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Forrester Blake's reckless, roving adventurer of the West-

JOHNNY CHRISTMAS

"Hot-headed, virile, hell with a knife, certain doom with a rifle."

– Chicago Tribune

DEATH MOON!

The moon was a round white eye; the desert, dark space matching darker space. Johnny's roan gelding stood taut-legged, head high, ears pricked forward. "What is it, feller?" Johnny whispered.

Then he saw his friend's body, the bloody scalped head hanging grotesquely. In the same moment he saw another head, scalplock and eagle feather upthrust among the rocks, tensed, questing. And another, and another—

COMANCHE!

The word was like a snake in his mind. Johnny drew a bead on the shaven skull, and in a minute all hell broke loose . . .

JOHNNY CHRISTMAS

"Can't be put down until the last page is turned—Plunge right in and hang on!"

Rocky Mountain News

Bantam Books by Forrester Blake

WILDERNESS PASSAGE
JOHNNY CHRISTMAS

JOHNNY CHRISTMAS

Forrester Blake

A NATIONAL GENERAL COMPANY

JOHNNY CHRISTMAS
A Bantam Book / published by arrangement with William Morrow and Company, Inc.

PRINTING HISTORY
Morrow edition published February 1948
2nd printing .... February 1948
3rd printing ..... May 1948
Condensation appeared in LITERARY CAVALCADE *January 1949*
Bantam edition published October 1952
2nd printing ..... October 1952
New Bantam edition published August 1958
2nd printing ..... March 1970

Published simultaneously in the United States and Canada

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

To George W. Light

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Author's Note

WE in America are apt to be a little forgetful about historical dates. A few words of orientation are, therefore, perhaps called for. At the beginning of this story in 1836, Texas had been open to American settlers for fifteen years. In a sparsely settled country with little law or order and constantly shifting boundary lines, antagonism between the Americans and the Mexicans had been growing year by year. The territory was plagued by innumerable guerrilla bands such as Wax Weatherby's raiding party. Organized Texas resistance to Mexican rule broke out into open fighting with the Declaration of Independence on March 2, 1836. After being set back by the massacres at the Alamo and at Goliad. Sam Houston overwhelmed General Santa Ana at the San Jacinto river on April 21, 1836. Johnny Christmas and Weatherby's band, operating hundreds of miles to the west, knew nothing about the Texans' victory nor would such knowledge have affected their actions. The loss of Texas and the conduct of such Americans as Wax Weatherby fed Mexican hatred for all Americans that smoldered for years in such towns as Taos, Santa Fe and El Pueblo de los Angeles.

For the next nine years—almost the entire period of the action of this book—Texas was a shaky, tottering republic. The burning issue of annexation became more pressing. Annexation came in 1845, but it was not until General Kearny, leading the American Army of the West, occupied Santa Fe in August, 1846, that Mexican hopes were definitely crushed. That victory ended an era.

So much for the background of the story of Johnny Christmas. Of greater importance to me is the attempt to portray characters and actions and to interpret accurately and subjectively remote American regions. Finally, Johnny Christmas himself, individualist, free rover of mountains and deserts, symbolizes the frontiersmen who knew the West as well as any early scout, but who, unlike Kit Carson and Jim Bridger, left no personal traces of their passage. He stands, I hope, as one American challenge to the defeatist philosophies of today.

The characters in this novel are fictional and any similarity to real persons is coincidental.

1: TEXAS DESERT

Los Vientos

UNDER his saddle blanket, Johnny Christmas stirred as a hand pressed his shoulder. Opening his eyes warily, he lay without movement, focusing on the figure above him. Weatherby, he thought. Ragged, black-bearded, dirty old Weatherby. Always playing favorites; always letting some men sleep, like Willie Epps, and waking others for night work. Johnny muttered and stretched his cramped legs. In the Texas moonlight, that April, 1836, Weatherby's size was startling: since sunset, when the camp had rolled in, he seemed to have sprouted ten inches. But then, Johnny remembered, the night was always queer in that way, fading a man or blowing him up like a toad and killing his eyes in blue shadow.

"It's after midnight, Johnny," Weatherby said. "You been awake?"

"Yeah. Once or twice."

"Hear anything?"

"Not a damn thing."

Weatherby, half-leaning on his flint-lock, stared at a knob west of the creek camp and made his decision.

"We should of set guard, but we needed sleep more. Hit up on the knob and have a look around. Watch the southwest. If you see anything, for Christ sake, don't start nothin'. Just let me know."

"You don't need to worry," said Johnny. "I won't make a peep."

As Weatherby moved away, stopping at other still, loglike mounds along the dry creek, Johnny kicked off his blanket. He was twenty years old, sandy-haired, thin-faced, his six-foot body as hard and flat as a latigo strap. Feeling the chill

of spring midnight, he hurried to put on his jacket. Against his saddle tree his own Hawken rifle lay at a shallow angle, its thick octagonal barrel sending off silver glints in the moonglow. In the same cache were his other weapons and equipment, a powderhorn, cap-and-ball pistol, knife, shot-pouch, hat, and canteen, heavy articles that he collected before going over to his picketed horse.

Weatherby was still moving among the sleepers when Johnny put his roan gelding over the creek bank. Beyond the last cottonwood, open country floored with sage, pear cactus, and scrawny mesquite swept out before him. To some men, even to men long accustomed to a certain region, abrupt descent into the solitude and wildness of great space might well have been frightening. But Johnny, wanderer, native of the older Tennessee frontier, was not one of these. After closed-in gullies, ridges, and timber, he preferred space. To him it was friendly, giving room for action, speed, safety. Instinctively, too, he liked the southwestern night, with its stars and whispering winds and high-glistening clouds. He felt most awake then, unseen and free, and unhampered by the penetrating light of noon suns.

A quarter-mile from the creek the land lifted sharply, a cross-wash forming a step to the knob crest. Johnny's approach was practiced: following the wash to its upper end, he dismounted, left his roan protected below skyline, and went forward on foot. Although he wore Spanish-style boots, weighted with spurs that had been tied down against the heels, only the faintest scraping of gravel indicated his passage. Mesquite clumps closed about him naturally, breaking his body lines in deep shadow.

Sharp on its near face, the knob slid away southwestward like a tilted plateau, miles of the same sage and mesquite sinking at last into mist. On the left Texas desert peaks, plated spikes beneath the horn moon, ran one after another beyond the horizon. On the right, directly westward, a solitary line, no more than a black and irregular streak at that distance, marked the course of river cliffs. Little by little Johnny searched the line, the bald peaks, and the shimmering basin between. Had a campfire been burning, he would have seen it. Had a Mexican military patrol, or a Comanche warparty, or even a single enemy scout been passing close by, he would have detected some sign. But in all that pitched basin there was nothing that midnight, not the swish of a hawk or the scuttle of a badger, not the scamper of lizards or the frightened squeak of kangaroo mice.

