded in getting Ma Hansen to give him a belated lunch. Certainly he would never have managed it but for the fact that the wily old girl knew he was too prosperous and wealthy a man to brush aside as a normal boarder. So Cal got his lunch, ate it in his room, and did not turn out again until evening. He had spent most of the afternoon at the window, watching in case the sheriff and his deputies had escaped and turned up again. But there was no sign of them. This fact did not occasion any wonder to Whit Brice, either, since he assumed they were still out somewhere on the search.

By the time Cal emerged the Painted Lady was in full swing. Passing through the batwings he stood for a moment surveying. After the fresh night air the place reeked of liquor, kerosene fumes, and strong tobacco, through which pierced the clicking of the faro and roulette tables. As usual there was the same motley assortment at the tables and propping up the bar—gamblers, storekeepers, cowpunchers, saddle-tramps, most of them with a woman tacked on somewhere.

Then Cal’s gaze strayed beyond this cesspool of humanity towards the tin-panny piano on the distant rostrum and automatically to where Connie McBride was singing—or more

accurately was trying to make herself heard above the hub-bub. She caught sight of him, he knew that, but made no visible sign of having done so.

Finally Cal reached the bar and surveyed the characters around him.

“What’ll it be?” the barkeep questioned.

“Gin.” Cal put down his money and through the back-bar mirror he caught sight of the big figure of Whit Brice approaching. At last he drew level, smiling genially.

“Howdy, stranger.” He held out his hand. “Always a pleasure t’see a new face.”

Cal, as he shook hands, reflected that the statement could hardly have been more accurate.

“Drinking?” he questioned.

“Yeah—sure. Double whisky, Harry . . . I like t’make new friends welcome,” Brice continued. “Can’t remember having seen you around town.”

“I arrived early this morning and I’m stayin’ with Ma Hansen at the moment. Martin Wade’s the name. Rancher from Texas.”

“Uh-huh. You’ll have heard of me—Whit Brice. I’m proprietor of this saloon.”

Cal downed his drink and nodded. “An’ from what I hear, the proprietor of a lot of other things as well.”

Brice grinned round his cheroot. “Yeah, you might say I own quite a few things around these parts. If it’s any of my business, where’d you get your information?”

“Lots of places. General stores, Ma Hansen’s, folk on the street. Near as I can figure it out yore about the biggest man hereabouts, as well as the largest property owner.”

Brice nodded. “Ain’t much I don’t own, mister—and what I haven’t got I *will* get, in time.”

“Mebby yore the man I’m looking for, Mr. Brice. I’m out to buy some property around here.”

“You are? What sort? Ranch, homestead, or—”

“Nothing like that, though it may come into it later. I’ve an idea about buildin’ one thing in this town that seems to be missin’.”

“And what’s that?” Brice picked up his drink.

“A church.”

Brice’s whisky nearly went down the wrong way and two nearby punchers who’d caught Cal’s remark stared at him blankly.

“I’ll say one thing, mister,” Brice commented at last, “you sure got a sense of humour!”

“Thanks—but I’m serious. Fill it up again,” Cal added, to the barkeep.

“*A church?*” Brice repeated incredulously. “But with all respect to yuh, Mr. Wade, the idea’s plumb loco—”

“Why is it?” Connie McBride asked, coming forward and smiling. “Evening, stranger . . .”

Brice glanced at her and made a very perfunctory introduction.

“My hostess and singer, Miss McBride. Meet Martin Wade from Texas.”

“Gladly,” Connie said, shaking hands. “And you can buy me a drink, Whit. None of your cheap stuff—”

“This is on me, ma’am,” Cal interrupted. “Just name it.”

“Brandy and soda—the best. And to get back to the point. What’s wrong with a church?”

Brice shrugged. “Nothin’ wrong with a church in its right place, if you go for that sort of thing. But can you imagine one stuck in the middle of these tin-horns and punchers? Plain waste uv time.”

“That’s my worry, isn’t it?” Cal asked, handing the girl her drink.

“Partly. It would be your worry to get people into it—which you never would—and my worry to explain to a lot of pinheads why I’d permitted the thing to be built at all.”

Connie shook her head. “That argument doesn’t wash, Whit. If Mr. Wade here wants to build a church that’s his worry. He’ll do all the paying and the hard work. All you have to do is collect.”

Cal nodded and he and the girl exchanged a brief glance of understanding. Though she had not the least idea what he was driving at she was prepared to back him up to the point of seeming obstinate.

“Space an’ land around here ain’t cheap,” Brice said finally.

“So long as it’s within reason that don’t bother me, Mr. Brice. I’ve money enough an’ to spare. Mebby we’d better get a quiet table and talk things over.”

Brice shrugged and wandered behind Cal and Connie to a table near a partition. More drink had been ordered before Cal came back to the matter.

“I noticed this mornin’ as I was givin’ this place the once-over that you’ve got a good open land area on the right-hand side of the main street, opposite the general stores. That would be a swell place to put up a temple.”

“And how’s about labour and materials?” Brice asked.

“You must ha’ got labour and materials to build Desert’s End, Mr. Brice. It oughta be forthcoming for a temple. For a price, of course.”

Brice took a sip of his drink and reflected. “Look, Mr. Wade, I’ll shelve any objections I might have regardin’ a temple because I’m a sucker for makin’ money, but tell me one thing: who’s goin’ to preach the Gospel in this temple of yours?”

“I know the right man,” Cal answered calmly. “He’ll convert every gambler and double-crosser in this town before he’s through. Name’s the Reverend Henry Roxburg, a genuinely ordained preacher. Reckon he’d be useful for marriages around here, too.”

“Yeah, could be,” Brice mused. “Most couples go out to Yuma or Phoenix to get wed as things are . . . Only one thing,” he added grinning. “I hope this preacher ain’t *too* good otherwise my customers might lose their taste for the Painted Lady.”

“Two sides to everybody,” Connie put in. “I suppose they will still drink even if they do listen to the Gospel on a Sunday.”

“Yore right there, ma’am,” Cal told her; then looking back to the big fellow. “Well, Mr. Brice? What’s your inclusive price for the land, materials as needed, and the labour to build? Since you’re the boss around here I’m assumin’ you have the last word on all three issues.”

Brice did not reply immediately. Instead he busied himself working things out on a piece of paper. During this process Connie gave Cal a wondering look but his only response was a profound wink with his further eye. Then Brice put away his pencil and glanced up.

“The whole thing, near as I c’n estimate, will cost you about twenty thousand dollars, Mr. Wade. Might be more or less accordin’ to the amount of labour and cost of materials.”

“That’s a whale of a lot of money,” Cal commented.

“I told you land around here isn’t cheap.”

“Can’t think why it shouldn’t be. There are no particular amenities far as I can see.”

Brice’s face hardened somewhat. “I’m a business man, Mr. Wade. I have an eye to the future when mebby a railroad will cross the desert to this very place. It will then be one of the most important towns in southern Arizona. That’s the price. Take it or leave it, we’ll still remain friends.”

“I’ll take it. In what form do you want the cash? I’ve no bank account here as yet—an’ for that matter I haven’t noticed that there *is* a bank here.”

“There is one,” Connie put in. “Next to the sheriff’s office. Whether there’s any particular significance attaching to that I wouldn’t know.”

“If it’s all the same to you,” Brice said, “I’d prefer it in cash. Will that mean a long delay on your part whilst you ride back to Texas?”

Cal reflected swiftly and then shook his head. “No; I can complete the deal by three o’clock tomorrow afternoon.”

“Okay.” Brice shook hands across the table. “In the meantime I’ll have Edgar Waneson, the town lawyer, draw up the necessary deed. He and Mayor Slater will witness it on my behalf, and Miss McBride here can witness on yours. Lodge the whole thing with the Yuma authorities afterwards and that’s that.”

“So far,” Cal said, “the river seems to be flowin’ all one way, Mr. Brice—your way. Since I’m going to do the payin’ I want a clause put in the deed.”

“I’m willin’ to listen. What *kind* of a clause?”

“I want it agreed that I have absolute freedom to build what I like, as I like. More plainly, I don’t want it specifically stated that I’m buildin’ a church, or temple, or whatever you like to call it.”

Brice looked puzzled. “But that’s what you *are* goin’ to build, isn’t it? I can’t let you do as you like, Mr. Wade, because you might decide to build a general stores or sump’n, and that would cause competition. Certain restrictions have got to be made.”

“That I know,” Cal replied, “but in this instance my church may not look like one. It occurs to me that to get a lot of these hoodlums converted to the gospel I may have to make my church look like something else—from th’ outside. Get me?”

Brice grinned. “Yore a man after my own heart, Mr. Wade. Full uv strategy. Okay, no limitations. I’ll fix it with Mr. Waneson—Now, we need more drink in celebration. I have the feelin’ that you an’ me might even be partners afore we’re through. You think big, an’ act big.”

“Sure,” Cal acknowledged easily. “An’ I’m only just beginning . . .”

Once Cal had returned to Ma Hansen's for the night he made no attempt to go to bed. Instead he went to his room and remained there, smoking and watching the still unclosed Painted Lady across the way. It was nearing midnight when he saw the lamps beginning to dim inside the place and a slow drift of men and women began to tumble out into the night. Connie and Brice came nearly last, stayed talking for a few moments, and then parted company. As Connie came hurrying across to the rooming house Cal extinguished his cigarette and crossed to the door of his room.

He caught the girl as she was hurrying along the dim landing.

"Connie! A moment!"

She turned in surprise at his whisper and then came along to him, her silk evening gown rustling gently.

"Come in," he murmured, pulling the door wider. "It's safer than us being caught out there—an' keep your voice down in case Ma happens to hear us. She's strict on the rules."

"You're telling me," Connie whispered, passing into the dim oil-lighted glow.

Cal closed the door and locked it, then motioned the girl to the solitary chair. As she sat down he perched himself on the edge of the bed.

"Whether there's anythin' immoral about this set-up, I wouldn't know," he grinned, "but it struck me yore entitled to some explanation as to what I'm gettin' at."

"Right now, Cal, I haven't the vaguest idea what you're driving at. You've never struck me as being a religious man."

"I ain't—beyond the fact that I believe there's a God who looks after every dog-gone one of us. What I'm actually drivin' at is to make the first move in underminin' Whit Brice."

"By building a church? You're not going to get very far doing that. In fact I'm astonished at your wasting your time. The only thing Whit Brice and his boys understand is a gun!"

Cal hunched forward. "You remember my insistin' that the deed should let me build as I like?"

"Yes—but that doesn't explain anything to me."

"Nor to Brice either, apparently, which is all to the good. What I'm actually going to build, Connie, is something which looks like a super gin palace."

"And inside it'll be a church, I suppose? Excuse me saying it, Cal, but that sounds a mite blasphemous."

"*Inside*," Cal said deliberately, "it will *be* a gin palace! The biggest, best, and brightest gin palace that ever was. It will make Whit Brice's Painted Lady look like the lousiest honkey-tonk in Arizona."

"But—" Connie paused, frowning. "You can't get away with that! Whit will raise hell!"

"He can't. That agreement he's goin' to draw up will give me the legal right to build what I want. If it doesn't I won't sign it. Once my gin palace is up it'll dawn on him that I'm a dangerous rival and there may be a showdown. Whether there is or not I aim to rebuild Desert's End—or mebby I should say add a better part to it, until finally I've done everythin' Brice has done but a hundred per cent better. By that means he'll be boss no longer. People'll take notice of *me*, not him, and there won't be much he can do about it. It's a bloodless way of kicking him out."

"It's brilliant," Connie whispered excitedly; then her first mood of enthusiasm faded a little. "But I don't think it'll stay as bloodless as you hope, Cal. Once Brice has it in mind that you're an enemy there'll be plenty of gunplay."

Cal shrugged. "Okay. I'm no amateur at shootin' if it comes to it. What Brice is goin' to learn is that he's up against somebody with as much money—an' more—than he's got, and just as much personality."

For a long while the girl sat considering, then she glanced up.

"Are you going to make any effort to win over Brice's biggest supporters to your side? I mean Mayor Slater, Waneson, Sheriff Andrews and those two crooked deputies of his—"

"I'll come to the Mayor and Waneson later on. Right now I've already taken care of Andrews and the deputies."

Connie started. "Killed them, you mean?"

"They killed themselves. I engineered it, sure, but it was their own hands that finished 'em. Nice bit of plannin' on my part, even though I say it—"

"But what happened? I've heard nothing about it."

In detail Cal told her of the avalanche in the pass, and of how he had led up to it with his story of gold for the picking up.

"Not my fault if they tried to shoot me," he finished, spreading his hands. "They brought it down on themselves—literally."

"I wouldn't have thought of a stunt like that in years," Connie sighed. "You've certainly got plenty of ideas."

"Tackling a bunch like this you've gotta have . . . Only thing that puzzles me is why Brice doesn't seem bothered at there bein' no sign of the sheriff and his deputies hangin' around. You'd ha' thought he'd have gotten to wonderin' by now, or else started makin' inquiries."

Connie shook her head. "He won't do that—not yet anyhow. He told me this evening he sent Andrews and his deputies out to look for you, or Chewonokee the Navajo."

"He did?" Cal's interest sharpened. "Why?"

"He's more than a suspicion you're still alive, Cal, and that you'll cause plenty of trouble before you're finished by getting Chewonokee and the Navajos he controls to descend on this town and wipe it up. That massacre in the mountains was Brice's doing, even as you suspected . . . To cut things short, Brice thinks the sheriff and deputies are out gunnin' for you, since they couldn't find you in the Navajo settlement."

"Which satisfies me that it was Brice's men who shot poor 'Smoky'," Cal muttered. "Why the Navajos had started in to torture him—if it *was* them who started to—I shan't ever know. But it was a *bullet* which had killed him, so that lays the blame on Brice's owl-hooters. I'll remember that when it comes to the clean-up."

Connie got to her feet. "Well, Cal, I've got to be going—and thanks for explaining everything. One day we'll be able to move as we like, when we like, without being overshadowed by Whit Brice, Ma Hansen, and all the rest of 'em."

Cal got up, too. When they had reached the door he took her abruptly in his arms and kissed her.

"On account," he explained, as she smiled. "And remember I'm doing all this because you told me to, Con. Left to myself I'd ride outa town an' enjoy my gold."

"Talking of gold," the girl said, "are you going to get some to pay off Brice?"

"Sure thing. I'm goin' this very night when things have quietened down and I can pretty well be sure nobody will follow me."

"I—I couldn't come with you, I suppose."

"You could, Con—but I think it better you don't. It would be bad enough for *me* to be caught near the vault and have to fight my way out of it, but if you were caught with me it would blow our plans sky-high. Brice would tumble to everythin'."

"Yes, I suppose so," Connie sighed. "Surely, though, you can give me some idea where the vault is?"

"Not very easily. The desert's a hard place to sketch and show one particular point. I know the way from the stars, and sun, an' shadows. I'm not holdin' out on you, Connie. That's just the honest truth."

"All right," she said quietly. "And look after yourself."

Cal opened the door silently for her and then closed it again. For a long time afterwards he sat around and smoked, watching the main street as the kerosene lamps were extinguished and the pale moonrise began to show itself . . . Towards two in the morning he at last got on the move. He donned extra clothes against the piercing cold of the night and then crept out silently to the landing, down the stairs, and finally to the stables at the rear of the rooming house.

At last he was on his way, but by no means taking everything for granted. He kept a constant watch around him as he rode, dividing his attention between glancing rearward and studying the stars which could guide him to the vault.

He reckoned he was half-way to his goal when he became conscious of hoof-beats other than those of his own horse coming to him faintly on the following wind. They could not be echoes because they were out of step. Immediately his mind flashed to the possibility of somebody having trailed him from Desert's End—perhaps even Connie herself. He did not stop immediately but kept on going at a reduced speed, mentally timing those pursuing hoof-beats with those of his own horse.

Finally, as he estimated he was within half a mile of his destination he came to a decision. His horse he could always recall at a moment's notice by means of a whistle, and he just had to see who it was so interested in his movement. These days it was absolutely essential that he cover up all his tracks and somehow dispose or silence those of an inquiring turn of mind.

So, as he came past a depression, he slid quickly from the saddle and dropped heavily down a sand dune to its base. His horse kept on going steadily into the misty moonlight, but he withdrew his gun and crept up quickly to the dune's summit, watching intently. Sure enough, after a while, a lone rider came into sight, the speed of his horse about the same as Cal's own had been whilst riding.

The nearer the rider came the more Cal realized it was not Connie—nor even a cowpoke from Desert's End. To judge from the solitary feather projecting from the rider's headband he was an Indian, wearing skin trousers and a thick blanket-like windcheater to keep out the night cold.

"Very pretty," Cal murmured to himself. "Mebby it's time I looked into things . . ."

He moved himself up so that he could have free action when needed. The moment the rider came cantering by Cal hurled himself forward, ran swiftly, and within a matter of seconds had clawed the surprised Navajo from the saddle before he had the chance to draw his knife or even become fully aware that he was being attacked. He landed with a thud in the sand and immediately Cal's knee was on his chest, his gun pointing.

"Just take it easy," he warned, using the Navajo language as best he knew it. "What's the idea of followin' me?"

The Navajo was silent. Cal reached forward to the man's belt and removed his knife, then he stood up and motioned the Indian to do likewise.

"I asked you a question," Cal said grimly. "Better answer it before I get playful."

The Navajo still said nothing, exhibiting the stoic obstinacy of his race.

"It's a certainty yore not out for a night ride," Cal went on, "therefore somebody sent you. I'm interested to find out who. Was it Whittaker Brice?"

No answer. Cal abruptly slapped out his free hand and dealt the Navajo a blow across the face that rocked him for a moment, but he still did not speak even though the moonlight showed the venomous glint in his oblique eyes.

"All right," Cal said quietly. "You know perfectly well what I'm saying but you prefer to be silent. I mean to find out the truth and know how I stand. Seems only one way to do it . . ." With his free hand he whipped from his belt the knife he had taken from the Indian. He held it menacingly, the sharp point a few inches from the Navajo's lean face.

"Whether I carve you up slowly is up to you," he said. "You can tell me all—"

He should have known better. Holding the knife so far forward was the one thing the Navajo wanted. Abruptly his hands flashed up, the fingers closing in steel strength around Cal's wrists, forcing him to drop his gun from one hand whilst the knife was wrenched from the fingers of the other . . . Then his feet were kicked from under him and he dropped on his back.

Only just in time he doubled his knees and lashed out with his heavy riding-boots as the Navajo flung himself upon him. The Indian took the blow in the stomach and reeled back, gasping for breath. Immediately Cal scrambled up again and dived for his gun before the sand covered it. His other gun on his left hip he just had not time to draw.

Again he flattened out as the recovered Navajo charged upon him. By a savage twist Cal just avoided the down-sweeping knife. It plunged into the sand beside his ear and he made it his chance to grasp the knife-wrist and force it round relentlessly. Inevitably the Navajo pitched sideways by the pull on his arm. He dropped flat on his face, gave a sudden gasp of anguish and became still.

Puzzled, Cal waited tensely, expecting a trick—but there was still no movement. Finally, his gun pointed in readiness, he pushed the Indian over on his back and gazed in surprise at the knife buried to the hilt in the Navajo's heart. There could be only one explanation. In rolling over the Navajo must have pulled the knife point upwards and dropped on it. . . . And now?

Cal knelt there, considering, his main emotion now one of anger. The Navajo had died without revealing his purpose or the identity of the one who had sent him. The puzzle to Cal was that, when he came to study the dead man's headband closely, he saw it had the colourings distinctive to the tribe of Chewonokee, but as far as Cal knew the tribe had been wiped out and probably Chewonokee with them.

Probably. He did not know for sure for he had not set eyes on Chewonokee's dead body. Why though, if he lived, should the Navajo chief send a scout in this fashion to keep track of his—Cal's—movements? Not knowing the real facts the whole business was a complete mystery to Cal. Certainly it never dawned on him for a moment that Chewonokee was now his most deadly enemy.