Settling back, Johnny sat between prickly pear clumps and scrutinized the black cliff line. Off there somewhere was Los

Vientos, old Mexican trail town and in that spring of 1836 one of Santa Ana's most northerly war outposts on the Rio Piedra. Johnny was curious. He wondered how Los Vientos would look that midnight, whether word had come to the local alcalde and an ambush had been set, or whether the Mexicans had got drunk the evening before and were now warmly snoring in bed. Whatever the case, Weatherby, who had drawn a map in creek sand, had warned that the place was a strongpoint. Its adobes, plaza, and church were on a ledge inside a Piedra bend, with the hard cliffs at its back. Surprise, Weatherby had said—a fast night raid—was the way to get at it. And surprise, Johnny grinned, was the way they would do it.

Letting his mind drift, Johnny thought of Weatherby, the man who had waked him. Johnny had been in the Texas desert two years. Of that time he had ridden with Weatherby, and Epps and Tom Gitt and the rest of them, maybe six months. They had met accidentally at a trail-side dead-fall named Anton on Pear Creek, and Johnny had congratulated himself, then, on a strong run of luck.

Not that Weatherby was not a good man in some ways. Those ways had turned out to be mighty few, that was all. He was an expert at trailing, careful, smart-working, rough, and as hard-riding as any. But he was shifty-eyed, too, a sharp dealer, ready to cut any man's throat. "Wax," they all called him. He was a windy old freak, around camp. He was always preaching, pious-like, about Sam Houston and Texas and how fine the Independent Republic of Texas would be. And at the same time, as everybody knew, he was always thinking about something else.

"Why, boys," Johnny mimicked him unconsciously, "we got a whole new country to build! That goddang Santy Anny! Dirtiest son-of-a-bitch I ever heard tell of! Killin' innocent folks—*white folks*—and rapin' and stealin' 'em blind! Them Mex ought to be wiped out, that's what they ought. Strung up, every last one of 'em!"

Johnny grunted, and laughed to himself. Strung up? If anybody ought to be . . . But then, there was never a talker like Wax. Never a talker, and never a liar. Men like Epps and hard-eyed old Gitt listened to him and, knowing him, laughed in his face. Loot and cold cash, Mex or American: that was what talked. But no man, Johnny had noticed, had cared to question Weatherby's lead. He had roamed that country too long. He was coyote-sly, skinning his eyes for the main chance, and the pickings on his raids were too good.

Aware suddenly of movement behind him, Johnny turned, fading farther into pear shadow, and made out a line of horsemen emerging from the creek cottonwoods. Across the open

country sound carried softly but well. He could hear the chink of bit rings, the creak of saddles straining at horsehair girths, and, more clearly, the clop of unshod hoofs on rock. Weatherby was there, big on his bay horse; Sarrett, loose-shouldered on his buckskin; Gavin, the dandy of the outfit, riding tight on his worthless single-footing sorrel; Willie Epps, pea-sized but clip-tongued and mean, aside from Gitt the most dangerous man in the line. Johnny recognized them by the peculiar quirks in their riding, and calculated each man's part in the raid. War? The Texas war for independence? That question again passed idly through his mind. Yes, that was what the big augers called it. Not a man but held some grudge. Not a man in that line but hated Santa Ana and his Mexicans, hated their talk, the way they killed, their rot-gut laughter. But there was something more, Johnny knew, in these riders. They were free-booters. Without war, they would still have been raiding. They were in it, in to the death, but keeping far to the borders of war.

Under the moon, that silent witness to so many night actions, the horsemen were moving at a trot. Weatherby would wait for no man. Johnny sought his long-legged, Tennessee-bred roan, broke at a lope from the wash, and, coming in from the flank, skirmished like a wild one into the bunch.

It was late, after three in the morning, when the riders reached the Rio Piedra. Cottonwoods like those along the unnamed creek grew in regular order on the river's left bank, as if planted there by some traveler of many years before. Growing among the cottonwoods were smaller trees, hackberries and willows sprouting in moist pockets that would know shade in the middle of the day, and wild grape, cockleburs, and clumps of flood debris offering protection to those who did not wish to be seen.

Dismounting in sage, the raiders, twenty-eight in number, made their way to the river edge. The Piedra, smudgy brown even in darkness, was three hundred yards wide at that point, mottled with bars that lay scarcely exposed, the gurgle of its currents, persistent against the soft sediments, indicating speed and some depth. Upstream was an island, a long, permanent sliver of cocklebur thicket. Downstream all was clear, the water flashing in patches like huge oval conchas. Beyond the river were other cottonwoods; open spaces lying close to current level; an arching ledge, fifty feet above the water, on which adobe houses were distinguishable; and the basaltic cliffs of the bend, bulging, irregularly carved, still a cave-black streak in the silver.

Weatherby stood quietly gazing out over the river. His

gaunt cheeks and scoop jaw, and the shabby, broken-brimmed hat that rested in precarious balance on the bridge of his nose, were all cleanly outlined in profile. There was little tenseness about him in that moment. He seemed instead to be fully at ease, neither expert frontiersman nor gunfighter but rather a slow-moving back-country farmer, out for an evening look at his crops.

"Sound asleep," he said, eying the Mexican town. "Not a God damn light in the place. Reckon anybody's home? Santy Anny, you reckon?"

Among his armed companions there was laughter, but no one spoke. Weatherby went on:

"See that high spot on the ledge? Look close and you can see the church way in the back, under the cliffs. That's the west side of the plaza. On the south's the Martinez corrals, and the town hall's right across to the north. Them's the main places. All the rest's just scrub adobe, a bunch of rat-nests, with old tumble-down walls and some sheds and things and quite a few orchards. Maybe a hundred and fifty people, all told. There won't be much to get, outside the stores and the hall."

The raw-boned leader glanced at his men. "Remember that map I drawed?" he said. "There ain't no way up that cliff. If they make a run for it, they'll hit north or south from the plaza. Either that or into the Piedra, and I ain't worried much about the river. It's too deep on the west, and them Mex don't go much for swimmin'.

"Remember what I told you about that north side. There ain't no roads a-tall. Just a stock trail, but look out for fences. There's two of 'em, with gates and three houses, and one irrigation ditch." Weatherby turned to the diminutive Epps. "Willie, you know who you're takin'. Keep close to the river. Sneak past them houses and get as close to the courthouse as you can. Right on the plaza. Then, when the fireworks begins, make a run for it."

Epps nodded. A Georgian, better acquainted with the middle plains than with the southwestern desert, he was chewing on a dry, sweet cottonwood twig as he stared, cold-faced, at the slumbering town.

"How far up's that ford, Wax?"

"Mile. Maybe a mile and a quarter. I'll give you an hour, gettin' up there, crossin', and comin' on down. You'll have to make it. It'll be close to light then."

"We'll make it. Don't worry none about that."

In the shadows another frontiersman stirred. Though said to have come from Indiana, the timbered hill land above the Ohio, Tom Gitt had never admitted the fact. A tall man

of graceful, light frame, in middle age, he was taciturn and inclined to keep strictly to himself. Little was known about him, at all, except that he had spoken of trapping beaver in the Rocky Mountains, and that, with the long flint-lock rifle, few men were his equal.

Weatherby showed Gitt considerable respect. "I was comin' to you, Tom," he said. "Epps takes the north ford. Me and the main bunch'll take the south ford and come back by the wagon road. Soon as we leave here, you hit for the island. When you get there, hole up in the cockleburs at the south end. Keep a sharp lookout."

Gitt was disgusted. "That's all?"

"It's the most important, Tom. Tres Arboles ain't but sixty miles south. We got to have time. If anybody comes flyin' off that ledge, it'll be up to you."

For long seconds, as his men continued to wait. Weatherby stood with head down, frowning and pressing his lips between thumb and forefinger. Epps; the silent Gitt out on the river; the main bunch and himself, coming back from the south wagon ford—no detail, he figured, had been overlooked. Glancing up and drawing breath deeply, he put his last question:

"Everybody got everthing straight?"

"Straight as a die, Wax."

"All right. Hit 'em hard. And good luck."

In the sage the horsemen split. Johnny, riding with Epps and eight others, looked back at the main party. Weatherby and his companions were riding fast into the south, a light cloud of dust, shot through with moon rays, hanging above them like smoke.

The north ford was easily found. It lay beyond the river bend, where the Piedra broadened between low, heavily silted banks and permitted passage over a turkey-track pattern of channels. At intervals of twenty yards the horsemen crossed without noise, feeling the quicksand drag. Coming together on the west bank, they struck south at once into cottonwoods. Weatherby's stock trail was there, crawling out of the village and wandering into the open desert behind them. Epps kept to it for a time in the tree fringe, riding with caution and peering ahead for the first sight of fields.

The Mexicans of Los Vientos had been wise, failing to scatter far from their church and town hall. To the north the outermost adobe with its sheds and cedar-stake corral stood not more than a quarter mile from the plaza. All was still about the little homestead as the raiders passed, the bean patch empty, the door and windows tight shut, the sheds and corral sagging without signs of life.

Beyond the adobe was the first fence, bordering the irrigation trickle that swung down from the cliff base and murmured in a final cascade to the Piedra. Epps, familiar with rusty stock gates, was prudent, giving the signal to dismount. Leaving the horses there under guard of an older man who, like Gitt, was disgusted with the part assigned to him, the remainder worked their way forward still more carefully, passing the second and third houses without incident and coming in good time to the settlement fringe.

From the shadow of a crumbling orchard wall, Johnny looked out upon the plaza. It was as silent as the outlying homesteads. Spiney locusts stood in it without movement in the late night air. A curbing skirted its four sides like a low parapet, and in its center, half obscured by the locusts, a bandstand rose like a deserted pagoda. Beyond the plaza, a faint but luminous yellow against the cliffs, was the church, surrounded by a wall that seemed higher than a man's head. Finally, to right and left of the church, were the principal points of attack, the Martinez store and town hall.

Noting that Epps was also motionless, Johnny gave himself a last minute to study the ground. The alcalde's office was like many he had seen in the Texas country, a mud-walled box with ornately plastered front, symbol of the civic authority which to Mexicans was a natural part of their lives. From experience he knew what he would find there: the mayor's private office, filthy with papers but opening grandly on the sunny side of the plaza; cubbyholes for clerks and tax collectors; the calaboza, a barred stinkhole with its creaking door and oversized padlock; and in the rear, if luck held, gunracks, powder, and lead. Across the plaza, too, in the sprawling Martinez tienda, were articles that would trade or sell high in northeastern Texas. Resting his rifle across the old wall, Johnny thought eagerly of those supplies—the saddles, bits, bridles, spurs, and lariats; the knives and tools of all kinds; the cloth, boots, belts, blankets, and special bits of equipment—soon to disappear except for the wheel marks of commandeered wagons, in the rough mesquite desert.

Somewhere, as he made his inspection, a dog barked unexpectedly, giving tongue in the whining, irritable way of the desert cur. The effect upon men behind the wall was immediate. Eyes settled in the direction of the barking. The long rifles hitched forward in an even row, and the click of hammers, drawn full back, was like the clicking of teeth in the near stillness.

The barking continued, swelling as other dogs came awake and accurately marking the advance of Weatherby's party. In a house not thirty yards away, across the lane from the orchard

wall, the first reaction took place. Light streaked the cracks in window shutters. The murmur of voices, the clump of boots, even the scratchings of weapons being taken from a wall were audible to the watchers. Presently a door opened, the light silhouetted several people inside, and a head topped by an immense black sombrero outlined itself against the moon-pale adobe.

Inch by inch, like a prairie dog coming out of its hole, the Mexican moved into the open. His manner of acting was comical. He was big and fat, his shirttail flapped out, and his trousers seemed about to fall from his hips. Knowing that something was wrong, yet failing to understand what, he kept scratching his head, hitching up his trousers, and looking about him in an indignant way. There sure enough, Johnny thought, was a gun in his hands, an old Spanish scatter-gun worthless for game bigger than rabbits and quail. When a real rifle spoke—it was Beecher shooting, under a pear tree—it was like a wind-whirl striking feathers. The Mexican's sombrero flew off and the scatter-gun, thrown wide, landed on its butt and discharged.

In the doorway, a woman screamed. Johnny listened, fascinated. Other men were in the adobe, scuffling about for weapons. Soon somebody came out, a boy of eighteen, running hard. Stopping at the fat man, he bent down, sobbing "Padre! Padre mio!" then jumped for the scatter-gun. Bart Gavin shot him. The boy was bending over again, snatching at the clumsy gun, and Gavin's bullet left him with his face in the dust. Then Epps sang out, "Hit it, boys!" and they were on the move, piling into the lane, hurdling the fat Mexican and streaking on, through a ring of wild screams, to the plaza's north side.

Johnny was fast. Outstripping Epps, he caught up with Beecher, rounded an adobe at the northeast plaza corner, and raced across to the alcalde's office. A split-second look showed stud-bolts, iron window bars set in three-foot sills, and a hand-wrought clasp and padlock on the double doors of the entrance. Striking first at the doors, Johnny discovered that they were well-seasoned, repelling his rifle-butt with the thump of thick wood. The window bars as tough: Johnny jerked at them angrily, impetuously, braced his foot against the rounded sill and heaved, prized and chipped with his knife, and found them unyielding.

About him the noise was increasing, confusion spreading through Los Vientos. Beecher, slow-witted, was flat on his belly behind the plaza curb, half-arguing to himself, firing, reloading, and firing into east lanes. Gavin, Freeman, Ed Travis: they had fanned out, picking curb points and firing at

the least sign of movement. Their shots were steady, almost too slow, Johnny thought; a covering fire, while answering shots were faster and wilder, coming from households at last fully aroused.