Finally, entirely mystified but reasonably sure that the Navajo had not been a minion of Whittaker Brice—which was the main thing—Cal scooped a grave out of the loose sand, rolled the body into it, and then covered it over. A few strident whistles brought his horse

speeding back to him, but all his efforts to locate the Navajo's mount failed. Presumably it had wandered off somewhere into the desert out of earshot.

Still puzzled, but every bit as determined to finish the job for which he had come, Cal rode on his way and within half an hour had once more located the buried vault. As far as he could tell it was quite undisturbed and when he finally emerged again he had enough gold pieces to amply cover the twenty thousand dollars which would be required by Brice, together with a surplus. He had no wish to make more visits than were necessary to this spot, for apparently there was more danger attached to it than he had imagined . . .

So he made the journey back to Desert's End, this time without any interruption. It was in the small hours when he finally dropped to sleep, but he was up for breakfast in the normal way, exchanging quiet looks of satisfaction with Connie McBride as they breakfasted and discussed trivial topics in order to dispel any suggestion of intimate friendship.

During the morning Cal exchanged his gold for greenbacks, but he took good care to keep his money with him. He had not the least faith in the bank next to the sheriff's office. And at three o'clock, as arranged, he arrived at Edgar Waneson's office to find the Mayor, Brice and Connie already there.

"Howdy," Brice greeted, grinning expectantly round his cheroot. "Waneson, this is Mr. Wade, like I was tellin' you."

The axe-faced lawyer shook hands and Cal felt as though he had gripped a wet fish. Mayor Slater came next, morose and square-jawed, but full of an air of avaricious expectancy.

"The deed's drawn up," Brice said, handing it across. "I guess you'd better read it."

"Naturally," Cal said, and sat down to inspect it carefully. He read it through twice, finally arriving at the conclusion that there were no hidden twists in the clauses.

"Okay?" Waneson asked briefly, and Cal nodded.

"Good enough. Let's get the signin' done."

"After the payment," Brice said deliberately. "Ain't that I don't trust you, Mr. Wade, but business is business."

Cal gave him a level look from his hard grey eyes and then counted out twenty one-thousand dollar bills. Brice smiled to himself as he double-checked them.

"Sure there aren't nineteen?" Cal asked dryly.

"I'd be comin' on you for another one if there was," Brice told him. "Right—we sign."

Within a few moments the formalities were complete, Cal receiving a duplicate of the deed and a receipt for his money.

"And how soon do you figger gettin' busy?" Waneson asked.

"That's up to th' big fellow here," Cal responded. "Get me the timber an' labour, Mr. Brice, and I'll start anytime."

"What about a plan?" Connie asked, more for the sake of something to say. "You'll need one, won't you?"

"I've worked that out," Cal told her. "By the time I get the labour and timber the plan will be ready."

In point of fact, with his mind on so many other things, he had overlooked the necessity of a plan—but it did not present any problem. Many times in his varied career he had drawn up plans for buildings. Not architectural masterpieces, by any means, but they had served their purpose.

"Mr. Brice has been telling me about your intentions, Mr. Wade," the mayor said. "None of my business, but I think it's a plumb crazy idea to build a temple in this town."

"I'm taking that risk," Cal said, shrugging. "Never know, you might even be converted to the Gospel yourself before yore finished, Mayor."

"I reckon not. The Gospel's outside my line of territory."

Cal got to his feet and made a final check-over, then he looked at Brice.

"I seem to have met most of the important people in this town, Mr. Brice, save one—probably the most important of the lot from the viewpoint of safety. Meanin' the sheriff. Or ain't you got one?"

Connie's eyes strayed to Brice, then back to Cal. Brice took his cheroot from his teeth and examined it.

"Right now, Mr. Wade, Sheriff Andrews is out on important duty along with his deputies. I got reason for thinkin' that there are some Navajos near this region who might try an' attack us. Imagine they've bin wronged, if you understand. I mean to be ready if anythin' happens. You'll see the sheriff soon enough when he comes back—though I can't think why you should want to."

"Just a matter of formality," Cal smiled, feeling he had learned what he wanted to know—that Navajos had no part in Brice's personal scheme of things. Which meant that the Redskin Cal had tackled in the night must have been operating at the command of Chewonokee.

"Well," Cal concluded, shaking hands, "that seems to conclude everythin' for the moment, gentlemen—Miss McBride. Soon as you let me know somethin', Mr. Brice, I can start gettin' busy. Like you sed, between us we can change this town a lot."

With that he departed and Brice put his cheroot slowly back between his teeth.

"I don't quite get the angle on that critter," he confessed, puzzled. "He don't *look* like a dope, yet he sure must be to think he can get away with a church!"

"You've got twenty thousand dollars," Connie pointed out. "Why should you worry?"

"Twenty thousand less my fee," Edgar Wanesson added. "I'm waiting for it, Brice—now."

Sunset was painting the sky in a breathtaking flamboyance of colour when Eagle Foot rode swiftly through the foothills of the mountains. In a matter of minutes he had reached the new and hidden retreat of Chewonokee and his few remaining braves and dismounted quickly from his horse.

Chewonokee, resting inside his own roughly constructed domain, looked up sharply.

"Eagle Foot comes quickly!" he exclaimed. "You have news?"

"News, Chewonokee, yes—but not of the best. I went to relieve Desert Wind this morning at the pre-arranged spot, but found no trace of him. I have spent the day searching for him. I finally found his horse, weak from thirst, wandering in the desert. The horse is now in the foothills and later I will bring him in—"

"And Desert Wind?" Chewonokee interrupted sharply. "What of him?"

"He is dead, Chewonokee, his own knife in his heart. I picked up his trail, and that of a second rider—Cal Rutter perhaps—and in a newly made grave I found Desert Wind's body."

Chewonokee was silent, meditating.

"I was wrong, Chewonokee, in saying it was *perhaps* Cal Rutter's trail: it *was*. I followed it to its limits and it brought me to the buried vault."

Chewonokee got quickly to his feet. "You found the vault!"

"It is plainly one belonging to us," Eagle Foot replied. "Inside it are cherished idols of gold, many of them defaced now where gold has been hacked away. Cal Rutter is more than just a thief, Chewonokee, he is a desecrator of our sacred idols!"

Chewonokee's face set. "The time has come for action, Eagle Foot. You have done well and earned my pleasure, and you shall be fittingly rewarded."

"I have only one reward I desire, Chewonokee—permission to track down Cal Rutter to Desert's End and fire an arrow through his heart. Not so much because he desecrated our buried temple, but in revenge for my dear friend Desert Wind."

Chewonokee shook his head. "That I cannot grant. Our law says that he who derides the gods must die with the gods. I shall deal with Cal Rutter myself. I am not yet fully well, but I am strong enough to commence a vigil. I shall keep watch at the vault and you will see to it that I am kept constantly supplied with food and water. One day Cal Rutter will come to the vault again, and when he does I shall be waiting."

A look of distress crossed Eagle Foot's features.

"But why do we wait for that, Chewonokee, when many moons might pass before he comes again?"

"We are accustomed to waiting, Eagle Foot."

"True; but would it not be simpler to sweep down on Desert's End and—"

"No. We are not enough in number—and our quarrel does not lie so much with Desert's End itself as with Cal Rutter . . . Come—the night will cloak our movements. You will show me where the vault is . . ."

Once he had completed his layout plan for his intended 'church' and sketched in a rough elevation, there was nothing more Cal could do in this particular direction until timber ordered from Phoenix should arrive. The labour for building would come from Desert's End itself since there were more than enough drifters around willing to earn a dollar or two.

So, there being a gap in his activities for the moment, Cal turned himself to other matters. He moved as and how he wanted, completely secure in the identity which Whittaker Brice and his minions had accepted. And these other activities were widespread and thorough.

Under the pretext of being interested in cattle dealings Cal made it his business to call on many of the local ranchers. From them he learned something he had long suspected—that nearly every ranch had mysteriously lost cattle from their corrals and never seen them again. Here and there the night raiders had been apprehended and always, to cover their identity, they had indulged in gunplay and murder, of which the Harcourt business had been an outstanding example.

Cal made a note of the number of head of cattle lost and the brands they had then carried—after which, night by night, he set out on some mysterious activity of his own. The result of his work became clear in a fortnight when all ranchers who had lost cattle found that their loss had been made up by extra cattle being added to their corrals. The animals had obviously had a brand upon them, but it had been obliterated by a square burn mark which had completely blotted out the original sign.

The ranchers were pleased even if puzzled, and took good care to quickly put their own brands on the additional cattle, but whom they had to thank for the nocturnal mystery they had no idea. Certainly they did not link it up with the big, easy-going stranger from Texas who had made a casual call upon them some time before.

Most infuriated of all was Whittaker Brice. His own considerable cattle reserves were heavily depleted, a process which had been going on for nearly two weeks—but for all the watchfulness of the ranch foreman and his boys the unknown rustler had not been caught. For which the explanation was fairly simple. Cal, responsible for everything, had each time chosen the hour after sunset when the dense mist of the deepening night lay over the valleys and pastureland. With this to cloak him, and possessing a thorough knowledge of Brice's corrals and the layout, he had got away with it, but never handling more than a few steers at a time.

Altogether, Cal was not particularly surprised to discover Brice in an ill humour when he called upon him in his office at the back of the Painted Lady two weeks after signing the land contract.

"Howdy," Brice growled, glancing up as Cal came in. "Take a seat, Mr. Wade."

"Thanks." Cal sat down, watching as Brice pushed aside a wad of accounts evidently belonging to the running of the Painted Lady. Then Brice bit the end from one of his cheroots and swung round in his chair.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Wade?"

"Get some action! I'm plumb sick of sittin' around waitin' for that timber from Phoenix. How much longer's it goin' to be?"

“Should be here today. Ain’t an easy trail from Phoenix, remember, an’ its tough goin’ for a wagon and team.”

“I’m not interested in how tough it is, I want action.”

“Yeah, I can sympathize . . . I want action, too, but in a different sort uv way.”

Cal raised his eyebrows, wondering what was coming. “Meanin’?”

“Meanin’ it’s time that sheriff of ours came back! There’s a big job waitin’ for him when he does. Some hombre around here has taken to stealin’ cattle from my corrals.”

“From *your* corrals?” Cal repeated, astonished. “I should have thought they were so well guarded nobody could get near ’em.”

“I reckon nobody could, in the ordinary way. Whoever’s doin’ this knows more ’n a thing or two about handlin’ cattle, an’ about stealin’ ’em, too! Each time there’s bin some sort of distraction to call my boys away. By the time they’ve investigated it cattle’s gone! I’m goin’ to raise hell when Sheriff Andrews comes back,” Brice finished bitterly.

Cal carefully rolled himself a cigarette and said nothing.

“Whoever this rustler is, he’s in league with the rest of the ranchers around here,” Brice continued grimly. “They’ve made no secret of the fact that they’ve gotten extra cattle from they don’t know where. Seems only one answer to that, this cattle stealer is a go-between.”

“Go-between for what?” Cal inquired.

“Well, it’s like this . . .” Brice hunched forward in a suddenly confidential mood. “Some time back there was a rustler at work, an’ he had a partner with him. Mebby he had several helpers, too, I wouldn’t know. Fact remains he did the hell of a lot of stealin’ and in one case he shot up an entire spread, killing the owner and his family. We’d enough evidence to hang the critter but for various reasons we let him go. An’ his pardner, too.”

“Well?” Cal asked, smoke drifting past his eyes.

“I know for a fact the pardner’s dead, but I ain’t too sure what’s happened to the killer-thief himself. I think *he’s* back of this. Mebby to ease his conscience he’s putting back the thefts he made to make it up to the ranchers he stole from.”

“And takin’ them from your corral to do it? Why?”

“Logical, ain’t it? He’s no love for me since I got the drop on him. So he’s makin’ me pay in a roundabout sorta way by stealing my cattle.”

Cal did not say anything. He was more than surprised at the way Brice had twisted things around to put himself in the right light and destroy all possible suspicion that he himself had been the original cattle thief. Just how many other steers had been stolen Cal did not know—and probably never would—but he knew perfectly well that Brice had illegal operators in all parts of the territory, either buying steers far below normal price, or else stealing them wholesale, to supply everready buyers. There were few crooked deals at which Whittaker Brice was not a past master.

“Truth to tell,” Brice continued, sitting back again in his chair, “Sheriff Andrews is on the look-out for more things than Navajos. He’s also lookin’ for this killer-thief I’ve been talkin’ about. Cal Rutter by name. If you ever run across him watch yourself. He’s a dirty liar and a dead shot.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Cal said casually. “But to get back to my reason for comin’ here, Brice. If I don’t get this timber darned quick to start work I’ll—”

He broke off at the gathering sound of wagon wheels in the main street outside. The noise grew into the jangling of harnesses and the shouts of men. Brice got to his feet and put on his hat.

“Sounds to me as though this might be what yore waitin’ for, Mr. Wade. Let’s take a look.” Brice’s guess was right. When he and Cal got to the boardwalk outside the Painted Lady they beheld a heavy wagon loaded with timber, and a team of sweating, snorting horses.

“That stuff for me? Whittaker Brice?” Brice called to the driver.

“Sure is! There’s more comin’ but it’ll be tomorrow afore it gets here. That desert trail’s a hell of a trip. Where’s the stuff to be unloaded?”

“I’ll take over from here,” Cal said, as Brice glanced at him. “Get me all the labour you can, as quickly as you can.”

“Sure thing, Mr. Wade.”

And from that moment onwards Cal devoted all his attention to his new venture, deliberately keeping out of the way of Connie McBride whilst outside, but having many a conversation with her in the comparative privacy of Ma Hansen’s rooming house. It was through this latter medium, as the days spread into weeks and the ‘church’ grew apace that he learned of Whittaker Brice’s growing uneasiness in various directions.

“It isn’t the church he’s worrying over,” Connie explained one night, as she and Cal checked up in his bedroom. “It’s the complete disappearance of Sheriff Andrews and his deputies which is bothering him. That, and the theft of cattle from his own ranch, is getting him itchy. He’s more than a feeling that you—as Cal Rutter, I mean—are around somewhere and might suddenly put a bullet in his back.”

“Good!” Cal grinned. “And I gather he doesn’t suspect ‘Martin Wade’ at all?”

“Not so far as I can tell. I have the feeling now and again in the way he talks that he suspects there’s something vaguely familiar about you, but of course he can’t reconcile it with your face and voice so he gets no place . . . I suppose the real fun will start when he discovers what sort of a ‘church’ you are really building?”

“There’ll be fun then all right,” Cal agreed dryly. “I should think the best thing he can do regarding Andrews is write him off as lost and appoint somebody else.”

Which was exactly what Brice did do a couple of days later. The fact that Edgar Waneson was appointed the new sheriff did not surprise those who knew of the machinations behind the scenes. In Waneson there reposed all the dirty secrets Brice possessed so he was manifestly the only man who could be entrusted with the office of sheriff and the maintenance of ‘law and order’.

Week after week went by and Cal’s church grew swiftly with almost unlimited labour at his command. So far Brice had not attempted any double-dealing. The men were paid regularly and seemed satisfied enough, and the timber supply was constantly forthcoming. The people of Desert’s End were all acquainted by now with the sign outside of the half-built edifice which said—MARTIN WADE ENTERPRISES, but since this of itself did not explain very much they got to talking amongst themselves and wondering what would appear from the chaos of beams, timbers, planks, and frenziedly working men.

“If that’s a church,” Brice said to Edgar Waneson, when the building was three-quarters up, “it’s the queerest ‘un I ever saw! Whoever heard of a church with batwing doors?”

Waneson did not reply, but he was smiling to himself over some inner thought.

“Of course,” Brice resumed, pondering, “Wade did say that the appearance mightn’t *look* like a church. Just the same, the batwings doors are carryin’ things mighty far. These morons around here are going to think they’re goin’ in a gin palace.”

“And mebbey they will be at that,” Waneson said.

Brice looked at him sharply. “What in thunder d’you mean by that?”

“I mean that I think you’ve been had for a sucker, Whit—just like I warned you when you told me to draw up the deed. That clause allowing him to build without restriction smelled like poison to me—but you wouldn’t listen. You were too keen on your twenty thousand dollars to raise objections.”

“Raising objections would have lost me all that money,” Brice snapped. “I didn’t see taking that chance.”

“So I figured, but in letting Martin Wade have his way I think you’ve taken a much bigger one. Nothing you can do about it either. That deed he signed isn’t fixed in one particular. I didn’t dare monkey with it for two reasons—one because the authorities in Yuma wouldn’t stand for it; and two, because Martin Wade’s no man to trifle with. If you want my opinion you’d have done best to turn down Wade flat, including the twenty thousand dollars, and told him to hit the trail. I have the feeling he’s only just started to make himself felt around here.”

Brice scowled as he stared through the window at the church with batwings doors.

“Always take care of him if he steps too far outa line,” he said finally.

“You hope,” Waneson gave a dubious look. “You’ve gotten yourself a man-sized problem in Martin Wade, Whit, and don’t you forget it!”

Brice said no more. He had worries enough. The disappearance of Sheriff Andrews and his deputies, the mysteriously vanishing cattle, the possibility of attack from Cal Rutter or avenging Navajos, and now the nebulous threat hovering over his biggest source of income—the Painted Lady—were all combining to give him increasing jitters.

He did not openly admit his feelings to Connie McBride, but she knew him well enough to read his emotions. Automatically Cal knew too, and pressed on cheerfully with the building, until he was within three days of finishing it. Then he found his workers did not turn up. It did not require much genius to decide that Brice had turned off the tap—but just the same Cal did not immediately make a row. He made no move at all until evening, much to Brice’s surprise since he had been waiting for him all afternoon, but in the evening there came the first signs of a showdown.

Cal appeared when the Painted Lady was at its busiest. Brice, standing by the bar, saw him enter and prepared himself for trouble.

“What’s the idea?” Cal asked bluntly, and waved the barkeep away as he asked for an order.

“Idea?” Brice eyed him levelly, his cheroot smouldering. “You wouldn’t be referring to the labour for your church, would you?”

“You know damned well I am! Yore on a contract, Brice, and don’t go around forgetting it or I might get annoyed.”

“That’d be too bad,” Brice said calmly.

In the distance the piano stopped and Connie ceased singing. The talking and gambling men and women talked less loudly, interested in watching what the two big fellows were going to do next.

“Your move,” Brice said laconically.

Cal glanced around the smoky expanse and picked out quite a good majority of the men who had been working for him. Then he looked back at Brice.

“Could only be you who stopped the flow of labour,” he said, “since the men were on your payroll. You can’t get away with it, Brice. You’ve been paid and I expect the men.”

“Then you can go on expectin’ because I’m breaking the contract right now! Yore not stickin’ to it, so why should I? You sed you was goin’ to build a church, but that it mightn’t look like one from the outside. It sure doesn’t! But it doesn’t look like one from the *inside*, either. I’ve had a look-see for myself. Bars, a rostrum, an office—you ain’t buildin’ no church, Wade. Yore buildin’ a gin palace! Do you think I’m goin’ to supply the labour for you to cut my own throat?”

Cal smiled tautly. “Yore going to supply the labour because the contract says so. There are no restrictions, remember. If I’ve changed my mind and decided to build a gin palace instead of a church that’s my business. You’ve got to go on keeping to your side of the bargain.”

“He’s right,” Waneson said, his face grim. “I warned you, Whit.”

“You shut up!” Brice barked at him. “I’m runnin’ things around here and, contract or no contract, yore gettin’ no more help from me, Wade. Since the contract’s broken by both sides we’d better come to some arrangement over money and call the whole thing off.”

Cal shook his head. “The contract stands even if I have to bring an authority from Yuma to settle the issue.”

“First,” Brice said furiously, “you’ve got to *get* to Yuma! I wouldn’t advise you to try.”

“And I wouldn’t advise you to try gunplay, Brice. I’m no amateur, believe me . . .” Cal turned and looked at the men in various regions of the saloon. “You’ve heard the issue, men, and it shouldn’t need much brains for you to see that Brice, to suit himself, is cheating you out of makin’ further wages.”

Brice’s lips tightened as there were various looks in his direction.

“I know how you men are feelin’ about this.” Cal’s voice was still calm as he lounged with one elbow on the bar. “Up to now you’ve done everythin’ Mr. Brice has told you—simply ’cos there wasn’t much else you *could* do. He’s been the big boss and had the last word. Things have changed a bit now. If you go on workin’ for me as you have been doin’ I’ll see you get paid. In other words, the lot of you are on my payroll now, not Brice’s.”

“You can’t damned well do that!” Brice roared. “The contract says—”

“Contract nothing!” Cal interrupted. “That’s dead, Brice, and you broke it. I’m actin’ for myself from here on!”

“Yeah? Some good that’ll do you without timber! I’ll stop the supply! I’ll—”

“You may figger to do a lot of things, Brice, but you’ll not get far,” Cal snapped. “For one thing, all the timber we need has bin brought, and if I decide to extend my activities I’ll get the timber myself. Drive it across the blasted desert if need be! Much more of this and I’ll contact the authorities for an arbiter!”

Brice’s lips twitched. He shot a glance at Waneson. The lawyer did not say anything but his expression was full of ‘I told you so.’

“Well, men?” Cal demanded, looking around on them. “What’s it to be?”

They had had time to murmur among themselves, and since the issue was between having money or not having it it did not take them long to decide.

“Okay, Mr. Wade, we’re with you. We start work again in the mornin’!”

“Sure thing. We’ll be there.”

Cal nodded and said no more. He turned and looked at the barkeep.

“Okay, Harry, I’ll have that drink now. Make it rye. You joinin’ me, Brice, now the fun’s over?”

“You got your gall!” Brice retorted venomously, and swung away—to finish up at a corner table with Edgar Waneson by his side.

"This can't go on," Brice muttered, chewing his cheroot savagely. "We've gotta get rid of Wade somehow."

Wanesson shook his head slowly. "He's not the sort you c'n rub out and think no more about it, Whit. He's dynamite, and the sooner you get wise to it the better."

"Who the hell's side are you on, Wanesson? Mine or Wade's?"

"I dunno," the lawyer reflected. "Right now I guess I'm neutral. Fact of the matter is I don't love you any more 'n you love me. I'm only sticking by you as long as you run the town and keep me comfortable. I'm not saying my affections wouldn't change if I found Wade running things better than you."

Brice looked at him fixedly. "Get one thing straight, Wanesson. You know most everythin' I do, an' have ever done. You don't suppose I'd let you double-cross me and go over to Wade, do you?"

Wanesson smiled acidly. "I know you could shoot me down but I could still speak even if I was dead. I could let Wade have certain documents long before you got a bead on me . . . In fact, Brice, I can tie you in a knot any time I want."

Brice breathed hard and for a moment it even looked as though he would slam his massive fist into the lawyer's face. Then he thought better of it and forced himself to calm down.

"We'll see how things work out," he said deliberately. "An' the one thing I don't get is why Wade has decided to choose this town of all others to build a better gin palace than mine. What's his object?"

"To bust you wide open, I should think. He's got no liking for you, Brice—or had you guessed. You don't suppose he'll stop at a gin palace, do you?"

What Brice thought about this statement he did not say. His eyes had wandered to the bar and there remained fixed. It had just dawned upon him that Connie McBride was talking to 'Martin Wade' with considerable earnestness.

"That does it," Brice muttered, heaving to his feet. "Not content with hornin' in on my business that skunk thinks he can take my girl as well!"

Wanesson glanced. "Nothing to stop them talking, Brice. You jump to too many conclusions."

Brice did not listen. He strode over to the rear of Connie, grabbed her arm savagely, and whirled her back against the bar. She stared in astonishment and then looked down angrily at the whisky which had slopped across her evening gown.

"What's the idea?" she demanded hotly. "I wanted my drink inside me, not outside!" She slapped her emptied glass on the counter and rubbed her bare arm tenderly.

"Get to somewheres safe, Connie," Brice said curtly. "I've business on hand, with *Mister Wade!*"

Connie did not move. "I'll go when I'm good and ready and not until. What's the matter with you, Whit? Had more hooch than's good for you?"

"I'm plain, cold sober—and more than a mite bad-tempered. You've heard already how this critter here thinks he can run my men around as he chooses, so why the hell do you have to make things worse by talkin' to him?"

"I'll talk to whom I like! You can kick the men around as you like, but you'll not kick me!"

"Sure yore not on the wrong horse, Brice?" Cal asked, the glint of danger in his grey eyes. "I *asked* Miss McBride over. She didn't come of her own accord."

"She'd no darned right to come at all!"

Cal grinned without warmth. "Things ain't yet gotten to the place where a woman can't speak to a man without your say-so, Brice. Better go easy, hadn't you?"

"Don't start tellin' me what to do, Wade! You know Connie's makin' a play for only one man, and that man's me!"

"Don't you be so darned sure of yourself!" Connie exclaimed, her hands on her hips and her eyes bright. "You get—"

"Aw, shut up!" Brice snarled at her—then out of the corner of his eye he saw bunched knuckles flash towards him. There seemed to be an explosion inside his head and he found himself tumbling backwards into the midst of a table. Punchers jumped aside, swearing as their beer glasses went flying. Dazed and gasping Brice lay sprawled, the table half on top of him.

"To tell a lady to shut up ain't manners, Brice," Cal explained, massaging his fist. "Thought I'd better put you wise to the fact."

The fog cleared out of Brice's head abruptly. With black murder in his face he made to scramble to his feet, then he froze as he saw he was looking into the barrel of Cal's right-hand .45.

"Just till you cool off," Cal said. "Get on your feet an' don't insult a lady again in my hearing."

Brice rose slowly, dusting himself down. He gave a venomous glance at Connie and then looked back to Cal.

"For your information, Wade," he said deliberately, "you've touched off a powder-keg tonight, and afore yore through it'll blow up right in your face! Not satisfied with tryin' to steal my business in this town you think you can take my girl as well. That's where yore dead wrong!"

"After this lot you've got a girl no more!" Connie declared flatly. "I'm through, Whit! You can find somebody else to bring glamour to this clip joint!"

With a flouncing of skirts she swung away and strode angrily amidst the tables until she reached the rear door which led to her dressing-room. Brice watched her go and massaged his aching jaw.

"She can make her own decisions, Brice," Cal said, slipping his gun back in its holster. "I'll tell you this much, though. If any harm comes to her through this shindig tonight I'll hold you responsible."

With that Cal turned away from the bar, went straight to the batwings, and vanished beyond them. He had almost expected a bullet in his back as he went but evidently Brice had sufficient sense to see that deliberate murder before witnesses would get him nowhere. So, finally, Cal reached his bedroom in Ma Hansen's and there remained, watching the Painted Lady across the street and expecting Connie to appear at any moment since her break with Whit Brice seemed to be complete.

Surprisingly, however, there was no sign of her. Once or twice Cal wondered if she were perhaps in danger and half hesitated over the idea of returning to the saloon to find out; then he decided otherwise. Connie was no child; she'd be able to protect herself, even against Brice.

She finally appeared towards midnight when the Painted Lady was closing down, and it made Cal's mouth harden when he saw she was once again in Brice's company. What was even more disturbing, he had one arm about her waist in the friendliest of attitudes.

Cal watched them intently, clearly illuminated as they were by the kerosene flares. Around them, the *habitués* of the saloon came lurching out into the night . . . The climax came for Cal when he saw Brice embrace the girl and obviously kiss her. Upon this they parted and she came hurrying across the street.

In one dive Cal reached the door, opening it slightly for the usual nightly check-up. It struck him as singularly bare-faced on the girl's part that she came in to him as usual. After the attentions of Brice he had rather thought she would have avoided contact. Then it occurred to him she probably had no idea that he had seen the incident.

"Well," she said, closing the door softly, "it looks after tonight, Cal, as though the gloves are off with a vengeance."

"Yeah," he agreed coolly. "In more senses 'n one, probably."

"Mmmm? How do you mean?" Connie seated herself on the usual chair. Cal could not clearly see her expression but her voice indicated surprise.

"Mebby I'm kinda suspicious and shouldn't be," Cal said slowly, "but your cuttin' free of Brice somehow doesn't tie up with your kissin' him."

For a long moment Connie was silent; then she sighed. "You men are about the most suspicious, bristling creatures on the face of the earth! Makes one wonder where a poor woman stands when she tries to help out."

"Never mind bein' a martyr, Connie; I'm just asking for an explanation."

"First Brice dictates what I shall do, and now you're doing the same thing! I've a good mind to walk out on the pair of you—but fast! As for the 'explanation', I've made it up with Brice because it was the only thing I could do."

"Meaning what exactly?"

"Meaning that if I don't stay in with him I can't help you."

Cal got up from the bed edge. "Look, Connie, whose side of the corral are you on? You cut free with Brice and were all set to come over to me. Now you've put things back as they were. *Why?*"

"I've *told* you! How am I ever to get the inside information we need concernin' Brice's plans if I don't stay with him? After tonight he's your sworn enemy, as you must have realized, and when I got to thinking it over I realized that I'd better patch things up somehow because now's the time when he'll really start plotting to get rid of you."

"I can take care of myself, Connie. The chance was there for you to break clean, and you didn't take it. In spite of the showdown tonight Brice is still boss of the town. Mebby that had something to do with your going back to him."

"Look," Connie said deliberately, rising, "do you want me to work on the inside, or not? Do you want to preserve your phony identity as Martin Wade, or don't you? If I play up to you we'll never know what Brice is plotting, and he might even tumble to it that you're Cal Rutter since I'm so thick with you."

"I can't help remembering, Connie, that tonight was the first time I ever saw Brice kiss you."

"It's happened before," Connie said quietly. "I don't let him do that because I *want* to. It just helps the business on . . ." Then quite unpredictably her mood changed. "Look, Cal, it seems to me that you spend your time sitting at this window watching what *I'm* doing! Well, I don't like it, and that's straight! I'll be hanged if you're not more full of suspicions than Brice himself."

Cal did not answer immediately, he was too busy trying to think of something to say. He took too long about it, however, for the girl turned abruptly and left, remembering just in time to shut the door quietly behind her.

For a moment Cal was on the verge of going after her; then he changed his mind and began to undress with savage impatience. Deep down in his heart he couldn't believe that Connie was two-timing him, but on the other hand his masculine conceit insisted that she should play straight with either one or the other. Altogether he had a badly disturbed night and was in a pretty sore mood by the time he went down to breakfast. By this time he had decided what he would do. He would apologize to Connie and leave her to handle things in her own way—only he did not get the chance.

She was not at breakfast, nor was there a place laid for her. Cal realized it would not be prudent to show sudden anxiety regarding her, so he waited until Ma Hansen brought in his own breakfast.

"Miss McBride not breakfasting today?" he asked.

"Nope, I reckon not. She sure has a grasshopper mind has that gal. She's left."

"Left!" Cal stared blankly.

"Sure thing." Ma put down the breakfast and sucked a back tooth. "Decided suddenly she'd go and live at the hotel down the street. Told me that late last night. Off she goes, an' I ain't seen her since. Not so sure I want to, neither, if that's what she thinks of the service here."

Ma Hansen went on her way, plainly in a huff, and Cal ate his breakfast moodily. Evidently Connie was sore, and somehow he couldn't blame her. The thought that worried him most of all was that she had perhaps decided to *really* cast in her lot with Whit Brice after all. Certainly she had cut off the one means of secret contact by which she had been able to inform Cal each night of what was brewing.

"Mebby it doesn't matter at that," Cal growled to himself. "Can't figger out what a woman's goin' to do no matter how hard you try . . ."

He finished his breakfast, endeavoured to convince himself he was better off without any feminine entanglements, and then he set off for the 'church'. To his satisfaction the workers had evidently decided to thumb their noses at Brice for they were all there, carrying on with the job.

And they remained at it, day after day, Cal taking the precaution to have two men—one for night and one for day—always on guard with a rifle, ready to forestall anything which Brice might attempt. He made no moves, however, perhaps because he realized that if he destroyed the 'church' he would have a host of angry workers on top of him because their money had ceased.

So the days passed and within a fortnight the place was finished. For Cal the hour had come for definite action. In the interval he had seen Connie once or twice, either in the street or in the Painted Lady, but each time she had been at pains to deliberately avoid him. It had got to stop. He needed Connie more than somewhat, not only for herself but as a singer-hostess in his gin palace.

On the night when the gin palace was completed, now duly named the Oasis, and fully stacked with necessary liquor of all types brought specially from Phoenix and Yuma, Cal entered the Painted Lady with determined strides and looked about him. First he saw Whit Brice, in his usual place at the end of the bar; then his gaze moved to Connie at the end of a

song on the rostrum. He wasted no more time. He went straight across to her and asked a question.

“How much is Whit Brice paying you for working in this dive of his?”

“Mind your own business!” Connie gave one angry look and turned to move from the rostrum. Before she could manage it, however, Cal had leapt up lithely beside her and caught her shoulders.

“This is business, Connie, not pleasure,” he said briefly. “Whatever Brice is payin’ you I’ll treble. I need you for the Oasis. The mob’ll follow you anywheres.”

“Thanks for the compliment,” she retorted. “What are you trying to do? Make me out to be a prize bitch, or something?”

“Oh, for cryin’ out loud, Con . . .”

“A moment *Mister* Wade, if you *don’t* mind!”

Cal turned and Connie jerked herself from his grip. Just below the rostrum Brice was standing with his gun cocked and his inevitable cheroot smouldering.

Cal waited, pinned by the gun. He noticed Connie did not entirely depart. She stood a little aside, waiting also.

“I’m gettin’ sick an’ tired of your interference around here, Wade,” Brice went on bitterly. “It’s bad enough to have you givin’ me competition with that gin palace of yours—or leastways you *hope* you’ll give me competition when you open—but when it comes to yuh tryin’ to take Connie as well fur hostess it’s time I stepped in.”

“Connie’s a free agent,” Cal snapped. “You can’t tell her whom she’ll work for. I’ve offered her three times what you are payin’ her—”

“I know. I heard you. But there’s more’n money to it. Connie an’ I mean somethin’ to each other outside business.”

Cal glanced around the crowded saloon and at the intent and leering faces.

“You like airin’ your private life in company?” he asked briefly.

“Nothin’ private about Connie an’ me being that way about each other. Everybody knows it—’cept you, it seems.”

Cal gave the girl a glance but she avoided his gaze.

“It looks to me, Wade, as though the time’s come for a showdown,” Brice said. “Step down here, will you, an’ mebbey we can talk it over. You too, Connie.”

The motioning of the gun made Cal compelled to obey. He came down to the floor of the saloon and held up his hands to assist Connie to make a short jump. Instead she ignored him and gained the floor by the steps.

“See what I mean?” Brice asked dryly; then he suddenly looked at the assembly watching him through the smoke haze. “Get back to your drinkin’, you boneheads! This ain’t nothin’ to do with you—leastways, not yet.”

Connie came up slowly. Brice leathered his gun and motioned to a quiet table. In another moment all three were seated but no drinks were ordered. Plainly there was nothing sociable about this set-up.

“I’ve bin doin’ a lot of thinkin’ since you came into town,” Brice said, his elbows on the table and his eyes pinning Cal’s steadily. “First I was inclined to blow my top—’specially when I found how you’d twisted things round regardin’ that gin palace of yours. But after a while—in these last few weeks—I’ve come to see how things are.”

“Time you came to the point, isn’t it?” Cal suggested.

“Leave me be; I’m gettin’ to it in my own good time. What I’m sayin’ is this—I admire you ’cos yore the only man who ever tried to stand up to me.”

“Not a case of tryin’, Brice. I *am* doin’, because I’ve more money than you for one thing, and also because it would take a better man ’n you to get me jittery.”

“Okay, okay, have it your own way. What yore tryin’ to do is step in my shoes, run Desert’s End your own way, and steal my girl if you can. Right?”

Cal noticed the uncompromising look on Connie’s face, so he gave a prompt nod.

“Right!”

“And suppose I’ll have no truck with either of you?” Connie demanded.

“That’ll be just too bad,” Brice told her. “But I think you will, Connie. A woman in a place like this tags on to the winning side. One or other of us is bound to get you in the end.”

“I never said I wanted her,” Cal remarked.

“You don’t have to. She’ll tell *you* yore goin’ to have her, and since men are suckers far as women are concerned you’ll follow through.”

Cal was silent and Connie coldly contemptuous. Then Cal gave a frown.

“What d’you mean, Brice? Tag on to the ‘winning’ side?”

“That,” Brice replied, “brings me to the point. First though, answer me a question, Wade. You’ve built a gin palace, and from the look of it it’s the real thing. Am I right in thinkin’ that you don’t intend to stop at just buildin’ that?”

“Yore dead right,” Cal assented. “I know after what’s gone on between us that you won’t grant me any further land, but I *can* buy the various properties around here because they belong to those who are in ’em. General store for one place. Ma Hansen’s for another . . . Yore backing the hotel down the street, but if I buy out Ma Hansen an’ put up something far better you’ll get the draught—but good! I’m aimin’ to rebuild Desert’s End under your nose.”

“So I figgered. Mind tellin’ me why?”

Cal shrugged. “Because the place has possibilities an’ you’ve neglected ’em. First and foremost I’m a business man, and this place is a good investment for money.”

“You know as much as I do, Wade, that the schemes you’ve got can only end in open war. Both of us might lose everything we’ve got. Our respective places could be burned to th’ ground by rival gangs and we ourselves could lose our lives.”

“Could be,” Cal admitted.

“That bein’ so mebbly you’ll listen to a suggestion. I figger you’re a man who’s used to takin’ a chance. In fact you must be to have gotten this far and made your money.”

“What’s this leadin’ up to?” Cal questioned.

“A proposition. There can’t be two bosses in a town this size, Wade. Either you’ll win through underminin’ all my financial interests, or I’ll win through destroyin’ everythin’ you’ve built up. An’ don’t think I couldn’t. Fire could take care of your gin palace right now if need be.”

“I’d thought of that. Any man tryin’ it will be shot down.”

“Mebby. There are still ways and means. I’m just sayin’ it ain’t worth the pair of us sittin’ on the edge of a volcano, hangin’ on to what he’s got, an’ never knowin’ when the end’s comin’. Leastways, not to me. It needs one boss—and Connie’ll no doubt cling to that boss for her own sake—and the other must get out.”

“Well?” Cal was becoming irritated by the long build up. “What d’you want to do, Brice? Shoot it out?”

“Nope. That might mean one of us losin’ his life, an’ I don’t see no reason for that. I’m suggestin’ a race—a horse race. Both of us is good riders; leastways I know I am, an’ I’m sure you must be. The course’ll be fixed later. The winner takes all.”

“Including me?” Connie inquired. “I’m not a deck of cards, remember.”

“You’ll please yourself about that,” Brice told her. “What I mean by ‘all’ is Desert’s End, an’ everythin’ that belongs to it, exceptin’ private banking account of the loser. The loser gets outa town in twelve hours, an’ never comes back. It’s a gambler’s proposition, Wade, but I reckon I’ve always been one. I’m hopin’ you might be, too . . . Fact remains if we flare into open war there’ll be an inquiry finally by the authorities and both of us might lose everythin’.”

This, definitely, was true. Brice had put his cards on the table, and no mistake. Ruthless gun fighting would inevitably follow if some kind of a compromise were not made.

“A horse race, huh?” Cal said finally, musing and trying to locate where the catch came in, for he was sure there must be one as far as Brice was concerned. “And what about the horses? Do we choose our own?”

“Sure we do. There are plenty in the livery stable if you prefer a cayuse other than your own.”

“I’ll stick to what I’ve got, thank you,” Cal said grimly. “I know what my own hoss c’n do. An’ whereabouts would this race be run?”

Brice pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and plonked it on the table. With his pencil he drew a rough sketch, Cal and Connie looking on intently.

“That’s the way I figger it,” he said finally. “We’d start from the north end of Desert’s End an’ then cover a twenty-mile track round the desert, the furthest point by Johnson’s Cactus—that’s that big outcropping of Saguaro just here an’ it’d mark the limit of the outward journey. We’d come back in at the south end, an’ whoever comes in first is the winner.”