Gradually the noise changed. Johnny sensed it. His face, with its straight nose and cleft, triangular jaw, tightened and he kept very still and stared shrewdly about him. The new sound reminded him of bees swarming: it was lower than rifle-fire but angry and close, a slow-boiling sound overflowing with trouble. It seemed to concentrate, as bees concentrate, on one spot: the town hall. Bullets went past in the shadows. Some whickered on up the lanes; others struck hard at the walls, throwing out sprays of dust. Johnny disliked dust of that kind. Jerking more savagely, he yelled into the darkness for Weatherby, ropes, and some horses.

Epps came up, leaping like a cat to the window sill and chipping away at the mud. "Beats me," he said, in cold fury, "why they build 'em so stout." He and Johnny worked together yet separately, keeping flat to the wall.

Southward the night action was booming, and there was heavy firing behind the Martinez store. Out of it in a matter of moments came wagon sounds: the screech of hubs and spanging of rims, the crash of wagon boxes on axles, and the clatter of horses on the dead run. Additional raiders swept into the plaza. In an arrow of dust they careened past men at the curbing, made the turn, and pulled in at the hall.

Weatherby was among them, no longer the slow-moving farmer but a horseman, grim and big, full of hurry and business.

"Wingo! Charlie Parks! Where's your ropes?"

The horsemen were expert, hooking loops over saddlehorns and throwing back the loose ends in unbroken motion. The rawhide strands, picked up by men waiting, were passed between window bars, tied, and tightened.

"Okay! Take 'em away!"

Cinches creaked. The desert horses humped in the back, lifting their riders grotesquely. For an instant, as firing kept on at what seemed a great distance, the men at the hall became still. Cracks showed in the front wall. Little by little the adobe bulged outward, then gave way in huge slabs. Mounts pitched forward. Riders sprang clear, and there were fresh yells and a crash of glass as rifle butts smashed through a pane.

Within, the town hall was pitch-black, its rooms partitioned in manana fashion, cluttered and sour with the smell of wine and Mexican tobacco. Until horses had broken down the double doors, flooding moonlight into a corridor that ran

like a mine tunnel toward the rear of the building, the intruders were hampered. Fearing to set flint to candles, they could only stumble over chairs, counters, and file-boxes in their search for the more secret places.

As he probed deeper into the blackness, Johnny listened to talk between Epps and Weatherby. They were moving as clumsily as he, swearing as they bumped into doors and walls, then plaintively, like town gossips, taking up their talk as they rammed head-first into the likeliest spots.

"How was it south?" Epps was asking.

"Them goddang dogs," Weatherby said. "I knowed we'd run into 'em sometime. But they caught us right off. There ain't nothin' I hate worse'n dogs, especially Mexican dogs. They raised holy hell."

"We was lucky. We didn't hit one."

"We heard shootin' and hollerin'." Weatherby held the question in his voice. "Figured something was up."

"Yeah. You boys was the cause of that. We run into a Mex."

"Get 'im?"

"We sure as hell did. Beecher pulled down on him cold. A kid come runnin' out and tried to latch onto the gun. Bart Gavin got him."

Weatherby was silent, blundering about in a room which had already been searched. At last he said petulantly, as if he had forgotten Epps' words:

"There ain't nothin' in here. God damn it, where's that Johnny Christmas? I seen him come in."

Johnny answered in kind. "Right here I am."

"Find anything?"

"It might be. But you better look for yourself."

"Well, why the hell didn't you say so?"

In the silence that seemed now to be flowing strangely from the plaza, as though both sides were winded and suddenly willing to wait, Weatherby, with Epps on his heels, hustled into the storeroom. Falling headlong over Johnny, he pawed about, feeling not only powder kegs and guns but flat, smooth, cold disks which he knew to be lead.

"By God," Weatherby muttered, getting up with a wheeze. "That's what I been lookin' for!" With a single stride he regained the corridor and bellowed half-triumphantly, half-irritably, at men still guarding the entrance:

"Smith! Stewart! Shake a leg in here. We got to be movin'!"

The plaza, when Johnny saw it again, remained queerly without sound or motion, the curb offering protection to possibly a dozen men lying on watch, the adobe houses standing gloomy and apparently vacant. The Martinez store

sprawled even more slackly along its canopied walk, as if no action had taken place among the feed sheds, wagon park, and corrals at its rear. In the west the church, once so softly luminous behind its ancient wall, stood more than ever detached, like a lump of desert rock crumbling slowly within the shadow of the cliffs.

Weatherby, impatient, supervised the loading. Two full racks of Mexican weapons; every block of raw lead and powder keg to be found; even file-boxes, stacks of loose papers, and writing materials were swept up and packed into wagons brought from the Martinez property. When all had been carried out, Weatherby made his appraisal, signified satisfaction, and, moving to the head of one of the teams, scanned the men still on guard in the plaza.

"Beecher!"

"Yeah, Wax!"

"Hustle it up! I want you to drive the first wagon!"

Getting up like a man whose joints were no longer limber, Beecher came down the dusty lane between the town hall and plaza. He, too, was big, and a thick-chested frontiersman with a whiskered, friendly face and great hands that gripped his rifle as if it were a light branch. When he had come halfway and was lumbering eagerly forward, full in the moonlight, a gun cracked. Beecher faltered, as though his heel had caught on a root, and, opening his mouth in a futile effort to speak, sank to the ground.

At the wagons, raiders stared. Before a man could move, a second shot rang out and Sarrett, loose-jawed native of the Mississippi country, toppled like a sack from his wagon seat.

"Look out, boys! They're in the church there!"

Weatherby's cry, bursting like a thunderclap over Los Vientos, broke the spell. Throughout the plaza, yells went up. Men pressed against their mounts or dashed for safety in the corridor. Even as they shifted a hidden rifle spoke again, and Johnny Christmas, caught behind a wagon hub, saw flame above the ancient wall and heard a bullet whistle where a man had been.

Keeping low, Johnny braced himself for the fourth shot. The wheel which he had jumped behind was of great size, hand-hewn from a seasoned block of cottonwood, the hub thick and capable of stopping lead. Yet, at best, it afforded insecure shelter. The horses were restless frightened by Sarrett's body where it lay tangled in reins and traces. Watching the wall, Johnny waited only a moment, then, leaping into the open, crossed the walk in two bounds and crashed into men in the corridor.

Weatherby was there, unhurt and raging. "I don't care what you do! Blow 'em up! Burn their damn church to the ground! Only, get 'em!" The words fell about him like hammer-strikes. Men were breathing hard recovering from shock and seething in the way of men unable to hold in their anger. There was no hesitation, no question as to what they would do.

Some minutes later, behind the alcalde's office, Johnny stopped to collect himself. He was alone. Among the trees and walls of Los Vientos other raiders had already scattered. Once more, as though at a prearranged signal, silence had settled on the Mexican town, a silence accepted this time by the most raucous Mexican cur.

Five minutes, Johnny was thinking bitterly, could be a long time. It was scarcely more than that since the shots had been fired. Yet those minutes had seemed an untold length of time during which he had lived like something trapped, then, breaking free, had crossed bright, limitless space to the safety of a hole and had come out, somewhere far back in the blackness, into a region of night as soft and fragrant, as isolated and peaceful as he had ever known.