For the life of him Cal could not see where any trickery could come in. Using the desert for the greater part of the race it would not be possible for any hidden gunmen to take pot shots, or fake some kind of accident.

“Up to you,” Brice said, after a long silence. “We can fight it out this way cleanly—or there’ll be non-stop fightin’ until one or other of us gets out.”

Cal looked at Connie. “Any ideas, Connie? All else apart?”

She shrugged. “Up to both of you. Just don’t include me as part of the stake.”

Cal mused a moment or two longer, then asked a question.

“No objection to either of us taking a ride along the course to survey it first?”

“None at all,” Brice responded. “In fact we’ll have to get an idea of where we’re goin’ to ride.”

“All right then, I’ll gamble with you,” Cal said. “I don’t want constant warfare any more’n you do and this seems the most bloodless way of settlin’ the issue . . . When’s the race to be?”

“Day after tomorrow. Sooner the better. We’ll need tomorrow to make our preparations.”

Cal nodded and got to his feet. “Okay, if that’s the way you want it. I don’t have to tell you what’ll happen if you try any double crossin’.”

“Same goes frum me to you,” Brice retorted.

“Tomorrow night,” Cal added, “the Oasis will be open. We can get an idea from that just how you stand to lose. An’ my offer to you still goes, Connie.”

He fancied he saw a deep struggle going on within her mind but her face remained adamant.

“I’m not coming, Mr. Wade. Good night.”

He looked at her in silent puzzlement, then with a shrug went on his way.

Once he had made a final check-over of the Oasis, and assured himself that a man with a rifle was on guard for the night—for he still did not trust the machinations of Whit Brice—Cal returned to his room in Ma Hansen's and sat down to try and work out whether or not he was a damned fool. Finally he came to the conclusion that he was not. Anything that avoided bloodshed was worthy of consideration, and he was also perfectly confident that he could win the proposed race. The horse he owned was not, of course, his own. It had belonged to Chewonokee and his tribe and was an exceedingly fleet animal. By this time Cal had become accustomed to it and was more than sure he could out-distance anything Whit Brice could produce. No; given a straight race he was perfectly sanguine about winning it. The bigger problem, to his way of thinking, was Connie. He could not fathom her attitude at all, unless indeed it was that she was playing from the woman's angle and was only going to make a definite move when she saw which man was really going to be in control . . .

The fact that Connie was compelled to stay beside Brice if she was to act as a go-between still did not penetrate Cal's mind. The cloud of jealousy was between him and the true fact of the situation—and the cloud deepened when towards midnight he saw the usual embraces taking place outside the Painted Lady's batwings as Brice and Connie left together.

"Nuts," Cal growled, and turned away angrily to make preparations for bed . . .

The next morning, immediately after breakfast, he made it his first job to ride the proposed race 'track' and surveyed carefully as he went. As he had expected, there would be little chance for any dirty work in this arid waste. The only possible concealment lay in the region of Johnson's Cactus and it was hardly likely Brice would try and pull anything from the most obvious spot on the route. For the rest, there was nothing but dunes and depressions and the furious heat of the sun.

Once or twice in his journey Cal gave the horse its head and was agreeably surprised at the speed with which it could move, apparently untroubled by the furious heat of the sun. Trained by the Navajos for whom speed was sometimes the only escape from death, the animal was quite one of the most nimble and enduring creatures Cal had yet encountered.

So he finally rode back into Desert's End from the south and returned the horse to the stable at the back of Ma Hansen's. A new thought was in his mind now. Between sunset and the time for the race on the morrow—the exact time had yet to be fixed—there might be an attempt to tamper with the animal. Dope it in some way perhaps, or otherwise make it incapable of doing its best. During the daylight hours Brice was unlikely to risk anything, but once night had fallen no punches would be pulled. Brice knew where the horse was stabled, so Cal thereupon made up his mind to keep watch on the animal later on, or else employ somebody to do it, somebody he could completely trust. As far as he could see he would be busy most of the evening—on the one hand controlling the first night at the Oasis, and on the other seeing Brice and fixing the final details for the race.

Somebody he could *trust*? This brought an ironic smile to his mouth and seemed a problem incapable of solution, until by mid-afternoon the answer had dawned upon him. He would hand the job to Ma Hansen, a totally disinterested party and as honest as she was matter-of-fact. For a monetary consideration she would probably be glad to help her good

paying guest from Texas—for if he went she would lose a useful source of income. Yes—to Cal this seemed to be the right answer.

Meantime, also in the mid-afternoon, Whit Brice had concluded his own survey of the ‘course’ and ridden back into town, finishing up in his office at the rear of the Painted Lady. He sat considering for awhile then yanked open the door and looked out into the saloon where the waiters were busy cleaning and sorting the tables for the evening.

“Harry! Find Seth Gibbons and Walt Dexter an’ have ‘em come here right away.”

“Okay, boss.”

In fifteen minutes the two gunhawks entered the office, both of them with expectation on their unlovely faces. It was pretty well known in Desert’s End that they were Brice’s gunhawks and had dealt with more than one dirty bit of business, including the Harcourt clean-up.

“Boys, there’s work to be done,” Brice said, as they waited. “I don’t know what yore doin’ right now in the way of ordinary work, but whatever it is drop it.”

“Nothin’ much,” Walt Dexter replied. “We’re on a muck shift at the livery stables.”

“All right, forget it. This’ll pay you better. Mebby you know there’s a race comin’ off tomorrow between me and Martin Wade?”

“Sure,” acknowledged Seth, his thumbs latched in his gunbelts. “Most everybody in town knows about it by now. You’ve spread it around plenty, boss.”

“Naturally,” Brice shrugged. “We want a host of witnesses when I come ridin’ in as the winner. An’ you boys are goin’ to see to it that I *am* the winner. I’m also warnin’ you that if you bungle the job it’ll be just too bad.”

“What’s the angle?” Walt asked. “Fix Wade’s horse fur ‘im?”

“No, that might be just the one thing he expects. Believe me, he’s nobody’s fool. There’s a better way than that—the main point in this race is that his horse must lose time some place, an’ the only way it can do that is to stumble and mebby fall altogether. If Wade gets hurt at th’ same time, all the better, but in any case one stumble’ll be enough to give me the lead.”

“Meanin’ you ain’t too sure you can make it without fixin’ things?” Seth asked artlessly.

“Meanin’, you moron, that I’m going to make *sure*. Now pin your ears back an’ listen. Somehow, Wade’s cayuse has gotta be made to trip up, an’ it’s got to look the real thing. You mugs are pretty handy at ropin’ steers and handlin’ horses that ain’t been broken in, so what’s your suggestion?”

Walt shrugged. “Ain’t difficult, boss. Just use a trip rope. Bin done many a time before to stop a cayuse gettin’ ahead uv its team mate when hitched to a wagon.”

“And what does it involve?”

“A thin rope an’ a coupla stakes in the ground. Rope’s slack to begin with and pulled taut as the cayuse crosses it. It falls over it.”

“And that’s the best you can do?”

“Ain’t no other way to make a horse trip up,” Walt said flatly.

“Mebby not, but this has gotta happen in the midst of open desert or some place . . .” Brice paused for a moment in thought. “No, wait a minute. At the end of the race we’ll have hit the southward trail for about a mile. There’s hedges either side of it. Mebby that would be the right place to fix something?”

The two men thought for a moment, then it was Seth who shook his head.

“I don’t think it’d do, boss. The rope’d show up against the rock an’ dust of the trail. Wade’d be sure to spot it. If we worked in the desert we could bury the rope in the sand an’ he

wouldn't see a thing."

"Except you two mugs," Brice said dryly. "You've gotta be there to work the rope. Talk sense, Seth!"

"He wouldn't see us if we chose the right place. Best thing you can do is show us where the course is ter be an' we'll take a look an' see what we can do."

"All right." From his pocket Brice drew the sketch he had made the night before for Cal's benefit. "Here's the course. Now hop to it an' let me know as quickly as you can what yore aimin' to do."

Seth took the sketch and headed for the door. Walt paused for a moment, uncertain.

"Look, boss, wouldn't it be better if we left it 'til night? If Wade sees us ridin' out of town towards the trail he might start thinkin' things and follow us."

"Hardly likely," Brice replied. "He's already been over the course earlier today. I saw him go. Not much chance of him doin' it again. You'd better work by daylight, far as viewing the set-up is concerned, then you won't miss anythin'. I'll keep my eye on the Oasis and if I see Wade leavin' there I'll think up somethin' to stop him."

Walt looked relieved and with a nod he followed Seth out of the office. A few moments later both men had mounted their horses and were heading out of town to the north. But they did not go unobserved. Connie McBride had seen their movements as she completed some afternoon shopping. She watched them out of sight and then stood reflecting to herself. When those two gunhawks got together and took orders from Whit Brice it usually meant trouble for somebody. That Cal would not particularly welcome any information she might give him at this time she knew full well, so she made no attempt to head towards the great timbered mass of the Oasis, but continued with her shopping.

An hour later the gunhawks returned to town to find Brice still in his office. He looked up expectantly as they came in. From the satisfied looks on the men's faces they had evidently solved the problem to their satisfaction.

"Nothin' to it, boss," Seth said. "At one place, 'bout a mile afore you git to the desert's edge where it hits the south trail inter town, there's a big dip. Mebby you remember it?"

Brice thought, then he nodded. "I think so, yes. Flanked on either side by dunes?"

"That's it. We won't even need stakes. All we do is hide behind a dune—one on each side of the course, and lay the rope in the sand. We pull it up about a foot as Wade's horse comes through an' he'll go flyin'. Even while he's droppin' I'll whip the rope away quick over my side uv the dune so he won't have a chance to look back on what did it—grantin' he don't break his darned neck, that is."

"Then?" Brice questioned. "You stay where you are?"

"Sure we do. Be no way to escape 'til the coast's clear. We take the chance uv Wade inspectin' the dunes but it's not likely he will. He'll think his horse just had a natural stumble. There's a gamble in anythin' if it comes to that."

Brice tapped his fingers on the desk edge, his lips tight. Then he gave a somewhat resigned sigh.

"Okay, seems it's about the only way. But remember one thing: if Wade *does* come across you there's to be no gunplay. I'll work out an answer if things go wrong."

"They won't," Seth said confidently. "Don't you see, boss? Wade'll be so busy on catchin' up on you he won't stop fur a think! Leastways, that's how I see it."

"Up to you now," Brice said. "See there ain't no slip-ups, and if I should be ahead of him don't get the wrong man!"

Seth and Walt grinned at such a possibility and then loafed out of the office once more . . .

So far as Whit Brice was concerned the stage was set, and as became his nature he pushed the whole thing out of his mind for the time being. He had another interest; to see how the Oasis would fare on its opening night. Since he already considered it his own property, the race being as good as won, he was anxious to observe how much of a pull the place had over his own rowdy Painted Lady.

He had plenty of evidence that evening after sundown. The thinness of his own clientele—and these customers were only those who were afraid to break with him for fear of what he might do to them—got him quickly on the move, and towards mid-evening he entered the Oasis by its elaborate batwing doors and looked about him. Business was more than brisk; it was phenomenal. Either it was ‘first night interest’ which would cool down to a normal steady trade in time, or else the people genuinely preferred the Oasis to the Painted Lady.

“Darned if I’d blame ‘em, either,” Brice muttered, as he gazed around him.

The place smelled of paint, varnish, and new wood. It was spotlessly clean and Cal had hired the waiters from the small circle of better class men who inhabited the town. The old back-bar mirror had been omitted and panelling used instead. The tables were highly polished, the chairs comparatively new—bought, as Brice knew, from a meeting hall in Phoenix which was being demolished. Overhead swung the very latest in kerosene lamps, emitting but little fumes . . . There was hardly any trace of tobacco haze, thanks to the fan system operating steadily in the ceiling.

“Any comments?” asked the dry voice of Cal, and Brice jerked himself from his survey to find ‘Martin Wade’ at his side. In place of his usual black suit he was wearing a near approach to evening dress. His shirt front crackled with starch and there were silk revers to his cut-away jacket.

“For a church it’s a mighty fine job,” Brice replied cynically. “When I take over I’ll pull down the Painted Lady. I know a good thing when I see it. Like I told you, I’m a business man.”

“Only one thing wrong with it right now . . .” Cal nodded towards the rostrum where there stood a piano and a few chairs. “I need Connie McBride. I’ll fix that after tomorrow’s race when she can see for herself which side of the fence she’s on. Meantime, Brice, you an’ me have things to fix up. What time’s th’ race to start?”

“Tomorrow mornin’. Might as well get the thing over an’ done with. It’ll allow the loser time to get out before sundown. That way one or other uv us isn’t goin’ to miss a night’s business with this place here.”

Cal nodded. “Suits me. Say, nine-thirty?”

“Nine-thirty it is.”

“There’s another point to settle, too. What suggestions have you got for the loser handin’ over everythin’? Apart from the crowd of witnesses, I mean.”

“I’ve had Waneson draw up a deed,” Brice responded. “Parts of it are left blank at th’ moment for obvious reasons. When we see who loses that person’ll sign away every interest he’s got in Desert’s End, just t’make the thing legal. It’ll be witnessed and then filed with the Phoenix authorities which’ll make it bindin’.”

“Just as long as the authorities have it on file I’ll be satisfied,” Cal said. “I wouldn’t trust Edgar Waneson’s legal transfer as far as I could throw it.”

“He’ll play square on this.” Brice lighted a cheroot. “I’ve mighty good reason for wantin’ the thing watertight. Once yore thrown out, Wade, I wanta be sure you’ll *stay* thrown out—see

you in the mornin’.”

He turned and left. He had duties to perform at the Painted Lady. Cal watched him go, then stood thinking. There was an airy assurance about the big fellow which seemed to suggest he knew already how the race was going to end—but just what he intended to do Cal could not imagine. The only thing he could do was keep his eyes open. At least nothing could be done to his horse; of that he was certain. Right at this moment Ma Hansen was guarding it, with a rifle across her knees . . .

Nor had she anything to report when Cal finally arrived back at the rooming house and took over the ‘stable duty’ from her.

“Okay, Ma, I’ll take over from here,” he said, settling down. “Y’might do me a favour and send some supper out.”

“I sure will—an’ if any strong-arm tactics is tried in the night just fire yuh gun. I’ll be here quick enough.”

Cal grinned and settled down on the stool in the dim glow of the oil lamp. In its stall nearby the pinto was apparently asleep. The supper was duly brought out and Cal ate it as he sat and pondered. Eventually it dawned upon him that the glow of the oil lamp was a possible deterrent to anybody planning anything—so he extinguished it. He would rather see exactly whom he had to deal with if anything was attempted. If by any chance Brice himself should come along and were caught doing it he would automatically put himself in bad with the townsfolk.

Cal moved over to a pile of soft hay in a corner and there lay in the dark, his rifle handy. He judged that by now it was some time after midnight and in spite of himself he caught himself out in dozing.

It was the sound of cautious footsteps that presently aroused him to full awareness. Immediately he was prepared, his rifle in his hand. He made no attempt to light the oil lamp. If somebody was intending to do something they’d surely use a light of their own.

It was not long before the stable door opened and he caught sight of a dim figure in the grey rectangle. Then the door closed again. The pinto, aware of something different, stirred restlessly . . . Cal waited, his jaw muscles tightening. And at length a tinder scraped into being. In the flickering yellow glow Cal saw the intruder’s face clearly . . .

“Lookin’ fur something, Connie?” he asked.

The girl swung round with a violent start and the tinder dropped from her fingers. She slithered across to the stable door in the darkness but before she could pull it open Cal had grabbed her arm.

“No you don’t, Connie! This wants some explainin’.”

He felt her relax but he still held on to her. With his free hand he snicked a tinder into flame with his thumb nail and relighted the oil lamp, then he looked at the girl’s set face. She looked as though she had just come from the Painted Lady. Her evening-gown was visible under her half-open overcoat.

“Don’t tell me you were lookin’ for a place to spend th’ night,” Cal said coldly, releasing her.

She averted her glance for a moment—but it was only for a moment. Then she gave him a defiant stare.

“I came here purely because I’m thinking of your interests!” she snapped. “I don’t expect you to believe that, but it’s true.”

“Yore darned right I don’t believe it! Thinking of my interests! Doesn’t tie up very well with th’ way you’ve been givin’ me the air lately, does it?”

“I’ve only given you the air because it was the sane thing to do. You don’t suppose I found it easy to do that, do you? Besides, you needed teaching a lesson.”

“Yeah? What about?”

“Jumping to conclusions! Because Brice and I *seem* to be thick with each other you keep on believing it’s the real thing. It *isn’t*, Cal. I said before, and I say again now, that I’m only tagging along with him so I can keep things clear for you.”

“An’ that’s why yore here now?”

“If you must know, yes!”

Cal gave a look of disgust. “Darn it, Connie, what kind of a mug do you take me for?”

“I’m here,” Connie insisted, “because I thought I could help you best by keeping an eye on your horse until the race tomorrow.”

“Very kind of you. If that was your idea why didn’t you come to the Oasis tonight and tell me about your kind intentions instead of creepin’ around in this fashion?”

“I didn’t tell you anything because I don’t want to give Whit Brice the slightest clue that we’re in touch.”

“You won’t haveta think up any strategies from here on, Connie. You might have known I could look after my own horse.”

“No doubt of it, but I didn’t know how busy you might be in other directions—so I decided to help without your knowing. That’s the honest truth, Cal.”

“I don’t believe it,” he said flatly. “Right now I’m doin’ my best to remember yore a woman. If you were a man you’d be flattened on that floor right now! Now get out—an’ don’t make any attempt to get near my horse again.”

“Why, you obstinate, pig-headed . . .” Connie’s voice choked from sheer fury, then she swung about and strode to the stable door, not particularly caring how much noise she made in closing it, either. Cal grunted something to himself and returned to his hay pile, though he was reasonably sure nothing more would be attempted. Connie would doubtless make it generally known that the pinto was well guarded. As for her excuse that she had come to keep an eye on the horse . . .

“Baloney!” Cal growled to himself, and extinguished the oil lamp once more. “She’s taggin’ along with Brice sure as Fate, an’ I’m just one hundred per cent sucker to ever have bin taken in by her . . .”

By nine-thirty the following morning it looked as though the entire township of Desert’s End had stirred itself to watch the ‘trial of strength’ between the two bosses. Cal, riding his frisky pinto from Ma Hansen’s, glanced to either side of him on the spectators—townsfolk, punchers, store dealers, housewives. He noticed also that the stores themselves were closed, presumably until the struggle was over.

In one particular bunch Cal noticed those townsfolk who so far had proven friendly towards him, and he gave them a knowing smile. In another group were Brice’s cohorts—shifty-eyed Waneson, Mayor Slater, and sundry others whom Cal well knew were Brice’s particular gunmen—and there was Connie McBride, too, fresh and bright-eyed, but she had no smile for him as he glanced at her. Instead she turned her face away and spoke to somebody nearby.

“All set?” Brice inquired, perched on his glossy, eager sorrel as Cal came riding up.

“Yeah. What’s the start signal?”

“I’ve fixed it with one of my boys to fire two shots. One to git ready and other for off. There’s nothin’ stoppin’ us goin’ now far as I can see.”

Cal nodded agreement and settled more squarely in the saddle, his nerves and muscles tensed for action. Until the end of the race he must concentrate solidly on what he was doing and forget all about the apparent about-face of Connie . . .

One shot re-echoed and the horses jerked nervously. Then came the second shot and instantly Cal’s pinto darted forward for the end of the street and the northward trail. Without using the spurs, relying solely on the words he muttered into the little creature’s ear as he half-lay on its neck, he got the animal into full gallop within a matter of seconds. Behind him, charging through the dust, came Whit Brice making ample use of his whip.

The hard, rubbly trail was lost within a few minutes and the shouts of the townsfolk were submerged by the drumming of horses’ hooves. Fast as the wind Cal’s pinto raced onwards, straining every muscle in response to his gentle urgings. Then the speed slackened somewhat as the less easy going of the desert trail itself was gained.

Cal only permitted himself one brief glance back over his shoulder and it was sufficient to show him that Brice was half a mile behind, bawling encouragement to his sorrel and wielding his whip with ruthless insistency.

“Faster!” Cal muttered, dust and wind battering into his face. “You’ve just gotta make it, pal . . .”

The pinto snorted. Already going all out, as far as the dragging sand would permit, it squeezed out that extra little effort to please its master and hurtled with race-horse speed towards the distant smudge which marked Johnson’s Cactus. Brice, to the rear, could not help but admit to himself that Cal’s horse was the fastest thing on four legs which he had ever seen. Not that it mattered. Everything was taken care of—then down came his whip again on his sorrel’s flanks.

For Cal the whole frantic business had now become one of blazing sunlight, sweat from himself and the pinto, grit, and the hot wind tearing into his eyes. The only sound was the thunder of the hooves. Dust was rising in clouds behind and around him. Here and there in the clearer patches he glanced about him but failed to see any sign of anything living—in so far as gunmen bedevilling the trail were concerned anyway. Certainly there was Whit Brice, still about the same distance behind, and slogging his horse to breaking point.

On—and still on, and it seemed that Johnson’s Cactus did not come any nearer. The pinto was commencing to labour somewhat now, its initial startling outburst losing impetus. Not that it signified since Brice’s own horse was also beginning to feel the strain, to say nothing of the anguish from savage lashings across the flanks.

“Easy, pal, easy,” Cal muttered. “Hold yourself. We’ll skip back into town faster’n anythin’ yet if you hold yourself.”

The ears flicked and the pinto dropped into a fast gallop from its original tearing run. Johnson’s Cactus swept up at last and in a flash it was gone as Cal swung the animal’s head.

“Now,” he whispered, as he caught sight of Brice still trying to make up that stubborn leeway. “Let it rip . . . !”

He ceased the gentle restraint on the reins and gave the animal its head. Consequently, recovered somewhat in wind after the brief slowing down, it ran for all it was worth—a hurtling bolt of horseflesh, sand flying under its whirling hooves and dust rising again in clouds. Cal clung to its neck desperately, blinded by dirt and grains, blinking furiously as he

peered ever and again at the way ahead. Just as Johnson's Cactus had seemed immeasurably far away, so the end of the desert trail now seemed to be in infinity.

On and on, the pinto bellowing and snorting at intervals, but still running with all the power of its grand little body and heart. To the rear the swearing, lashing Brice had made up a little of the leeway.

"Faster!" Cal panted, glancing back briefly. "Faster, old pal, and the day's yours!"

The pinto understood but it could do no more. The whites of its eyes were showing and foam flecked from its mouth and frothed across Cal's face and chest. Ahead two giant dunes marked where the desert trail was nearing its end and the normal southern trail into town began. Once on the rubbly ground and the battle would be as good as won.

Thunder from the rear as Brice gained more ground, at the cost of a sorrel which was bursting its heart in its final frantic endeavour. For Cal the dunes loomed to either side and swept towards him. He set his teeth for the final mighty burst of speed to finish the job—then incredibly he was flying through the air, his ears filled with the screaming of his mount. He crashed down again with a terrific impact, his body at a sharp angle. Something white hot and merciless tore through his right shoulder—then he was smothered in sand grains and dust as Brice went flying past. In seconds he was gone, hidden by the clouds of dust.

Taut with pain, his right side numbed, Cal struggled on to his feet, blinking his eyes to free them of grit. He looked around him and beheld the pinto just getting on to its knees. Apparently it was not hurt for it came trotting over to him, wagging its head and snorting vigorously.

"Hard luck, old timer," Cal said bitterly, hardly able to get the words out for the pain in his shoulder. "I reckon that's one good race we lost . . ."

With an effort he picked up his hat and jammed it back on his head, then he looked about him for the cause of the fall. Nothing unusual was visible so the only solution was that the pinto had over-run itself and tripped, a common enough fault even in human beings running at top speed.

"Best get back into town," Cal panted, struggling into the saddle with great difficulty, his right arm hanging limp. "I need a sawbones or somethin'. Something's busted some place."

He rode back into town at a jog trot, knowing only too well that the race had been lost. As he had expected most of the populace was thronging around the triumphant Brice as he sat astride his horse in the main street, his big face wreathed in a triumphant grin. Then he caught sight of Cal's slow advance.

"Too bad, Wade," he said magnanimously. "But fur that fall you took you'd ha' given me a run for my money!"

Cal only nodded dully and dragged himself out of the saddle. That he was suffering a good deal of pain was obvious and it brought Connie McBride quickly towards him.

"Here—let me help—" She nearly added 'Cal' and then remembered just in time.

"I c'n manage by myself, Connie, thanks—No, you give me a hand, Ma." He caught sight of Ma Hansen waddling towards him. "Get me to the doctor."

Dr. Latchwork, the town's only medico, was amongst the crowd. In a matter of minutes he and Ma Hansen between them had Cal in the modest surgery. Connie was left where she stood, her face serious and undecided. She waited a while then as Cal did not reappear she took hold of his pinto's reins and patted the sweat-soaked animal gently.

"You did your best, old friend," she murmured gently. "Too bad you had to tumble . . ."

At that moment her eyes strayed beyond the animal to the southward trail. Riding in from it came two men, whom she presently recognized as Seth Gibbons and Walt Dexter. She remembered they had not been present amongst Brice's minions when the race had started, and now they were coming in from the southward trail . . .

A trail of suspicions crossed her mind as she watched them ride in and mingle with the crowd. They dropped quickly from their horses and presently were almost lost to sight in the surging people.

Thoughtful, Connie fastened the pinto's reins to the tie-rack outside the doctor's place, then she slowly returned to where Brice was still acknowledging the plaudits of his immediate supporters. The other members of the town, disheartened by the failure of the courageous 'Martin Wade', drifted away gradually. At last Brice slid from his horse and bawled an order.

"Hey, Joe, take this cayuse of mine an' give it a rub down. Might do Wade a favour too and take his pinto back to Ma Hansen's stable. Blanket him up. Might as well be friendly to the loser."

Somebody gave a sardonic laugh. Connie turned to Joe and nodded to the tie-rack outside the doctor's.

"There's Mr. Wade's pinto—"

"How now, me gal?" Brice interrupted her, lifting her off her feet in his powerful hands and kissing her whether she liked it or not. "Glad to have stopped on my side of the fence, huh?"

"Not much more to be said now, Whit," she replied quietly, as he set her down again. "Just the same I think we ought to go and find out how badly Mr. Wade is hurt."

"Sure thing—then I've a matter to straighten out with him."

"Fore you go, boss . . ."

"Huh?" Brice turned in surprise to find Seth Gibbons right behind him. Seth motioned his head significantly so Brice followed him across to where Walt Dexter was standing by the horses.

"You mugs loco?" Brice asked bluntly. "Why couldn't you wait until dark afore ridin' into town? Somebody might suspect somethin' since you wasn't here when the race started."

"Okay, let 'em suspect," Seth shrugged. "They can't prove nothin', can they? And anyways, we've got some news that's too good to keep."

"Well?" Brice looked impatient. "Hurry it up, can't you? I've things t'do."

"Okay," Seth gave a triumphant grin. "I'll hand it t'you neat, boss. Martin Wade is Cal Rutter!"

There was a momentary silence and a disbelieving look crossed Brice's face. Then he frowned.

"*What* did you say?"

Seth still kept his voice down. "Martin Wade's that mug Rutter y'ran outa town—"

"You've bin out in the sun too long," Brice interrupted. "There couldn't *be* a man more different to Cal Rutter—"

"Okay, okay, so his voice is deep an' his face is different. But his build's about the same, ain't it?"

Brice shrugged. "Plenty of men about that size hereabouts. Doesn't prove anythin'."

"I reckon a bullet scar across th' top of th' head does! Not likely to find two men with a scar like that—exactly th' same an' everythin'."

"When did you see this scar?" Brice asked grimly.

"When Rutter fell off his horse. His hat went with him. Both Walt an' me saw the scar plain as all hell."

"Yeah," Walt confirmed. "Ain't no doubt about it, boss. An' both uv us saw Cal Rutter's scarred head afore he wus thrown outa town. If he *ain't* Rutter it's sure one mighty big coincidence."

Brice reflected. "Come to think of it, I've never seen Wade with his hat off—leastways not 'til now," he added quickly. "I don't s'pose he'll have it on in the doc's surgery."

Without giving another thought to the two gunhawks he turned back to where Connie was waiting, vaguely wondering what the urgent conversation was about.

"Ready?" she asked, rather cynically.

"Yeah. Just a matter of business I had to fix with those two mugs."

Connie knew instinctively from Brice's pre-occupied look that something of extreme importance was absorbing him, but she did not inquire further there and then. For that matter she had quite a deal of thinking to do on her own account . . . So after a moment or two they entered Dr. Latchwork's surgery to discover Cal with his shoulder and upper arm splinted and bandaged.

Cal glanced up as Brice and Connie entered. His face was drawn and unsmiling. His hat lay on the nearby table where stood Ma Hansen, determined to do guard duty over her well-paying guest until the end.

"Well, what's th' damage?" Brice asked easily.

"Busted collar bone," Cal answered. "The doc here's fixed it. Reckon it'll mend itself in time."

Brice moved nearer, his eyes fixed on Cal's tumbled hair. Distinctly visible on his scalp was the scar-line of the bullet which had once creased him. Connie, noticing the intentness of Brice's gaze, suddenly realized what was passing through his mind and started to speak—but Brice cut her short.

"The only thing I don't get," Brice said deliberately, "is how you changed your voice, Rutter."

Dr. Latchwork and Ma Hansen both looked up sharply. Connie clenched her fists and the colour went from her face. The least concerned seemed to be Cal himself.

“Took you quite a time to tumble to it, Brice, didn’t it?”

“I tumbled to it long ago,” Brice lied. “You don’t suppose y’could fool a man like me, do you? I was just waitin’ to see how far you’d go. I couldn’t think of anybody *but* Cal Rutter comin’ back to this town an’ causin’ so much disturbance. I know I’m right now by that bullet scar down yore head. The biggest puzzles are yore changed voice an’ the amount uv money you seem to have.”

“Both of which are my business,” Cal responded, shrugging. “Okay, so I’m Cal Rutter. Doesn’t make much difference, does it? I gambled with you, Brice, an’ lost. I’m on my way out of town in any case.”

“I reckon you’ve forgotten somethin’,” Brice said grimly. “I warned you that if you returned to this town you’d be shot down without any questions bein’ asked. That went for ‘Smoky’ Jones too, only I happen to know he’s dead already.”

Cal said nothing. Since Brice knew ‘Smoky’ was dead it meant that he had been responsible for the attack on Chewonokee and his braves.

“You can’t just shoot Cal down in cold blood!” Connie exclaimed angrily. “The whole town would be down on you, Whit!”

“You ain’t kiddin’,” Ma Hansen confirmed sourly.

Brice turned and looked at Connie squarely. “Seems t’me, Connie, you might ha’ known from the very start that Rutter here was not what he was supposed to be—”

“Leave Connie outa this,” Cal snapped, getting to his feet slowly. “The whole thing’s blown up in my face an’ I’ve lost everythin’. I’ll quit by sundown and sign everythin’ over to you. I don’t believe that even a skunk like you would shoot me down just because you promised to do so.”

Brice shrugged. “Okay—it’s quits. Like Connie says, some of the townfolk might take a dim view of my blottin’ you out—specially when your gun arm’s out of action . . . That being settled we’ll get along to Waneson’s and you c’n sign the transfer deed.”

“With my left hand?” Cal inquired.

“You can make a cross with your left hand and add your thumb print. That’ll be legal enough—now come on.”

“You don’t want *me*, do you?” Connie asked quickly.

Brice glared at her. “Course I do—fur a signature witness!”

She hesitated, then with a sign she led the way out of the surgery with Brice and Cal behind her. Dr. Latchwork sighed as he pushed into his pocket the money Cal had left for him for his services.

“Something about all this that I don’t cotton on to, Ma,” he said, musing. “I’m more’n a mite sorry that Mr. Wade—or Cal Rutter if that’s his name—didn’t win that race. It would have made a big difference to this town to have him in charge.”

“Sure would,” Ma agreed, frowning . . .

Meantime, Cal, Brice, and Connie had reached Waneson’s office. He was smiling in cynical triumph as he laid out the transfer deed on the table.

“Too bad, Mr. Wade,” he said dryly. “Just one of those things.”

“The name’s Rutter,” Cal said.

“Huh?” The lawyer stared in amazement; then he looked at Brice.

“I knew long ago he wus Rutter,” Brice growled. “Thought I’d give him his head an’ see how far he’d go. All right, let’s get the deed signed. Read it, Rutter. You’ll find it means you sign over *everythin’*—everythin’ mind you—connected with this town.”

“I don’t need to read it, Brice. I’m more’n sure you won’t have left anythin’ out!”

“It’ll have to be signed as Martin Wade,” Wanesson pointed out. “The deed’s made in that name—”

“I’m not signin’ at all,” Cal put in. “How the hell can I with my shoulder like this? A cross with my left hand and a thumb-print from that ink-pad there. Best I can do. Brice here seems to think it’s legal enough.”

“Well . . . all right.” Wanesson did not look too happy.

“This deed’s nothin’ more than a formality anyways,” Brice pointed out. “Because if yuh *do* show yourself here again, Rutter, there’ll be a six-gun waitin’ for you.”

Cal did not respond. He was in no mood for arguing the point, anyway. He duly made the cross with his left hand, added his thumb-print, and then turned to go.

“I’ll be outa here by sundown,” he said briefly, and for a moment his eyes rested on Connie. She half hesitated, the pen in her hand as she was about to add her witnessing signature. Then Cal turned away and the office door closed behind him.

“Good riddance,” Brice growled. “Just the same I’d sure like to know where he got all his money from—an’ gold, too!”

“Oh, leave him alone, can’t you?” Connie blazed. “Isn’t it enough that you’ve kicked him out?”

Brice did not answer; instead he nodded to the deed. Connie signed it and then flung down the pen and swung towards the door.

“Hold it!” Brice ordered, grabbing her arm. “If you go near Cal Rutter you’ll be sorry, Con. I know you’ve always had more’n liking for him, but this ain’t the time to renew it. Let him go if you know what’s good for you!”

“I’m going to the hotel if you *don’t* mind,” Connie retorted, whipping her arm free; then before Brice could say any more she had left, the door slamming behind her.

Indeed, she had quite an important plan of her own to put into operation. For one thing, she was perfectly sure that Brice had *not* known Cal’s real identity until he had spoken to the two gunhawks, Seth Gibbons and Walt Dexter. From that moment onwards he had been completely pre-occupied until he had studied Cal’s head in the surgery.

“That means,” Connie argued to herself, as she hurried along the boardwalk, “that those two gunhawks must have noticed something about Cal—undoubtedly the bullet scar. They could only have noticed that when his hat was off, and that would happen when his horse fell . . . Walt and Seth rode into town from the southward trail not so far behind Cal himself—and they were not here when the race started.”

Connie’s eyes narrowed. Those two cohorts of Whit Brice *knew* something, and it was up to her to find out what. Up to now she had not known for certain whether or not the race had been ‘fixed’—though, knowing Brice, she had been suspicious, but right here it looked as though there was a chance to get some direct evidence.

Without a pause she hurried on, making for her hotel at the further end of the main street. As she went she noticed both Seth Gibbons and Walt Dexter lounging against one of the tie-racks, talking with a knot of idlers. Possibly they were waiting for Whit Brice and maybe some further orders . . . Then at length Connie gained her hotel room, took a small .32 from her possessions and made sure it was fully loaded, then she slipped it in the pocket of her riding-skirt. Thus armed, and her face grim, she left again, slowing her pace along the boardwalk as she came within sight of Seth and Walt. They had not moved in the interval.

They were still lazily chatting in the bright sunlight and were apparently at peace with the world.

Connie thought swiftly. This was not a moment when direct action would do her any good. The only course was to fall back on her feminine appeal. So she forced herself to smile and, coming level with the knot of idlers, she leaned on the boardwalk rail and looked down at them.

“Would you two boys do me a favour?” she asked.

Every man looked up quickly, and since she had not said *which* two boys there was a quick tightening of neckerchiefs and a general movement of expectancy. Connie was known to be Whit Brice’s showpiece, and any help rendered her would automatically put the doer in good with the boss.

“You two . . .” Connie nodded directly to Seth and Walt. “You look about the strongest.”

“Yes, *ma’am!*” Seth exclaimed, grinning all over his ugly face. “Anythin’ you want . . .” He swung up to the board-rail beside her and Walt quickly followed him. Connie looked at them with an air of mystery and then jerked her head gently.

“Along the street here,” she murmured. “I’m stuck with a buck-board and can’t move it. Until I do I’m held up . . .”

“Think nothin’ of it,” Walt told her, swaggering along ahead of her. “There ain’t nothin’ Seth and I can’t shift.”

Connie smiled gravely to herself and after a moment or two took the lead in the advance along the boardwalk, turning off into a deserted side-street between two of the stores. The two gunhawks followed her; then as she came to the end of the narrow little alleyway she turned abruptly, her .32 pointed steadily.

“All right, boys, take it easy,” she said. “Step over here against this building where you’re not so likely to be seen.”

From the looks on the faces of the two men it was plain they thought she was pulling some kind of a joke—but when their advance brought her gun up all the sharper they hesitated. And finally they did as they were told.

“Understand one thing,” Connie said deliberately. “This is not a joke. I’m in deadly earnest. I want the answers to a few questions, and if you don’t give them to me I’ll shoot the pair of you.”

At such close quarters, the two men reflected, she could hardly miss. They waited, wondering what was coming.

“You two found out that Martin Wade is really Cal Rutter, didn’t you?”

They looked at each other.

“*Didn’t you?*”

As far as they could see there was nothing to be lost by admitting the fact. In a very short time the whole town would know that Cal Rutter and Martin Wade were one and the same person.

“Yeah, sure we did,” Seth said finally. “Ain’t no need to get so tough about it, *ma’am.*”

“I haven’t finished yet. You found out that Wade is Rutter when his horse fell, didn’t you?”

“Sure,” Walt acknowledged promptly. “We—” Then suddenly realizing the extent of his admission he shut up dead.

“Too late,” Connie told him. “You saw him fall, therefore you must have been on the spot. That brings me to the point. The race was fixed, wasn’t it?”

“Like hell it was!” Seth objected angrily.

“Then how did you happen to be on the exact spot where Cal Rutter was thrown? Come on, out with it! I’m not kiddin’, boys, believe me!”

Again the pair glanced at each other and Connie quickly read the thought that passed between them. She was only one woman, and not a particularly hefty one at that, and her gun was only a slim .32. The thought between them only lasted a couple of seconds—then they acted. They flung themselves forward together, to almost instantly wish they hadn’t.

Connie stepped back a pace and fired twice, deliberately. Seth jerked up short, clutching his left forearm. Walt jerked up his right hand and stupidly watched the palm well with blood. Then, muttering to himself, he yanked off his neck-cloth and bound it tightly round the wound.

“Smart, ain’t yuh?” Seth panted, blood commencing to show through his shirt-sleeve.

“Just determined,” Connie said, pale-faced but holding her ground. “I’ve more bullets left yet, and I’ll use them unless I get the truth out of you two skunks!”

“All right, it was a fixed race,” Seth panted, busy now with his own neck-cloth as he wound it round his arm. “What good d’yuh suppose it’ll do yuh to know? The boss’ll shut you up afore you can tell anybody.”

“Meaning you got your orders from Whit Brice?” Connie persisted.

“Sure,” Walt told her, determined to side-step the blame, and possibly more bullets.

Connie nodded. “Thanks, that’s all I wanted to know. Now start walking. You’re going to tell your story to the man whom it most concerns—Cal Rutter. And remember I’m right behind you.”