Under pear trees heavy with the scent of blossoms and April wood sap, Johnny shivered a little. His escape had been narrow. He had known fear in those moments, a fear that he himself would have been the first to admit. Nothing, the wild country had taught him, could live without fear. No thing had ever walked the earth, or flown above it, or burrowed in it, without facing crisis and the terror it brought. Surprise, too, he was thinking: all his life he had heard men, good trappers and hunters, talk of surprise and calculate its value and nature. Now, again, he had seen. Again, twice in a single night, he had witnessed its effects on men and the crises in which they had ended their lives. To Johnny, standing still in the Mexican orchard, surprise as well as fear—the slashing blow, delivered out of darkness—was a law common to all things. It was desert law, acceptable enough, to be studied and skillfully used, or evaded.

Grunting, he reloaded his rifle. His hands, slimmed by riding but hard of knuckle, worked smoothly. His eyes, their gray-blue intensified by the night, followed the movements automatically, checking each in succession. The trickle of powder down the barrel was dry, the descent of the bullet clean, the swish of the ramrod at once comforting and businesslike. When he had finished, Johnny blew powder grains from the metal and looked about him. Where Epps and the others had got to, he did not know. Nor did he care. Trusting no one, having faith in nothing but his own eyes and ears and

in his fine Hawken rifle, he knew only that he would work more swiftly and surely alone.

His trail took him to the north wall of the church which ran westward a considerable way, rising and falling with the ledge contours and reaching its northwestern angle among boulders at the cliff base. Under the late moon, trees and short bushes cast their shadows on the wall. Far above it, looking incredibly old and weathered at close range, the church-spire, notched with a solitary window and tipped with a block cross of glinting yellow, gazed in seeming peace upon the town and shimmering river.

Pressing close to the wall, Johnny waited, letting the slight sounds of his passage die away. Minutes later, as he was on the point of lifting his head above the wall, he heard the click of pebbles nearby. Footsteps, setting up a dry shuffling within the churchyard, arrested him. Coming from the left, in the direction of the arched plaza gateway, the foosteps passed close to the north wall and receded, as if following the twisting course of a path. Presently a more familiar sound, that of heavy door hinges creaking, came to the listener's ears, a noise followed at once by the scraping of sandals on rock and by the sharp, unexpected striking of metal on a doorsill.

Still Johnny waited, a question rising uneasily in his mind. Three shots had been fired from the church wall. No man, Johnny was positive, could have fired, reloaded, and fired a single weapon with such sureness and speed. The sniper retreating into the church, therefore, must have had three rifles at hand. Either that, or . . . Johnny, marking the thought, hitched his knife farther back on his hip, re-examined his rifle hammer and load, and slipped over the wall.

The churchyard was much as he had pictured it, a level space of two acres, planted with roses and yucca, and providing, in secluded plots, sanctuary for the pious dead. Sighting nothing yet fearing ambush, Johnny kept well away from the path, stepping over graves to the ancient mission and finding it ruggedly built, its north side broken only by two windows, narrow and high, and a doorway half-hidden by lilac. Paying no attention to the windows, Johnny tested the door-latch. It lifted easily, the door itself swinging inward and giving access to a sunken rear room.

At some point on the plaza a gun went off, a solitary, questing shot designed to draw fire. Cocking an ear, Johnny tried to identify the weapon, but failed. Crossing the room under cover of the echoes, he located a second door and moved wraithlike into the innermost spaces of the church.

Light, filtering through the colored windows of nave and

sides, spread like mist through the vaulted room, bringing into gray relief the lines of prayer benches, the altar with its tapestry and candlesticks, the religious santos set in niches, even the soaring, hand-carved beams of the ceiling and the huge portraits, done in dark, cracked oils, which filled the space between the pedestals. Upon Johnny, who in two years of life in Texas had gazed distantly and with shyness upon the ancient churches of the Mexicans, the effect of the room was profound. By the altar rail he stood stock-still, momentarily forgetful of his purpose there, overwhelmed alike by the ghostly bareness of the place and by the sternness, the death-like severity of the faces that stared so sharply down upon him from the walls.

Once more the gun went off, a single voice, seemingly lost and sending its report in rippling waves against the cliffs. This time it drew response. Glass tinkled. Somewhere in the vaulted room there was a shuffle, as of cloth or sacking being dragged across dry boards. Johnny, stiffening, saw movement in the choir loft. A figure, strangely hooded, limned itself against the lone spire window. Glass fell in louder splashes and the metal of a weapon, slanting downward, poured a stream of moonlight toward the plaza.

For a fraction of a second Johnny hesitated, half-raising his rifle. He could have fired. Many times before, in wooded as well as open country, he had hit more difficult marks, bringing down running deer or squirrels hiding among the highest branches of oaks. But this target was different. This time, if he missed, there would be swift reprisal. In the choir loft the figure would whirl. The gun even now leveling upon some obscure point in the plaza would flash in the direction of the altar, and he himself, caught without a loaded rifle, would become the target of one who had already killed twice at long range.

Tensed for a sign that he had been discovered, Johnny followed the stealthy movements of the sniper. More glass tinkled, like the falling of water drops into a pool, as the break in the window was widened. Boards creaked and the rustle of cloth was louder as the figure, working with a grim singleness of purpose, settled itself, encompassing the gun within its black folds. His lips dry, his mind filled with vague, impersonal thoughts of the men at whom the bullet might strike, Johnny awaited the shot. When it came he sprang forward, full into the broad central aisle. He was ready in that instant, sure in the knowledge that he held the advantage, hard in his intent to shoot down, with his own weapon, the enemy so clearly marked against the spire pane.

The cocking of his rifle was like the spang of a fork tine in frost. At the sound the figure spun about, the Spanish gun fell with a crash and for an additional second, as the men faced each other, there was absolute silence beneath the high-beamed roof of the church.

"Maria sanctissima."

Like a lonely plains wind, soft and without accent, the words floated down, touching Johnny with their fear and despair. The arms of the figure stretched out, batlike in the loose folds of the robe. The body straightened and seemed to grow taller; the head was slowly drawn back, bracing itself against the spire frame. At the shot the figure disintegrated. Candlesticks rang in the blast. A roaring, like that of water rushing through some underground passage, surged and ebbed between the walls. Powder-smoke smudged the lines of moonlight, and then only Johnny, his body bent forward, his right hand clasping the cap-and-ball pistol, was left visibly on watch in the church.

A minute passed. Moving warily, Johnny approached a staircase leading to the choir loft. As he did so a fresh sound, scarcely louder than the scuttle of a rat, caught his ear. He whirled, covering the broad main floor with his pistol.

At the altar rail still another figure was crouching, small and familiarly compact. Johnny grinned as he recognized him. Not until the late-comer had moved again, stepping quite close, did he say:

"Lookin' for somebody, Epps?"

The little frontiersman jumped. "God damn you. I ought to kill you for that."

"I wouldn't try it if I was you," Johnny said coldly.

"You know what I'm lookin' for. Where is he?"