The two men turned sullenly, then Connie added: “And don’t put your hands up. I want this to look as though I’m walking with you. But that doesn’t say my gun isn’t ready.”

Silent, nursing their injuries, the two men made their way back up the alley. Connie’s intention, feeling inwardly sure that Ma Hansen would support anything she did, was to march the two men into the rooming house for a showdown with Cal—and it would have to be done as slickly as possible. Brice might be abroad in the town again by now and if he saw what was transpiring he would very soon stop it.

The men and women on the boardwalk glanced at the two grim-faced men, and Connie between them, but they did not suspect anything unusual, certainly not that she had her gun still ready even though she kept it out of sight in the high pocket of her divided skirts. The way things looked she *could* have been accompanying the two men to the doctor’s since by now considerable bloodstains were apparent on both of them.

Then within a few yards of Ma Hansen’s boarding house Connie gave a start—for there was Cal himself, his arm in a sling, mounted on his pinto, to the saddle of which was attached a bedroll. It was plain from the tackle he had with him that he was going a distance.

“Cal!” Connie shouted quickly. “Cal—here!”

He turned to look at her. She was on the edge of the boardwalk with the two gunhawks either side of her. Hurt as they were they did not attempt to do anything to her—but to Cal the impression was totally different from anything Connie could have foreseen. It looked as though they were with her as companions for he was too far away to notice the wounds they had received, the verandah of the boardwalk casting them into shadow.

“Cal, listen to me . . . !” Connie could not move far for fear of losing her captives, which again put her in bad as far as Cal was concerned. He turned his eyes away from her at last, nudged his horse, and rode up on the high street towards the southern trail.

“Oh, the fool! The *fool!*” Connie cried desperately, and abandoning her two charges she dodged under the boardwalk rail and raced into the main street—to find a clumsy buck-board drawing across her path. By the time she had dodged it Cal was out of sight—and so too were Seth and Walt. They had made good their escape.

“You sure don’t look in the best of tempers, Connie!”

Connie swung angrily at the sound of Brice’s voice. He was standing on the nearby boardwalk, surveying her and grinning widely round his cheroot.

“I can please myself how I look!” she retorted, vaguely wondering how she was going to explain herself.

Brice eased his big form over the rail and dropped down into the street, coming across to her.

“Wouldn’t be Cal Rutter’s departure that’s causin’ you to get all steamed up, would it? He left town a few minutes ago; I saw him as I was leavin’ my office.”

Connie hesitated and then turned slowly, giving Brice a direct look.

“Yes, Whit, it *is* on account of Cal Rutter that I’m steamed up! I tried to stop him going but a confounded buck-board got in my way.”

“To stop him goin’?” Bruce looked down on her in sardonic amusement. “Not much point in tryin’ to do that, Connie. He’s finished, an’ he’ll never come back if he knows what’s good for him!”

“I tried to stop him so I could prove to him he’d been cheated out of winning that race—or at any rate he didn’t have the chance to compete fairly. Seth Gibbons and Walt Dexter fixed things at your orders.”

An ugly look crossed Brice’s face. “Shut up, you little fool! Do you want everybody to hear you—?”

“Yes—only you’d probably kill me if I tried it, so I shan’t risk it. You’ll find Seth and Walt have bullet wounds; I gave them those to make them talk . . . And as far as we’re concerned, Whit, this is the finish!”

“Yore darned right it is!” he breathed savagely. “Get to hell out of town, Connie, before I —”

“You don’t have to worry; I’m going. The dirty work you pulled on Cal Rutter is the finish as far as I’m concerned. And don’t try and stop me going, either, because if you do I’ll yell everything I know from the housetops.”

Infuriated, more than a little dismayed by the feeling that she had perhaps hit the ground between two stools, Connie swung away and went back up the main street. Brice made no effort to stop her. Badly though he wanted her for himself he had sense enough to know that she was dynamite with the information she possessed—so the answer seemed to be to take it out of those two lugs, Seth and Walt . . .

And on the trail out of town Cal Rutter was riding at a leisurely speed, the slow pace being enforced by the fact that he had only one arm with which to work. His mood was one of the bitterest. He had lost everything he had built up, and Connie into the bargain. For the life of him he could not fathom her attitude. If she had been so close to Brice solely for the purpose of getting information out of him why hadn’t she *given* some information? Cal was inwardly sure that the horse’s stumble had somehow been fixed, though he did not know by what means—and plainly it would avail him nothing to investigate now. Why had Connie not tipped him off?

In point of fact Cal was being far more unreasonable in his attitude than he had need to be. Not that it mattered to him now in any case. He'd finished with Desert's End for good, and he cursed himself for several kinds of a fool for not having forced Connie to ride away with him on that first morning when they had discussed their plans. It had come to it in the finish and he had to depart alone . . . His own plans were more or less mature. He would grab some more gold from the vault, enough to last him for a long time to come, and then head out towards Yuma. After that—? Well, it didn't much matter.

It was late afternoon when he reached the vault, hidden by its camouflaged area of sand. He hobbled his pinto and then pulled aside the covering from the opening. Getting below took him longer than usual, but he managed it finally by using a rope fastened to the saddle-horn. With its aid, and using his sound arm, he was able finally to slide into the depths.

He paused only for a moment to accustom his eyes after the glare of day; then he struck a tinder and advanced to the one particular idol which had so far supplied him with all the gold he had needed. He had just reached it and was pulling out his gun to chip away some of the gold with the barrel when a voice froze him in mid-action.

“Wait, Cal Rutter!”

It was a distinct, even eerie, shock to receive that command from the gloom, and spoken in the unmistakable voice of Chewonokee. Cal turned immediately, the tinder still sputtering in his slinged hand, his gun in the other.

“Is—that—Chewonokee?” he asked deliberately.

For answer the Navajo came out of the shadows, an arrow quiver over his shoulder and a bow in one hand. The other hand was resting significantly on the hilt of his knife, and as Cal well knew that knife could be pulled to strike a fatal blow before he could ever fire his gun.

“I had the impression you were dead, Chewonokee,” he said quietly, and to show he meant no hostility he slipped his gun back in its holster.

“Chewonokee not dead, Cal Rutter. Chewonokee wait here for your coming. Chewonokee has been very patient.”

The tinder spluttered out. Cal was about to light another one only Chewonokee did this instead of himself, igniting a nearby oil-soaked torch. In the flickering glow he returned to where Cal was standing beside the maltreated golden idol.

“Cal Rutter no longer friend of Chewonokee,” the Navajo stated coldly. “Cal Rutter destroy Chewonokee's tribe and steal the gold from sacred idol. Chewonokee has waited to avenge . . . and now the hour of reckoning has come.”

Cal frowned. Here was a situation he had not reckoned with. He noticed in silence the macabre deliberation with which the Indian reached behind him to his quiver and pulled forth an arrow. He placed it in his bow, but as yet that steel-strong forearm did not draw the bowstring back.

“Look, Chewonokee, it's about time you got a few things straight . . .” Cal tried to keep his voice casual even though he knew he was arguing with death. “I didn't start that attack on your mountain retreat. It was Brice's doing, and I only found it out a few days ago. When that attack was made I was here—in this vault.”

“Stealing what rightfully belongs to my tribe,” Chewonokee said impassively.

“Only so that I could get enough money to launch a campaign against Brice. Without gold, convertible into cash, I couldn't even have started.”

Chewonokee relaxed the merest trifle and Cal thanked himself that he had struck upon such an inspired excuse for his depredations down here.

"I believed you were dead, Chewonokee, otherwise I would have called on you long ago for help. I figured I had a lone hand to play against Brice—an' I played it to the best of my ability. An' lost! I staked everythin' on a horse race between Brice an' myself. Out of it he got everythin' I'd built up in Desert's End, an' all I got was a busted shoulder. You can see that for yourself."

"Those things Chewonokee believe—but the fact still remains that you have stolen gold down here, from sacred idols. It is written in our tribal law that the penalty for that is death. That is why Chewonokee has waited so long . . ."

Cal's eyes strayed to the various remnants in the torch glow. Provisions, a roughly made skin bed, odds and ends.

"This vault was found by accident," Cal said. "It was 'Smoky' Jones who discovered it—"

"'Smoky' Jones admitted that fact, by accident. We tried to make him tell us the vault's location, but the attack on our encampment prevented it. Eventually I discovered this place for myself and, according to our law, took possession and waited. None of the things you have told me lessen the blame against you for stealing gold, Cal Rutter."

"Had you been alive—or rather had I *known* you were alive—I would have told you what I was doing."

The Navajo's immobile face became grim. "You knew of this vault when you first came to me. You did not tell Chewonokee then."

"No—because I didn't see it was any of your business!" Cal retorted, changing his tactics. "You Redskins have your tribal laws, but we also have *our* laws—and one of them is that gold is where you find it. If yore lucky enough to discover a bonanza in the desert, which doesn't happen above once in a lifetime, it's yours! Would you blame me for following out *my* laws?"

Chewonokee considered this, but he did not relax any further.

"I keep on tellin' you, Chewonokee, I took gold because I desperately needed it in my campaign. I didn't think of theft, desecration, or anythin' else: I didn't even know this place belonged to Navajos once—"

"You understand Navajo language, Cal Rutter. You must have read symbols on the walls."

"Mebby; I don't remember. Fact remains, I was fightin' Brice with everything I could lay my hands on, and gold was the biggest weapon of the lot. I've been partly fightin' your battle—remember that. The men who shot you and your tribe down were principally Sheriff Andrews and his two deputies. I took care of them in Jackson's Cleft."

"True," Chewonokee admitted slowly. "One of my braves saw you . . ."

Cal snatched at his chance. "There's a bit of proof, anyway, that I've been workin' on your side."

"You say, Cal Rutter, that you have left Desert's End for good. Why, then, are you here now? The gold you meant to take cannot be to further your campaign against Brice."

"Yes, it can," Cal said grimly. "After a decent interval I intend to go back, even if only to avenge my pardner, 'Smoky' Jones. It was because of Brice that he got a bullet in him. I'm not sayin' anything about what you and your braves did; I guess your tribal instincts got the better of you."

"You have spoken well, Cal Rutter, but your arguments do not convince Chewonokee. You have stolen from a sacred idol and the law says death is the penalty . . ."

With that the Indian brought up his bow arm quickly, and Cal's hand instantly flashed down to his gun. Before either of them could act, however, there was an interruption as something heavy plummeted down to the floor behind them. They both stared in surprise; then

the dim figure rose up from the floor to become revealed in the torchlight as a very dishevelled Connie McBride. In one hand she was clutching her .32.

"No funny business, either of you!" she commanded. "And even if you don't understand my language," she added to the Navajo, "you know what a levelled gun means."

Chewonokee eyed her and lowered his bow. "Chewonokee understand," he said calmly.

Cal hesitated, then again slipped his gun back in its holster. Like a chicken before two Great Danes, Connie held her ground. She looked sharply from one to the other.

"Since you two seem bent on shooting the tar out of each other maybe it's time I stepped in," she said bluntly. "I followed you, Cal, from town to try and explain things. I saw your pinto hobbled above and it didn't take me five minutes to find the hole up there. I listened to what you two said to each other, but I popped in when I saw things were getting tough."

"Thanks for the reprieve anyway," Cal growled. "Not that it makes any difference. Chewonokee won't listen to my explanation, and I'm equally determined to blast hell outa him if he turns that damned bow an' arrow on me."

"The pair of you are like a couple of darned silly kids," Connie declared frankly. "The thing you both want—and what *I* want too—is the extermination of Whit Brice, yet you're at each others' throats because of an ancient tribal law! Working together, you could soon destroy Brice and his whole rotten town."

"That's what I've been aimin' at all along," Cal insisted; then suddenly he paused and frowned. "Say, wait a minute! Did you say *you* want Brice wiped out as well?"

"I did—and I do!" Connie looked at him defiantly. "If you hadn't been so pig-headed in the past you'd have seen I really was only staying beside him so I could perhaps tip you off to any dirty work. Unfortunately for me he never revealed anything. I *did* try to get you as you left town but you gave me no chance."

"When you were in the company of Seth Gibbons and Walt Dexter? Hardly likely, was it?"

"I had this very gun on them!" Connie cried. "They were with me because they couldn't be anything else! They fixed that race, Cal—and I was going to prove it to you. The fact that I followed you here is proof I'm on the level, isn't it? Whit Brice as good as kicked me out of town because I told him to his face that I'd discovered he deliberately arranged that fall of yours."

"Keep right on talkin'," Cal invited quietly.

Connie shrugged. She had really little more to tell, but what there was she gave in detail.

"So here we are—all three of us," she finished. "And we're here because of Whit Brice. Each one of us has more than a good reason for wanting him out of the way—and what do we do? I hold the pair of you up with a gun, and you two are ready to destroy each other. Brice would just love that, wouldn't he? The last chance of opposition would vanish!"

Cal was silent, his gaze straying to Chewonokee. As usual it was impossible to tell what the Navajo was thinking, but at length he spoke.

"The white squaw speaks much sense, Cal Rutter."

"You bet I do!" Connie exclaimed spiritedly, neither man conscious of the enormous personal effort she was putting forth to stall off what might be death for both of them. Then she went on hurriedly. "What's a little gold and tribal laws compared to the destruction of a deadly enemy? Remember one thing, Chewonokee—Whit Brice won't be content until he's destroyed every Navajo he can find. He's afraid of them, and for that reason he'll wipe them out without question whenever and wherever he can. I wouldn't say all this to you if I didn't know you to be a long way ahead of the ordinary savage. You're a man of fair education and

you've mixed with whites enough to know their viewpoints. Which would you rather have? The chance of a worthwhile position—as a doctor maybe—in a newly organized Desert's End or the justification of a tribal penalty because Cal has stolen gold?"

Chewonokee was silent for a long time; then at length he relaxed and put the arrow back into its quiver.

"Chewonokee work with you to destroy Brice and so avenge those of his own tribe who died. Tribal law can be changed by the leader of a tribe—and I change it now. When gold is needed, Cal Rutter, you will seek me and ask. We will decide together."

Cal grinned with relief. "That suits me. Okay, then the three of us set about Brice? That it?"

"With those who remain of my tribe," the Navajo replied. "But we cannot strike yet. You, Cal Rutter, are in no condition to fight until your shoulder is mended. Chewonokee will aid you to get it well. You and the white squaw will come with me to my retreat. There we will plan how Brice can best be dealt with."

For Chewonokee to abandon the demands of tribal law was one thing, but to make his few followers see his viewpoint was quite another. For some days after he had returned to his mountain retreat with Cal and Connie he was obviously not having an easy time of it trying to explain himself away—and though the other Navajos in the settlement were not openly hostile they made it more than obvious that they had no intention of being friends.

It was a week later, and Cal's shoulder was mending rapidly, when Chewonokee appeared to arrive at a decision. One morning, when Cal and Connie were sprawled amidst the rocks enjoying the sunlight, Chewonokee came over to them.

"Chewonokee have much trouble with followers," he explained. "The things I believe they do *not* believe. To keep their loyalty Chewonokee have to convince them."

"Of what?" Cal asked. "About my taking gold, you mean?"

Chewonokee shook his head. "In that they obey my ruling. But they are not convinced of the need to attack Whittaker Brice and thereby endanger their lives. They want from his own lips the proof that he attacked our encampment, just as they want proof from him himself that he wiped out the original Navajo compound on which he built Desert's End. Without these words from Brice himself they are not willing to fight because the odds are heavily against them."

Cal reflected. Certainly he could not blame the braves for not wanting to stick their necks out, and it was also plain that they had not the imagination to think things out for themselves.

"Much ties up with this," Chewonokee mused. "Unless they know of the real guilt of Whittaker Brice they will not believe you took gold with which to have a weapon to fight him. And without Brice's confession I cannot get men behind me to carry war into Desert's End. I come to you for suggestions, Cal Rutter."

"Mmmm . . . It ain't easy to make any, either. In fact the whole thing's a vicious circle. We can't get Brice to confess to anythin' without grabbin' him first—an' we can't grab him if your boys are stubborn. You'll haveta give me time to think it out, Chewonokee."

"No, wait a minute—" Connie held up a hand as Chewonokee turned to go. "Maybe there *is* a way, Chewonokee, and I might be the king-pin."

The Indian waited and Cal gave an uneasy glance at the girl.

"Now take it easy, Connie. If Whit Brice has thrown you outa town there's no sense in your takin' a risk to—"

"Hold it a moment, Cal, and let me speak. Suppose I were to ride back into town and tell Whit Brice that I happen to know where the gold vault is? He'd immediately fall for a bait like that. Once he arrived at the vault he'd find Chewonokee and a Navajo reception committee awaiting him. I'd have to smother my conscience in regard to leading him to his fate, but when I think of the way he's stamped on people in the past—to say nothing of that massacre at the Harcourt spread—I think I could manage it."

"It's crazy!" Cal decided immediately. "You can't take a risk like that. He'd have a bullet put through you the moment you came within sight of town."

Connie shook her head. "Don't you believe it, Cal. In spite of everything Brice still wants me—because I happen to be a woman. He'd shoot any man down without question but I'm confident I can get away with it."

"I don't like it," Cal muttered uneasily. "There oughta be some other way."

"Ought to be—yes; but there isn't. What do you think about it, Chewonokee?"

"The plan is good," Chewonokee responded. "I suggest it be carried out and that I gather my braves and retreat to the vault to await Whit Brice's coming."

"An' I sit here bitin' my nails and wondering what's goin' on?" Cal demanded.

"Only until we've got Brice to tell the Navajos all they want to know," Connie explained. "Then you and Chewonokee can lead the braves in an onslaught against Desert's End. With Brice out of the way as the directing power it shouldn't take you long to clean up the rest of the bunch."

"It is decided," Chewonokee said briefly, taking no more notice of Cal's disquiet. "You will carry out the plan, white squaw, as soon as possible. When you have gone my braves and I—and Cal Rutter—will go to the vault to await you."

"May be some time before I talk Whit Brice into it," Connie warned.

"No matter. Navajos are accustomed to waiting."

"I'm not," Cal growled. "And I don't like the set-up one bit."

Nevertheless he was completely overruled and Connie, indeed, though she inwardly knew there was considerable danger in her mission if Brice did not happen to react in the way she expected, was quite anxious to be on her way. She respected Cal's wishes only in that she should wait until night time before entering Desert's End, so that no trigger-happy gunhawk, instructed perhaps to stay on the watch for her, would see her coming.

So, two hours after sundown, she set off, but before she went she made herself as dishevelled and trail-dirty as possible as an integral part of her plan. Within an hour she had reached the main street of Desert's End and dropped with apparent weariness from the saddle of her horse.

A glance through the windows of the Painted Lady satisfied her that Brice was not there. Evidently he had preference for the greater opulence of the Oasis which, to judge from the noise coming from it, was in the thick of the evening's business . . . Sure enough Brice was there, propping up the bar counter, his cheroot smouldering as usual. When he caught sight of the dirty, travel-strained Connie with her tumbled hair he stared blankly.

"I'll be dog-goned," he muttered, and immediately went across to where she stood resting limply beside the batwings.

"Hello, Whit," she greeted him, with a tired smile. "I never felt in better form to have a bullet put in me—if you still feel that way about it."

"What in heck have yuh been doin' to yourself?" he demanded; then without giving her the chance to answer he swept her up in his arms and carried her into one of the private rooms leading off the main saloon. Brandy followed, after which Connie considered it would be appropriate to 'revive' somewhat.

"Take this how you like, Whit," she said, looking frankly at Brice across the table, "but since leaving here I've been with Cal Rutter."

"You have, huh?" Brice bit deeper into his cheroot.

"And he's not the man I thought he was! I made several attempts to escape from him, without success, but this time I managed it. You can see from the mess I'm in that I haven't had much of a picnic."

Brice grinned suddenly. "So you come rompin' back to old Whit, eh? Well, nothin' like experience to make a gal see the light. I may have flown off the handle that day in the main

street, Connie—the day you left—but I’ve never stopped bein’ sorry for it. Things ain’t been the same without you.”