"Up in the loft. I was just goin' up."

Glaring, Epps moved toward the stairs. He was silent as he climbed them, quick in his appraisal of the choir space, unhesitating in his approach to the form below the window. Fumbling with the voluminous black robe that covered the body, his fingers encountered braided cord, beads, and a cowl. Only after that, with the opaque light of the moon falling upon a white, half-obscured face, did Epps stand up, his eyes holding Johnny strangely in the gloom.

"Can you tie that?" he said. "It's a priest."

Johnny leaned on his weapon. "He was a damned good shot, whatever he was. Look down there."

On open grass in the churchyard, within a few feet of the plaza gate, lay what appeared to be twin lengths of black pipe.

"Rifles, by God!"

"Three of 'em. How'd you think he shot so fast? When he come up here he knowed he'd only have use for one. No time to load three."

"I'm a son-of-a-bitch." Epps jerked a small silver cross from the priest's neck. "After this I wouldn't put nothin' past 'em."

Wasting no further words, Epps ran his fingers again through the robe, and finding nothing worth taking, retraced his way to the stairs. On the main floor he gauged the size of the tapestries, then tore one from its pegs and carried it to the altar. There he spread the cloth flat and began tossing onto it candlesticks and other ornaments of value.

For a time Johnny looked on in surprise.

"What the hell you doin', Epps?"

The pile on the tapestry was growing. "Come on, come on!" Epps snapped. "Everything's silver, by God. Silver and gold. I bet Weatherby didn't expect nothin' like this."

Johnny's surprise turned to contempt and digust. He flushed as he said:

"Put 'em back, Epps."

In his zeal Epps paid no attention.

"God damn it. I said put 'em back."

Epps stopped, glancing up in exasperation.

"Say," he answered, "what is this? Are you foolin'?"

"Not me," Johnny told him. "I just ain't robbin' churches, that's all."

Epps sat back, grinning. "Well," he said, "if that don't take the cake. You know, boy, I been watchin' you. You're gettin' a mite too big for your britches."

"You think so?"

"I know so. And I ain't the only one. Weatherby was talkin' the other day. He said he was sort of gettin' tired of things. Didn't figure you was holdin' up your end of the deal."

"*I* wasn't?" Johnny spat. "Weatherby can go plumb to hell. I'm sick of his jaw."

Epps' grin widened. "Well, now, I'll just have to tell him that. As for tonight—you kill a priest, then scare me half to death, then say you ain't robbin' no churches. What's the matter, Christmas, afraid of your name?"

Johnny stepped forward, caught Epps by the shoulder, and sent him sprawling. Before the little raider could regain his balance, he faced the cap-and-ball pistol.

Johnny stared at him.

"You'll take that back, too, Epps."

"By Jesus!" Epps was too astonished to do more than sit. Even in the semi-darkness the hate on his small, sharp features was plain. "I'm warnin' you, Christmas. . . ."

"I don't want no trouble, Epps. Just put them things back like I told you."

Epps complied, grudgingly, in hard silence. When the candlesticks and similar ornaments had been replaced to his satisfaction, Johnny said:

"Now, get out of here. And no tricks."

"I'm warnin' you, Christmas. I ain't forgettin'. No man livin' can do me like this."

"Watch yourself, then." Johnny followed close through the sunken rear room and kept Epps in sight to the wall. "Weatherby, too, if he feels that way. I got friends in this outfit, Tom Gitt for one. But you don't need to worry. I'm pullin' stakes quick, just as soon as we get back to Anton."

Orange bands, lying behind the spiked peaks of the basin, were brightening and the moon had entirely disappeared when the raiders assembled at the alcalde's office. By that hour Los Vientos had been completely subdued. There was no action in the plaza, no sign of an impending rush from the adobes. In stillness the last wagon was piled high, drivers were picked, and the bodies of Beecher and Sarrett, destined for burial somewhere in the desert, were lifted to the top of the load. Mounting his roan, Johnny jogged along at the side of the column. He rode loosely but in a state of readiness, his eyes resting constantly on certain riders.

Some distance ahead, Weatherby, with Epps at his side, paused at the south wagon ford. Still another rifle shot, rolling clearly over the bars and channels of the Rio Piedra, puzzled the veteran raider and made him turn toward the adobes under the cliffs. Then as a horseman rode out from the cocklebur island, striking for the east river bank, a smile broke over Weatherby's face.

"Gitt," he said, and his voice was heavy with meaning. "Some bastard shouldn't of tried it."

Dripping Spring

AGAIN it was night, one of those desert nights which, in the sparkle of their stars, the infinite softness of their airs and the clarity of their smallest sounds, stand unmatched by the nights of lower, wetter regions. Hill-top sage was waving just a little. It was cooler and great full-bellied clouds, born of mountain

ranges far beyond the desert rim, were floating on southeastward, drawing shadows over points and sandy washes.

For three days Weatherby's party had traveled in a northeasterly direction, bringing their wagons out of the Piedra basin and pressing on into flatter country where mesquite was less thick and where prairie grass, covering the intervals between dry creeks, offered better grazing for the horses. Though confident, Weatherby had taken no chances. The trail of the Mexican wagons was wide and unmistakable, the only wheel tracks among countless miles of antelope and buffalo trails. In comparison with horsemen unencumbered by equipment, the wagon speed was slow. Weatherby's trail organization was that of a military scouting force on the move: he kept riders out at all times, watching point, flanks, and rear, and yet during those three days there had been no sign of pursuit, no alarm of any kind to bring abandonment of his plans.

Beecher and Sarrett they had buried in a common grave, selecting a spot in a hollow unlikely to attract passing eyes, digging deep into the sand there, and leaving neither mound nor head-cross as a marker. Nor was there any ceremony. A few words were passed between men; there were brief expressions of regret, but that was all. Death, to the men present in that hour, was impersonal, awe-inspiring but a natural thing. They accepted it, when it came, as they accepted the sunlight and storms of the desert, and quickly rode on.

On this, the third night out from Los Vientos, Weatherby made his camp beside a tiny spring which dripped from the sandstone wall of a creek-bed, filling a rock basin with water so clear that every grain of sand could be seen in its bottom, and seeping outward in a semicircle to nourish the greener grass that sprouted there. Wagons were parked in the most convenient spots. Horses were roped out to roll and graze their fill; equipment lay scattered about; scouts, to be relieved at midnight, held their vigil at the compass points. Weatherby, feeling secure, allowed a small fire to be kept up for the guards, a blaze which, hugging the red stone of the wall, spread its cottonwood fragrance over the camp. But of all the party only one, Johnny Christmas, still sat up at ten o'clock, drawing in the fire's heat and watching it grow smaller but brighter as the night deepened.

Johnny sat with his back to the sandstone wall, his Hawken rifle—gift of his Tennessee grandfather—resting solidly across his thighs. Dust, the gray alkali that seemed to blow forever over the desert, covered him. His boots and hat, homespun black jacket and trousers appeared more than ever ragged. His pipe, lying unheeded in a cupped palm, showed dead ash in its bowl. His face, with its wide-set eyes and high cheeks, bespoke

not only strength and independence of spirit but, in that quiet hour, complete absorption in thought.