He got up, came round the table, and kissed Connie heavily. She remained passive.

“This mean I’m forgiven?” she asked.

“Forgiven? Sure thing! There’s one thing I’m goin’ t’do though, and before I’m much older, and that is dig out Cal Rutter an’ put him where he belongs. I should ha’ done it long ago. Now you’ve had some experience of him you mebby realize I was right at the time?”

“Uh-huh,” Connie responded, non-committal.

“Far as I’m concerned, Connie, yore right back where you started—but on one condition.”

“And what’s that?” she asked quickly.

“That you don’t go around shootin’ your face off about the way that race was fixed.”

“I shan’t. It got Cal Rutter out of town and that’s the main thing.”

“I had words with Seth and Walt after you’d gone,” Brice said reflecting. “They won’t talk outa turn again—an’ they won’t follow a girl around because she asks ’em to, neither!”

“You mean . . . you killed them, Whit?”

“Nope; but I felt very much like doin’ so. They’re still around ’cos they’re too useful to lose. Anyway”—Brice clapped his hands together with sudden enthusiasm—“we’ve more things to do than waste time talkin’ about a coupla skunks! You an’ me is together again, an’ that’s the main thing.”

“That’s right,” Connie admitted. “There’s also something else, too, and it’s mighty important.”

Brice looked at her expectantly as he seated himself again.

“Gold, Whit! Gold for the picking up! That was one thing which made it worth my while being with Cal. He thought I was playing beside him all the way and because of that he loosened up far enough to show me where he gets his gold.”

“Yeah?” For some reason Brice’s reaction was much more lukewarm than Connie had expected.

“He’s found an old Navajo vault,” Connie explained quickly. “Seems that he and ‘Smoky’ Jones landed on it by accident one day and the place is overstuffed with gold idols, jewels, and heaven knows what. A regular Aladdin’s Cave, in fact.”

“An’ he showed you the whole works?” Brice asked bluntly.

“He certainly did—thinking I was going to stay with him, of course.” Connie put a hand on Brice’s arm. “Don’t you see what that means, Whit? I can show you where the vault is and you can get all the gold you want.”

“An’ what’ll Cal Rutter be doin’? Pickin’ daisies?”

Connie fenced quickly. “He won’t be anywhere near the place. He took all the gold he needed—enough to keep him and me for the rest of our lives I should think—and then we hit the trail for Yuma. I escaped from him whilst he was sleeping. He won’t go back to the vault because he’s got no reason to.”

“He won’t go back to the vault mebby, but he’ll sure be on the prod for you, Connie! You know where the vault is! D’you think a man like Cal Rutter will let you get away with *that*?”

Brice got up from the table and shook his head deliberately. “No, Connie, I’m not takin’ the risk of goin’ to any vault—an’ I don’t intend to put you in the position that you might be shot at, neither. Cal Rutter’s no fool an’ he’ll guess that you’ll come straight to me after desertin’ him because there ain’t no other place you *can* go. Since he won’t have the nerve to show his face around here—at least I don’t think he will—I reckon he’ll be waitin’

somewhere near that vault fur you to show up, probably with me. That would be his grand chance of gettin' the pair of us."

Connie was silent for a moment, realizing that her scheme had fallen to bits. She made another attempt before the last chance of setting bait had completely gone.

"Isn't it worth almost any risk to get your hands on unlimited gold?"

"It ain't worth the risk of losin' your life anyways. I'll get around to the vault finally—an' you'll show me where it is—but that'll only happen when I know Cal Rutter's bin put somewheres safe, or else blotted out altogether. Right now, forget it!"

Connie got reluctantly to her feet and pushed back her dishevelled hair. She had a good deal of fast thinking to do to shift Brice's adamant viewpoint.

"Well, I'd better go across to the hotel and start tidying myself up," she said. "I've still got some clothes left there from when I left town hurriedly."

Brice studied her, so intently indeed that she presently dropped her gaze.

"You on the level with me, Connie?" he asked abruptly, taking hold of her shoulders tightly.

"On the level? Of course I am! Why do you suppose I came back here?"

"I dunno. I'm just tryin' to figure somethin' out. It wouldn't be because you're *still* carryin' a torch for Cal Rutter, would it, an' are here just on his say-so?"

"That's absurd, Whit!" In spite of herself Connie knew there was consternation in her eyes. And Brice wasn't slow to notice it. Abruptly he released her shoulders and stood regarding her cynically.

"I always thought Cal Rutter was a low down heel," he said deliberately, "an' now I'm sure of it. So he sends a woman to do his dirty work for him, does he? You must take me for an all-time mug, Connie! He's waitin' at that vault for me to go an' look at the gold, ain't he?"

"I've already told he isn't!"

"I don't believe it. This stunt is stage-managed! You came 'cos he told you to. You thought I'd love gold so much I'd walk blindly into a hail of bullets to get it. I'm not that loco, Connie! Yore stayin' right here now you've gotten here, an' so am I. If Cal Rutter can't fight clean he can rot. You've come back into Desert's End, Connie and by hell I'll see that you stop here!"

There was nothing Connie could say—not fast enough to be convincing anyway. The only gleam of light in the situation far as she could detect right now, was that it had never crossed Brice's mind that *Navajos* might be waiting for him. If Cal ever came into Desert's End it still would not remove the trap waiting at the vault.

"Yeah, I'm dead sure I'm right," Brice muttered, summing up his thoughts from the look on Connie's face. "The whole thing's a put-up job. An' I'm going to reverse it! Instead of me walkin' into Cal Rutter's trap and bein' shot down he can wander into mine an' I'll return the compliment. Fur I'm more'n sure he'll come t'find you when he guesses things have gone wrong some place . . . Now get to the hotel, Connie, an' don't try and leave town or send messages if you know what's good for you."

The days and nights passed. For Connie, ditched in Desert's End, it was virtually little else but captivity. Though she had complete freedom as far as the town itself was concerned she had no illusions about the fact that Brice's relentless gunhawks were always watching somewhere, ready to act if she tried to make a break for it. As for Brice himself, he

completely ignored her. She had no job, nothing to do but kill time and wonder how the situation was going to work out.

For Cal, waiting with Chewonokee and a picked number of his braves at the vault, the situation was becoming intolerable. When the fourth day had been reached and he and Chewonokee sat together surveying the empty haze of desert, his impatience found words.

“Something’s gone wrong, Chewonokee,” he insisted. “I know it would take Connie a little while to get Brice where she wanted him—but not *this* long! Mebby he’s tumbled to it. He never was a fool.”

Chewonokee meditated, as impassive as ever, his keen eyes staring into the desolate distances.

“I can’t stand any more of it,” Cal added. “Waiting down in that vault, or sat up here, with just plain nothin’ to do is too much for me. ‘Sides, Connie might even be in danger. I’ve got to know!”

“White men always impatient,” the Indian sighed.

“Even *you’d* get impatient if somebody you dearly loved was in possible danger. I wouldn’t put it past Brice to kill Connie if he found out her scheme . . . I’m going tonight to see what’s wrong, Chewonokee. My shoulder’s good enough for action again, thanks to your ministrations. This issue has got to be settled.”

“As you wish,” the Indian shrugged. “I shall remain—and wait. Sooner or later Whit Brice must be made to confess. Until he does my braves cannot be made to follow me.”

Decided in his own mind what he was going to do Cal did not make any further comment. The remainder of the day he spent in chafing idleness, or else in exercising his almost healed shoulder. He felt reasonably confident that it would not let him down, and certainly his gun hand was as good as ever, to say nothing of his marksmanship.

It was typical of Chewonokee’s brooding mind that it was just on sunset before he made any comment about Cal’s intended sojourn, then as he watched Cal strapping on his gun-belts he said:

“Chewonokee ride with you as far as Desert’s End. I would send one of my braves with you instead, but none will stir.”

“Afraid I can’t look after myself?” Cal asked in surprise.

“Chewonokee afraid you have not looked deeply into the situation. Even by night you will not be able to approach Desert’s End without being seen. There will be gunmen somewhere watching. Chewonokee convinced of that.”

Cal nodded. “I’d thought of that. I’ll have to shoot them before they shoot me, that’s all.”

“And make much noise?” the Navajo asked quietly, at which Cal frowned.

“Mmm, I see what you mean. If I shoot I’ll have the town round my ears in no time.”

“The arrow makes no noise and strikes true,” Chewonokee said. “And, friend Rutter, my eyes are keener than yours by night. I see what you cannot see. I will ride with you to the town’s outskirts and help you get safely in. After that, you fight alone. I cannot help you more until you bring Whit Brice for my braves to question. Were I to enter the town with you I’d be shot down because I am an Indian. You, as Cal Rutter and a white man, stand a chance with your guns.”

“Okay,” Cal nodded. “And thanks for the lift up.”

Chewonokee said no more. He returned to the vault for his bow and quiver of arrows, then when the transient twilight had foundered into the misty dark he and Cal set off swiftly across the desert, neither of them speaking, both alert for the least sign of danger.

But there was none, and in due time they rode out of the desert mists into the increasing yellow glow that proclaimed the kerosene flares of Desert's End. At this point both men dismounted and hobbled their horses.

"Ready?" Cal asked briefly, and he saw the Navajo nod in the reflected glow. He removed the bow from his broad shoulders, fitted an arrow, and then advanced silently with Cal, guns ready, beside him.

In the space of a few minutes, keeping low, they had reached the point where the rough main street of the town joined the edge of the desert. Things seemed fairly quiet, but the glare from the Oasis showed that the night's business was about to start. Here and there on the boardwalks men and women were moving, some going to their homes, others out on their nightly prowls which would inevitably end in either the Oasis or the Painted Lady.

"Looks quiet enough," Cal murmured. "I don't see anythin' to stop me stridin' straight into the Oasis, usin' my guns for protection. That's where I'll find Brice, I reckon."

"Keep perfectly still," Chewonokee murmured, and Cal, though he did as he ordered, failed to detect the reason for the injunction.

"On the roof there," Chewonokee added. "A man waits!"

By straining his eyes to the limit Cal could now faintly descry a head, shoulders, and Stetson hat just showing above the parapet of the building facing the desert. Plainly the man was a gunhawk. Cal realized that a few steps further would have meant him receiving a bullet—or a challenge—for he would then have come into the full glow of the town.

"There may be others," Chewonokee murmured. "Chewonokee make sure of this one . . ."

Cal wondered vaguely at the uncanny eyesight of his comrade and watched as the sinewy arm drew back the powerful bow to its limit. A twang and a hiss—no more. But the figure on the parapet, lurched and then dropped out of sight.

"Nice work," Cal murmured. "Can you spot any more of 'em?"

Chewonokee remained motionless through a long interval, his head turning slowly as he surveyed.

"From here I see no more," he announced finally. "Let us go closer . . ."

Cal gave a nod and followed close behind the Navajo as they gained the actual main street itself. They were now both within the glare of the nearest kerosene lamp, and it was at this moment that a puncher emerged from round a nearby corner and caught sight of them. The possibility was that he was not one of Brice's gunhawks, but the fact remained that he saw a Navajo. His hand flashed instantly to his gun—but just as quickly Chewonokee had an arrow in his bow.

The bow twanged. In the very act of drawing his gun, the cowpoke was impaled by the arrow and crashed motionless to the boardwalk. Chewonokee, looking as impassive as ever, glanced about him, then:

"You are alone now, Cal Rutter. The gods be with you."

Cal tightened his hold on his guns as the Indian glided into the night—but, even as he had said, there did not seem to be any immediate threat at the moment. So, watching every step he made, Cal advanced to the nearby Oasis and peered carefully over the top of the batwings. Within the place was more less crowded, doing far better business than the Painted Lady had ever enjoyed. Not that this signified. What *did* signify was that Whit Brice was there, seated at a corner table with a drink in front of him. He was broodingly watching the customers and was evidently lost in thought.

Of Connie there was no sign, and this fact made Cal pause. His main concern, apart from somehow getting Brice and turning him over to the Navajos, was to be sure of Connie's safety. Which was to be first? Tackle Brice, or look for Connie? It was as he stood trying to make up his mind that he felt something prod hard in his back.

"Drop your guns, Rutter—an' drop 'em quick!"

Cal did nothing of the sort. He knew that to drop his guns meant the finish, so instead he took a chance and whirled round with lightning speed, slamming out his gun butt foremost as he did so. The move was fast enough to prevent his aggressor firing. Overwhelmed by the ferocity of the blow the gun dealt him across the bridge of his nose he stumbled backwards—and Cal instantly followed up his advantage. He dropped his right-hand gun into its holster, whipped up his fist and caught the staggering gunman under the jaw. Dazed, he collapsed on the batwings and tumbled into the saloon—which was enough to bring everybody to their feet.

Cal could not back out now; the damage was done. He held his left gun steady and looked down at his attacker. In the bright light he recognized the face of Seth Gibbons . . . Then Whit Brice came strolling over, smiling harshly.

"Well, well, if it ain't our old friend, Cal Rutter! So you finally got here, huh?"

"Looks like it, doesn't it?" Cal demanded.

Brice, contemptuous of the gun trained upon him, hauled Seth Gibbons to his feet and swung him round.

"Next time I tell you t'keep watch, Seth, see that you do it. I'll have a word with you later . . ."

"I couldn't help it, boss!" Seth breathed hard and wiped blood from his smashed nose. "I wus checkin' up on Walt and I found him dead with an arrer through his chest. So I figgered I'd better see what was goin' on—this guy was too quick fur me."

"An arrow?" Brice repeated, his eyes narrowing. "What's the angle, Rutter?"

"Plain enough, Brice. I wouldn't be mug enough to walk in here alone with one gun. The whole town's surrounded by Navajos. I got in touch with Chewonokee, like you once figgered I might do."

It was a monstrous piece of bluff but Cal considered it was worth trying. Brice stood looking at him fixedly, then with typical callousness he bundled the groaning gunman through the batwings to the outdoors. This done Brice dusted his hands and returned to where Cal was standing.

"So you reckon t'have the town surrounded with Navajos, do you?" he demanded.

"Stick your nose too far out there, Brice an' you'll find out how right I am."

"Yeah? Nice of yer to warn me . . . What I don't get is why yore standin' there like a dummy with a gun in yore hand. I can't draw while I'm covered so why don't you shoot me? That's what yore aimin' to do, ain't it?"

Cal was aware of a passing admiration for the man's blunt animal courage. For all he knew the town *was* surrounded by Navajos, most of them after his blood, but there was no sign of fear in his rugged face.

"I don't shoot a man who isn't defending himself," Cal retorted. "But there's also another reason. I want Connie McBride, and I want her now!"

"Yuh do, eh? Thanks for tellin' me. I always thought you an' she were thick with each other, an' I guess I was right. That spiel she handed me out about you an' her havin' gone different ways was a lot of eyewash. If I'd ha' fallen for it I'd have landed in a Navajo vault to find you ready with your guns."

“It was worth a gamble,” Cal replied. “Right now, Brice, my gun’s still on you. Where’s Connie?”

“Supposin’ I tell you? What’s the pay off?”

“Just get her, then we’ll talk business.”

Brice shook his head. “I’m the only one who knows where she is, Rutter, an’ I ain’t tellin’. Leastways, not unless you give these Navajo friends of yours the signal to get away from this town. I c’n play an ace fur an ace any day.”

“Not while I’m around you can’t you big lug!” declared the voice of Ma Hansen, as she came in at the swing doors. Then summing the situation up briefly with a glance she added, “I heard what you said as I came along the boardwalk, Whit Brice, an’ yore nothing but a durned liar! Everybody knows Connie’s stayin’ at my place ’cos she couldn’t afford your clip joint of an hotel. Ain’t no secret where she is, neither. She was in her room when I left to come here for a sit-down.”

“Do me a favour, Ma,” Cal said quickly. “Tell Connie I’m in town but don’t let her try to see me. Put her on a horse and tell her to ride to Chewonokee. She’ll know what that means. She’ll be safe, then.”

“Safe?” Ma repeated, surprised. “Ain’t she safe in Desert’s End?”

“Only for a while. The moment I give the signal there’ll be a cloud of avenging Navajos.”

Ma did not hesitate any longer. She turned quickly and hurried through the batwings—rather too quickly in fact for the nearer batwing swung right back after her passage and struck Cal’s gun arm. In a flash Brice saw his opportunity and slammed out his right fist. Cal took the full impact under the chin and toppled into the nearest table, his gun falling out of his hand. Probably Brice would have blazed away with his own guns there and then but a chair crashed down over his shoulders and brought him to his knees. The puncher responsible—evidently on Cal’s side—had whipped Brice’s guns away from him before he knew what had happened.

In those same lightening seconds Cal also found himself stripped of weapons as he stumbled to his feet.

“What’s the signal for the Navajos, Mr. Wade?” demanded the puncher who had stripped Brice. “Or is it Cal Rutter? Don’t make no odds. Fact remains I’m with you ’cos you gave me an’ my boys wages when this skunk had closed up on us.”

Cal recognized the man now—the foreman who had handled the labour for the Oasis when Brice had given the order to stop . . . As for the question about the signal to the Navajos—Cal did some swift thinking. If Brice thought, as apparently he did, that the only danger at the vault had been that he—Cal—might be present with a loaded gun, then he might still go there into a trap.

“There’s two signals,” Cal replied. “One shot means to attack, and two shots means retire to the foothills encampment . . . I’m goin’ to send them away, Brice,” Cal added, “an’ let you an’ me fight it out to a finish. If Chewonokee once launches an attack the innocent’ll suffer with the guilty, an’ I don’t want that.”

Cal gave a nod to the foreman and he went outside to the boardwalk. Two gunshots followed, then he came back in again.

“Winner take all, huh?” Brice asked, with a hard grin.

“That’s the angle,” Cal confirmed. “An’ this time the fight won’t be fixed, like the race was.”

Brice's grin faded and he looked around on the crowding people. Then he began pulling off his jacket.

"All right, if that's the way you want it. I'll take a gamble with you."

Cal did not reply. He had put everything into one throw of the dice. He had *got* to win this time and then drag Brice to the Navajos and let them finish the job.

"One thing more," Cal said, looking about him. "Some of you folks are behind me; some of you are behind Brice. It's got to be understood that whoever wins this fight is runnin' Desert's End henceforth."

There were nods, and grunts of acquiescence. Brice clenched his big fists resolutely.

"Ready whenever you are," he said bitterly. "I reckon you must be loco takin' on a job like this with that shoulder of yores. Ain't so long since you bust it."

"Thanks to you! An' it's a darned sight better than you know. Chewonokee knows a thing or two about bone manipulation and—"

Brice did not wait any longer. He seized his chance whilst Cal was talking and slammed out his right fist. Cal saw it coming, jerked his head sideways, then brought his left fist down with battering-ram impact on the back of Brice's bull neck. He gulped for a moment and reeled with the shock, but in a matter of seconds he had twirled round to the attack once more.

A sledge-hammer blow struck Cal straight between the eyes and he tumbled into the centre of the saloon, the crowd hurriedly making way for him. Brice grinned with satisfaction and reached a hand behind him to a bottle. With one blow he smashed it in half and with the jagged neck end in his hand advanced again.

Cal shook his head dazedly, glimpsed what was coming, and lashed out with his feet. It was the only safe way to deal with razor-edged glass. The soles of his heavy riding-boots kicked the glass out of Brice's down-swinging hand and he stumbled as he was thrown off balance. He collapsed on top of Cal, his fingers striving to reach Cal's throat . . . With a desperate effort of strength Cal twisted sideways, tore loose, and staggered to his feet. He stood rocking and waiting—then Brice was up too, swinging a haymaker which just missed Cal's jaw. Within seconds Cal's own left whipped round and jerked Brice's head back as though his neck was hinged. He gasped and tumbled backwards, only to double up at a smashing blow straight to the *solar plexus*. Yet again Cal hammered him, pole-axing him across the jaw and on the back of the neck. Any man of lesser strength than Brice would have taken the knock-out by this time, but he still remained on his feet, winded, his face blood-smearing, but a long way from being finished.

"Finish him, Cal!" came an urgent voice. "Finish him!"