Johnny was thinking, that night, of the Los Vientos raid. The actual fighting no longer concerned him. Such things had happened before and would happen again. It was the church instead, and Epps, and the rifleman—the strange, black-robed priest—at the spire window that had preoccupied him most constantly on the ride north.

Epps. There he was now, rolled up in his old blue blanket by the fire, his head, with the bald spot showing in the black hair, resting apparently comfortably enough on the bare, slick leather of his saddle. Johnny looked across at him, remembering the first time they met. That had been at Anton on Pear Creek more than six months ago. Epps had come riding into town with some traders. He had had a pretty good outfit: a first-class Kentucky-made rifle, a bedroll full of new blankets, and six shavetail Indian ponies packed with articles he had brought down to sell. He was full of facts about the country up northwest. Beyond the Cimarron jornada, he had said. Weatherby got into the talk, and quiet old Gitt, and quite a few others. In the Buckhorn saloon Epps pulled beaver pelts, white-tanned doeskin shirts, wampum belts, and even glittering, heavy Rocky Mountain rock specimens out of his packs. Till long after midnight there had been wild, wonderful stories of Bent's Fort on the Arkansas, of the buffalo plains, of Taos and the trapper brigades, and of the high beaver country, all flowing together and all told in the way of a man telling the truth.

That, of course, had been before the Texas trouble. Maybe, if Santa Ana and his Mexicans had stayed peaceful, a party would have headed out from Anton one day, packing northwest for the Arkansas country. Johnny would have liked that. More than once, deep in the Tennessee night, he had thought of the Rocky Mountain country and had wanted to see it. But Texas massacres put an end to such dreams. Since then Epps had been on the move with the rest of them. He bucked the mesquite desert, took part in every raid, and gradually lost the ponies and outfit with which he had started.

There, Johnny reflected, lay the curious fact. In all those months Epps never complained, never hesitated, never showed the slightest fear in anything that he had to do. Yet in Los Vientos, just for an instant—that first moment of discovery, as they stood gazing down at the Mexican priest—uneasiness had come to Epps, rising in his voice like a sickness. A shadow formed on Johnny's face. What could it be, he asked himself. Why should some old church, that choir loft, and a sniper lying dead in moonlight make a man like Epps afraid? Such

things were strange and hard to understand. Johnny had come upon them before, many times. They always haunted him, as night haunted him. They mocked him with their mystery, left him pondering—hopelessly, it seemed—long after older men had said good-night and sought their beds.

Still seeking reasons, Johnny fell into comparisons. That old Mexican church: if he had seen one in the Texas country he had seen fifty, scattered among adobe Mexican towns that were sleeping away their years beneath the sun. Some of the churches were pretty, cream-colored and clean-looking, with vigas showing irregular rafter lines, and spires, always cross-tipped, standing lightly against the blue sky. At noontime and especially at dawn and twilight the bells rang, setting the sage tingling with the sounds of their chords. Johnny had seen many priests entering or leaving the churches. He had noticed old women, dressed in black and shawl-covered, limping up the paths with desert flowers for graves; children laughing happily; and men walking with detached, somber faces—all aspects of life and of death as they were known in the Mexican towns. But never before had he been touched by these things. Never before had he done more than stand at a distance, shyly, observing like a traveler from a strange land and out of a stranger setting of faith.

More deeply than the figure at the window, Johnny knew, the church at Los Vientos had affected him. For the rifleman, the priest, he had been prepared. He had sought that meeting: it was a natural incident of the raid, as much a part of the night as the first crashing shots from the orchard. But the crumbling desert mission, isolated behind its walls and darkened by the carved cliffs of the Piedra, quickened him in another way. The distorted santos in their niches, the altar with its golden cloth, candlesticks, and other trappings, startled him, embarrassed him, and left him with a sense of suffocation.

Stirring his Texas campfire, Johnny thought of other churches he had known, of the churches of his own people in the Tennessee hills, and of incidents, related vaguely to the incident involving Epps, that he had witnessed in them. Those churches, he recalled, were not so large as that at Los Vientos. They had no paintings or symbols, little of age, and nothing of wealth about them. Built of logs and set in sunlit clearings, they offered only pews, pegs for hats and coats and guns, and pulpits for their preachers. Yet, he felt, in their way they had been as beautiful.

Not, of course, that he was one to say. A smile, mischievous and a little sad, bowed Johnny's lips as he recollected a certain Tennessee morning. Probably, he thought, he had seemed strange that morning, balky, dreamy, hard to understand.

Probably folks were still talking, still wondering what it was that happened. All but old Granddaddy Christmas down in his clearing. Old Granddad, Johnny smiled, would sit by himself. He would sit till time and all came to an end, listening, thinking, and saying no word.

His mother came in very clearly that morning. "Why, John Christmas!" she said. "I declare, you get right out of that bed! You know what day this is! Your pa and Uncle Jim and the rest of 'em—they're nearly all of 'em ready to go!" She stood at the foot of his bed, fresh-looking and clean in her Sunday dress.

It was a cloudy sun-up, forecasting showers. Snuggling deeper into his shuckings, Johnny gazed out at the gardens and sheds, at the old beech smoke-house full of hams, and at the pines drifting far back on the ridges. There was to be a big time on Short's Creek that day. Prayer-meeting. Preaching by Preacher Birdwell. Picnicking on into the evening, and talking, and maybe some swimming under the falls. Baptizing. It would be a good time. But he . . . Well, he planned something else. Hunting. A little upcreek fishing, maybe, if the weather cleared up. Walking, wandering, working certain things out in his mind by himself.

"You-all go ahead," he told his mother. "I don't know. I ain't much in the mood for it today. Maybe I'll come down, later on."

"Why, Johnny!" She was hurt. "And we was plannin' so much. Don't you feel good?"

"No, it ain't that." He knew that he would only hurt her more by explaining. "It's just that . . . Well, I'm just doin' some thinkin'."

"Thinkin'? About what, Johnny?"

"Nothin' much, I reckon."

"But it must be about something." She stood more quietly at the bed. "Won't you tell me, Johnny?"

"It's not a thing, ma. You go ahead like I told you, and have a good time. I'll come out to the falls later on."

She went out then, afraid, and pretty soon his father came in. His father reminded him much, now, of Tom Gitt. He was as silent in his ways, hard-working, seeming to see nothing about him, yet noticing the smallest thing that occurred. He came in that morning, easily, packed his pipe with new tobacco, and said:

"I hear you ain't comin' to prayer-meetin' and the picnic, Johnny."

"No."

"This is the third time this summer. Some of us can't very well understand it. Not unless you've had trouble."

"No, there ain't been any trouble. I just thought I'd go somewhere today. By myself. Huntin', maybe, or maybe some fishin'."