Cal glanced in surprise. The voice belonged to Connie! He saw her clearly for a moment, half-dancing on the edge of the excited crowd with Ma Hansen beside her. Now why on earth hadn't she ridden out of town as Cal had ordered? He had arranged that deliberately so she could be safe from Brice if he happened to win the fight—

Blinding lights flashed before Cal's eyes and his head seemed to explode. Taken right off guard in looking at Connie he absorbed the full shock of a terrific punch to the jaw. With half the senses knocked out of him he dropped flat on his face—then Brice dropped on him and jerked his head up by the hair, afterwards slamming punches back and forth with merciless precision across Cal's face.

Battered and half-conscious though he was Cal realized something. He had now got to reverse his tactics and *lose* the battle. If that were done Brice would inevitably force Connie to

show him where the Navajo vault was, and thereby he would walk right into trouble. Sure of Cal's defeat he would not expect to meet disaster at the vault and—

Cal struggled, arched his back suddenly, and Brice became dislodged. Though he now intended to lose the struggle Cal was not going to literally take it lying down. He would inflict plenty of punishment before he gave in.

Given the brief respite by Brice tumbling sideways, Cal turned his hands to account and seized Brice's throat, squeezing with all the strength he possessed, but in this his right arm was not strong enough. Brice dragged himself free and his right fist shot out like a piston. Cal dodged it and brought down a left-arm jab across the bridge of Brice's nose. It was sufficient to give Cal time to fight to his feet. Here he deliberately delayed for a second or two—and his failure to defend himself in the uppercut which followed was also deliberate.

His head singing he dropped flat on his back, waiting for Brice to plunge on him and finish the job. Only he didn't. He waited a second or two and then, exhausted, dragged his arm in its torn shirt-sleeve across his sweating blood-streaked face.

"All right, this louse is out," he panted. "Anybody here got anythin' to say?"

Nobody had apparently—then Connie broke through the crowd and went on her knees at Cal's side, raising his puffed and bruised face.

"Cal!" she whispered desperately. "Cal, get on your feet! You didn't think I was going to ride off and let you fight this lot alone, did you? Cal! Wake *up!*"

Cal heard her quite distinctly for he was not unconscious. He slightly opened one eye and saw her face close to his.

"I'm foolin'," he breathed. "Get Brice to th' vault—"

"Get up frum there, Connie!" Brice snapped, seizing her arm and dragging her to her feet. "If I ever needed evidence that you an' this skunk are that way 'bout each other I've got it now! But it ain't comin' to anythin', believe me!"

Connie said nothing. She stood looking helplessly about her.

"I've things t'do," Brice added, snatching up his jacket. "You an' me, Connie—get movin'!"

Connie found herself bundled forward. She only waited whilst Brice rebuckled his gunbelts about him and snatched up his hat; then he jerked his head towards the batwings. Before following Connie outside he glanced back at the crowd.

"Throw that mug out," he ordered. "There's only one boss in this town from here on—just like he sed."

Grinning through his damaged lips Brice strode outside to where Connie was standing.

"Pity fur you you didn't take Cal's advice and get out a town while you had the chance," he said grimly. "Right now yore stayin' with me—an' yore goin' to go on doin' it for a long time."

"This is hardly the moment to leave town, is it?" Connie asked. "Not when you've got the people behind you . . ."

"We're goin' to that gold vault, while I'm sure Cal Rutter's laid out here. Get your horse—No, wait a minnit. You can ride on mine and save time."

Connie said nothing. The move Cal had been hoping for had been made, and without any effort on her part either . . . Meantime, back in the Oasis, Cal was slowly getting to his feet and looking about him on the grim faces.

"Better get goin', Rutter," Seth Gibbons said. He had his gun pointed and apparently he had recovered from the blow across the nose he had received earlier.

“Goin’?” Cal repeated. “On your say-so?”

“On the *boss’s* say-so! Yore not wanted around here any more, Rutter. Yore name plain stinks.”

Mayor Slater, who had been a silent witness of the happenings so far, came forward slowly, smugness written all over his big, ugly face.

“Seth’s right, Rutter,” he said. “We ain’t saying you haven’t had a darned good try at beatin’ Brice, but he’s plainly the better man. Besides that, he isn’t a killer. All the folks here know that by rights you oughta be hangin’ by now for the Harcourt job. You’ve got the chance to blow for good—so get out.”

“Thanks for remindin’ me of somethin’,” Cal said slowly, using up the precious minutes to get his strength back. “I’ve been so busy fightin’ Brice I’d forgotten a personal matter. Mebby it’s time I got around to it.”

“Quit talkin’ and get out!” Seth Gibbons commanded. “If you don’t I’ll let you have it—an’ everybody here would support me.”

“Don’t be too sure,” warned the building foreman, who was keeping a watch on Cal’s guns. “Ain’t everybody here that’s against Cal Rutter. ‘Fact I reckon most folks would be with him if he hadn’t got a murder pinned on him.”

“This gun’s doin’ the talkin’ right now,” Seth said, glancing to where the foreman stood. “An’ for that—”

Seth got no further. He should have known better than let his attention stray. In one dive Cal was upon him, deliberately inflicting a second killing blow on that already swollen and distorted nose. With a yelp of pain Seth went slithering across the floor and tumbled into the midst of the tables.

“My guns!” Cal shouted, and the foreman flung them across. Just in time Cal got his right gun levelled as Seth struggled round.

“Okay,” Cal continued grimly, bringing his other gun up into his hand. “Mebby the issue regardin’ this town ain’t settled even yet. Mebby I’ve ditched Whit Brice more completely than any of you realize as yet. While I’m waitin’ to find out about that there’s a few personal matters wantin’ attention . . .”

Since nobody quite knew what Cal meant there was an uneasy silence for a moment. Then Mayor Slater began to back slightly and to the rear of the group Edgar Waneson, the lawyer, made a sudden dash for the batwings. He stopped dead in his tracks as a bullet splintered the woodwork in front of him.

“Come right back here, Waneson,” Cal instructed calmly. “I was wonderin’ if you were in this happy gatherin’. Just the man I wanta see.”

Waneson hesitated and turned slowly, his shifty eyes narrowed. Knowing he would probably get a bullet in him if he did not obey he elbowed his way back through the crowd.

“You stay right where you are, too!” Cal snapped, as he saw the mayor trying to escape. “You two bright beauties, along with Whit Brice, are responsible for all the dirty work that goes on in this town . . .”

The two men made no answer but they glanced at each other anxiously. To the rear, the foreman of the building gang was keeping guard with his own guns.

“Now . . .” Cal looked at Waneson steadily. “You, as lawyer to Whit Brice, must know most—if not all—of his secrets. An’ there couldn’t be a better time to tell those secrets with everybody around us here—seventy-five per cent of the town’s population mebbly. Start talkin’, Waneson! What’s the truth about the Harcourt ranch killings?”

“How the hell should I know?” Waneson snapped.

“I’ll gamble yore the only one who *does* know. There have been the hell of a lot of cattle stealings around these parts, too, many of which stealings I’ve managed to recompense. There was rustling at the Harcourt ranch, too. That sort of business could not go on without there bein’ records of some sort. Brice had always bin too busy a man—to say nothin’ of bein’ too stupid—to keep records of his dirty work. You’d be the one to do that.”

Waneson did not reply, but the look in his eyes was quite enough. He gave a hunted glance around him but there was a complete barrier of men and women in all directions.

“Out with it,” Cal ordered, his guns levelled. “Who did the Harcourt job, for which I got the blame?”

Silence. Cal’s left-hand gun exploded deafeningly and tore a piece out of the floor not an inch from Waneson’s feet. He began to sweat visibly.

“Next time I’ll be nearer,” Cal said. “You’ve nothin’ to lose except your job in Desert’s End by talkin’, Waneson. If you *don’t* talk you’ll lose your life. Up to you.”

The brutal logic of the situation was more than plain to Edgar Waneson’s legal mind, and like any man of his calibre his sole concern was himself.

“The Harcourt job was fixed,” he said deliberately. “It was organized by Whit Brice, but because you happened to come into it by accident you got the blame. In my records you can find a full list of the sums paid to Brice for rustled cattle which he’s sold, together with dozens of other items.”

“Thanks,” Cal said, with a grim smile, as the men and women murmured amongst themselves. “One thing more; Brice was also responsible for the massacre of an encampment of Navajos when he built this town, wasn’t he?”

“Right,” Waneson said, shrugging—and then as the mayor looked at him in stupefied rage he added, “Say what you like, Mayor, I’m pullin’ outa this before things get too hot. I can

always get a job in another town, knowing the law as I do. And I'd better go before Brice returns. That's for you to say, Rutter."

Cal jerked his head. "Blow! Far as I can tell you've done no actual wrong yourself, beyond supportin' that skunk Brice. Same goes for you, Mayor, so you'd better get out along with Waneson while the going's good . . ."

The mayor did not hesitate a moment longer. He turned and broke his way through the excitedly talking crowd and followed quickly in the tracks of lawyer Waneson. Cal grinned widely and holstered his guns.

"That's the lay-out, folks," he said, spreading his hands. "Whatever else you think of me I'm no killer. Mebby that makes a difference if I ask for your support—"

"You got our support all right," Ma Hansen put in, coming forward. "And those few blamed critters who don't side with you'll be run clean outa town, an' they know it. But yore forgettin' somethin', Mr. Rutter. What about Brice? He ain't finished with yet. I don't know where he is right now, but when he comes swaggerin' back into town he'll have to have a reception committee waiting for him."

"I'm pretty sure where he is," Cal replied quietly. "And I think it might be a good idea to take the reception committee to *him*. How many of you are behind me?"

The roar of response was overwhelming and Cal knew that, as far as Desert's End was concerned, he had completely won the battle. But there were still the final details, and the implacable Chewonokee to be satisfied . . .

Chewonokee, though, was well able to take care of himself. At this moment he was surveying with frozen contempt the limp form of Whit Brice as he lay on the floor of the desert vault, surrounded by the flickering of torches. As Cal had expected—and as Connie had engineered it—the over-confident boss of Desert's End had dropped straight into the hornet's nest. Added to the battering he had already received at the hands of Cal, it had not taken Chewonokee's braves long to finish the job. Knife cuts and a relentless beating up had forced Brice to confess to everything to save himself from death.

Now he was motionless, dead out. In a far corner Connie stood, doing her best to harden her heart and stifle her conscience for having led Brice into the trap.

"My braves are satisfied," Chewonokee said, coming over to where she stood. "They demand the death penalty for Brice, but that must wait and be performed with proper ceremony."

"Does it *have* to be?" Connie asked desperately. "I feel so dreadfully responsible for all this."

"Chewonokee would not insist on death penalty providing Brice leaves country—but I am at the mercy of my braves . . . You will stay here and guard Brice until we return. We go now to Desert's End. Alone there amongst enemies he will have great need of us—You are armed?"

Connie brought her .32 into view and the Navajo nodded. Then he turned away and gave brief orders to his followers in their own language. In silence Connie watched them climb on to each other to reach the exit from the vault, until the last man had been pulled out. Then she crossed over slowly to where Brice lay and went on her knees beside him. After a moment's hesitation she turned him over and the sight of his battered face gave her nerves a jolt.

Chewonokee, with all his keen perception, had overlooked one vital point. Connie McBride was a woman, and at heart a good-natured one. Suddenly it did not seem to matter to her whether Brice were bad or otherwise. He was a beaten man and sorely in need of help.

Immediately she went to work, found water and a rag, and set to work to bathe his face and revive him. Then at length she heaved up his powerful shoulders and pushed a bunched-up blanket beneath them. Brice's swollen eyes peered at her after a moment or two and he grinned crookedly.

"Sure made a swell job of gettin' the truth outa me, Con, didn't you?" he whispered.

"It was—just the way things worked out, Whit. It had to be done. If you hadn't run things the crooked way for so long it would never have happened."

"Nope, I reckon not . . . One thing I like about you, Connie. You're a fighter—a gal after my own heart. A pity that skunk Cal Rutter has t'get you after all."

Brice was silent for a moment or two, his eyes closing. Then he opened them again as Connie shook him urgently.

"Listen, Whit—this is important. Chewonokee and his braves have gone to Desert's End to help Cal clean up the rest of your mob. When they come back the braves will demand the death penalty for you—and more likely than not Chewonokee won't be able to control them. Exhausted though you are you've got to escape—*now!* I'm left here to see you don't get away, but I could fake it so it looks as though you over-powered me. Nobody can prove otherwise. It's your last chance to go on living, Whit—somewhere far away from here."

The words took a long time to penetrate but when they did Brice forced himself up on to his elbows. His strength was certainly at a low ebb after all he had endured, but with the threat of death ahead of him he had just *got* to move.

"Your horse will still be up above," Connie went on, helping him to get to his feet. "Chewonokee said he'd leave it there so I could use it when I had to leave here. I'll fix the rope to the saddle-horn and you can be hauled up."

"Okay," Brice muttered, swaying as he fought to keep his strength together. "Yore sure a straight-shooter, Connie, an' if I had a chance to go over my time again I'd make the hell of a lot of changes . . ."

Connie was not listening. She scrambled the Navajos' various boxes and possessions together until she had a rocky perch high enough to enable her to climb through the vault opening. After a moment or two Brice saw a rope descend and he knotted it quickly about him. In a matter of moments he had been drawn up and was in the sand under the stars.

"Here . . ." Connie came back to him under the stars. "This is my gun. Take it to protect yourself. I'll hand Chewonokee an excuse when he lands back."

Brice hesitated, then abruptly he caught Connie's slim form in his arms and kissed her fiercely.

"Just for luck," he explained, as he released her. "I reckon I'll never get the chance to do it again."

Connie stood in silence, studying his big form in the dim light. He turned the horse, hesitated, and then came back.

"An' there's just one other thing," he added. "I'm not doin' it for any personal reason, Connie—only because I want t'make things look right for you when Chewonokee gets back."

"What's that?" Connie asked in surprise; then she had blacked out completely as Brice's fist struck her straight across the jaw. He gathered up her senseless form and, as gently as he could, lowered her through the hole into the vault. She fell slackly as he released her and for that very reason would probably suffer no injury.

His strength returning with the activity and fresh air, Brice went back to the horse, mounted it, and then considered which way he should go. He was in the midst of trying to

make up his mind when occasionally on the wind he fancied he caught the sound of horses' hooves. Not one or two but an apparent small army of them.

Nor had his ears deceived him. The noise of the horses was being created by the hosts of horsemen and horsewomen riding out of Desert's End, with Cal at their head, to find Whit Brice. Inevitably, almost half-way to the vault, they ran into Chewonokee and his braves.

"Chewonokee glad that you still alive, Cal Rutter!" the Navajo exclaimed, drawing his horse to a halt under the stars. "Brice has been forced to speak and my braves are ready to help you . . ."

"That's fine," Cal responded, "only it won't be necessary. The folks of Desert's End are right behind me—as you can see by this crowd I've got here with me . . ." And he went on to explain what had transpired.

"It is well," Chewonokee commented when the story had been told. "We will return to the vault where the final ceremony of a traitor's death must be performed on Whit Brice."

"Does that *have* to be?" Cal demanded. "Can't you forget tribal law for once? I've gotten rid of Mayor Slater, Edgar Wanesson, to say nothin' of a batch of gunhawks—all without killin' 'em. Even Sheriff Andrews and his deputies brought about their own deaths. I don't want to be a party to an actual killing far as Brice is concerned."

"Chewonokee's braves demand it," the Navajo answered. "So it must be . . ."

He wasted no further time talking. Swinging his horse's head round he shouted to his followers and they began to ride back in the direction whence they had come. Cal hesitated for a moment, then turned to the Desert's End riders.

"I'll follow him up an' see if I can do something," he said. "The rest of you go back to Desert's End and clean up whatever odd pockets of resistance there may be."

"Okay, Cal—just as you say."

Cal nudged his horse forward and within a few minutes had caught up with the hard-riding Indians. He drew alongside Chewonokee but did not attempt any conversation. The final argument to try and save Brice's life would come later.

It was as they were nearing the region of the vault that Cal caught sight of a dim form rising up from behind a nearby dune. Chewonokee would also have seen it but for Cal, on his left, blotting out the view . . . Cal stared fixedly and in split seconds he realized a gun arm was rising to take aim. Instantly he flung himself on to Chewonokee, dragged him out of the saddle, and crashed him into the sand.

In those seconds there was a crack of a gun and Cal felt the impact of a bullet in his ill-fated right arm. There came another shot—then another. The horses reared wildly; the braves skirmished—then a well-placed arrow phutted through the starlight and the shots ceased.

Slowly Chewonokee got to his feet and helped Cal up beside him. Together, the braves gathering round them, they moved over to the silent figure on the dune top. He lay sprawled with an arrow clean through his neck.

"Looks like your tribal ceremony ain't goin' to be needed, Chewonokee," Cal muttered, holding his wounded arm tightly.

"And the white squaw?" the Indian asked. "What of her?"

"Hell, yes!" Cal gave a start and swung around. In a moment he had reached the opening which led into the vault, a couple of braves behind him. Peering below he heaved a sigh of relief at the sight of Connie just in the midst of recovering as she lay in the uncertain torchlight.

“Get down and bring her up,” he told the two braves, in their own language—then he returned to where Chewonokee was still impassively regarding the dead form of Whit Brice.

“Obviously he tried to escape,” Cal said, then struck with a thought he wandered round to the other side of the dune. There, its forelegs hobbled, he discovered Brice’s horse . . . By the time he had returned to Chewonokee, gritting his teeth at the pain of his wounded arm, he found Connie was there, supported by the braves to either side of her.

“Cal!” she exclaimed thankfully, moving forward unsteadily, and he put his left arm about her shoulders.

“What happened?” he asked quietly. “Brice make a break for it?”

“Yes. I didn’t stand a chance. I thought he was unconscious when suddenly he hit me under the chin. After that I just passed out . . .” Connie was silent for a moment, looking at the dim figure on the dune. “Is—is that—”

“That’s Brice,” Cal confirmed grimly. “I don’t know why he didn’t get goin’ while the goin’ was good. Evidently he figgered that havin’ a gun—yours incidentally—he’d try and finish off Chewonokee . . .”

“He would have succeeded, friend Rutter, but for you,” Chewonokee put in, coming forward. “Chewonokee not blind to act of bravery and friendship. You pulled me from my horse to save me being hit by that which I could not see. And you yourself took the wound—fortunately not fatal.”

“Wound!” Connie ejaculated, pulling free of Cal’s grip; then in a matter of seconds she had discovered the damage to Cal’s right arm.

“Cal, you’re hurt! Same arm again—”

“Yeah,” he sighed. “Mebby I’ll get Chewonokee to chop it off so it doesn’t keep gettin’ in the way . . . Ain’t no need to panic, Connie. It’s only a bullet wound and that isn’t a new thing to me. Chewonokee’ll be gettin’ tired of fixin’ me up before long.”

“Chewonokee speak,” the Navajo said, and his raised hand in the starlight silenced the murmurings of the nearby braves. “Tribal law has spoken in a strange way, but the end has been fulfilled. Brice has died because of a Navajo arrow, so the gods are satisfied. From here on let the past die also. We have been given the sign of eternal friendship in that the white man Cal Rutter risked his own life that your leader might be saved. Red man not forget that—ever. We will return with you to Desert’s End, friend Rutter, and reshape our own destiny. The wanderings of our outcast tribe shall cease and we will turn our knowledge and skill to the benefit of ourselves and the white men . . . I have spoken.”

“I couldn’t have put it better myself,” Cal said. “And the gold vault?”

“White men and red men will use gold only as need be for progress between their peoples . . . Now come, let the people of Desert’s End hear our decision. And I, Chewonokee, will use my knowledge to heal your arm, friend Rutter, once we reach town.”

Cal said no more. His arm did not seem to matter in the least at the moment. He had achieved his object and that was enough . . . No, not quite enough. There was Connie, too, and she smiled happily in the starlight as she came back into his embrace . . .

THE END

[The end of *Navajo Vengeance* by John Russell Fearn]