"You been goin' alone quite a bit lately. I've noticed." His father smiled suddenly, as if admitting that he knew more than he said. "I used to be that way when I was your age. Eighteen or so. Went out a good many times, hikin' over the hills. You never knowed Carolina, Johnny. It was right pretty country. But then I walked out one day and it seemed like I never quit walkin'. Not till I hit Tennessee. I kind of liked it here. Met your ma and got married, right down on Short's Creek. Looks like it's permanent, now we got land and a house. Plenty for you, too, Johnny, if you figure on stayin'."

A silence followed. Johnny looked long out of the window and his father sat on the bed. Presently his father took the pipe out of his mouth and looked down with that same kind of half-smile.

"You'll be comin' down later, Johnny?" he asked.

"Yeah. I most likely will. But maybe not, too."

"Well, if you don't, it'll be all right, I reckon. There's only one thing. It looks kind of rainy this mornin'. Take care of yourself in them hills."

Against the ruddy stone of the creek bank, in Texas, Johnny sat immobile, staring into the firelight. Time and again, since losing himself in the desert, he had re-lived that Tennessee morning. He could still see his mother, worried and fretting. And it was strange, he thought, mighty strange how much his father seemed to have known.

There had been hunting, no fishing, of course. The homestead clearing became very quiet after a while. There was a good breakfast waiting, and he ate it and then went outside and wandered about the place. Looking. He looked at everything—the house and smoke-house and barn and stock-lot—without quite realizing it, so that they would be sure to stay in his mind.

It was in mid-afternoon that a certain incident transpired, creating shock, tension, and fear as deep as that which instantaneously had filled the church at Los Vientos.

Towards eleven o'clock Johnny had gone down the hill to Short's Creek. A morning shower had stopped by then and the clouds—low, slow-moving, wet-clouds so different from the towering white thunderheads of Texas—had broken up, letting sunlight break through in patches. Short's Creek was running full, frothing as it boomed over the falls and rushed on, through gaps and clearings, from the rocky pool to the main hill rivers. It was a morning indeed for wandering, for hunting and fishing as he had thought he might do, or simply

for sitting somewhere on a crest or on the side of a ridge, watching things and identifying the woods sounds that he heard. The air was very sweet in that hour, clean-smelling as it always was after rain, the grass long and damp and slippery under foot, the trees—the straight old sugar pines, and the oaks and elms and maples that grew closer to creeks—loaded with drops, shimmering like cones of silver crystals in the fresh sun.

Preacher Birdwell, Johnny remembered, had been a considerable bit excited. Tall, thin, and limber, he was standing by the falls pool when Johnny came down, where the grass was softest and where there was more open space for prayer-meeting. Hollises, Rattrays, Bennetts, the members of Johnny's own family: all, apparently, had got the same greeting. Preacher Birdwell, double-dyed pious that day, was still shaking hands with everybody and stopping often, so that all could see, to listen and pick up the call.

About three o'clock he had warmed up. Going to a rise some rods from the creek, he lifted his Bible on high and stared in sudden rapture over the crowd. Already, Johnny noted, some folks, women especially, commenced to mumble and get down on their knees. Preacher Birdwell stretched like a living cross over them, breathing hard, hands thrown to the sky. A peculiar tone, strained, cloudy, came into his voice. Blood swelled in his throat veins, his head was tossed back, and his fingers jerked like twigs twisted in wind. Johnny remembered his praying: "O Lord, O Precious Savior in Christ, look down upon us. Bless these poor folks. Bring 'em to see, Lord, bring 'em close, close, Lord, full of joy and the Spirit this day. . . ."

Again, as Johnny lived in recollection, differences, contrasts of the sharpest sort came to his mind. Here in the Texas country, among towns so old, sun-dried, and rounded into the earth that there was no tracing their pasts, he had watched the Mexican people at worship. From a distance, like one keeping to a private spot of ground, unseen and unvisited by anyone else, he listened to their mission bells and to the subdued sound of their singing. At night he came closer in, like a wanderer, irrevocably and mysteriously set apart, to observe their fiestas. On Sundays—blue, perfect days as a rule, filled with sleep and a marvelous softness—he watched their funeral processions, gaudy sometimes with banners and many priests in their robes, but at other times simple, a long file of people walking, a black thread of people moving into the desert, with a solitary horse in the lead and a corpse draped over its saddle. From the beginning these Mexican people had profoundly impressed him. In Tennessee there had been wildness, the hot and dangerous flash of human lightning. But in Texas, a land so new and yet covered so thickly with the dust of years, there was a more

agreeable slowness, the slowness of a deep-soaked desert river, a solemnity, a sense of measured motion both fascinating and alien to all the ways he had known.

On Short's Creek that morning long ago Preacher Birdwell's voice had risen higher, carrying easily over the clearing, dropping at intervals like a storm wind dropping, then lifting once more, a single babbling cry, above the saner rumble of the falls. In all that gathering, Johnny thought, not one man truly caught those words. They were not words to him but only sounds, as harsh and meaningless as the cawing of crows. Yet somehow the people—those same Hollises, Rattrays, Bennetts, and his own mother and father—seemed to understand. The murmur of their answers was like the murmur of water far below the falls. They were looking, gauging, interpreting every movement and swaying to the cadence of the voice.

When the time came, the center of the meeting shifted downslope to the pool. How a certain thing had happened after that, Johnny did not quite know. Nor did he smile as he reconsidered the action. He was not one to laugh unnecessarily, nor was he one to wish a man bad luck without reason.

The pool itself, as he remembered it, had been shell-shaped, a clear woods-green, filled with whirls and scud-stringers where water flowed most swiftly over the falls. On countless days Johnny spent hours there, swimming, fishing, or merely lying flat to draw in the sun and gaze, frog-like, at the changing glints in the stream. He found the warmest and the coldest spring-fed places, the best spots for perch, the openest stretches for swimming. He knew, too, as he thought that everyone had known, the danger in the pool. He had learned that ledges were there hidden in shadow, that holes held strong and deeply-boring currents, and that snags carried over the fall-rim had sunk there like traps, waiting for fish-lines and other things drifting past.

One by one, under the spell of Preacher Birdwell's voice, people had moved up to receive their baptizing. Johnny, standing unnoticed and far to one side, saw Minnie Hollis, Claude Rattray, old Riley Bennett and a dozen others walk screaming into the water, go under in the arms of the preacher, and come up screaming more loudly. Fatty Bennett moved up then, four hundred pounds of good mountain weight. Round-faced, good-natured, the best-liked man at the meeting. His weight, Johnny thought, must have forced Preacher Birdwell off balance. There was a new kind of splash. Legs and arms tilted up, throwing spray for yards over the pool. It had all been funny, almost. When the splashing subsided Fatty Bennett was bobbing like a cork on the water, and the baptizing man, Preacher Birdwell, was gone.

The change that had come over the meeting then, Johnny reflected, was astonishing. One moment there was noise and movement; the next moment there was dead silence. The clearing sunlight seemed terribly bright in that instant, the sound of the falls steady, beating like a slow drum-roll on the pool.

"Preacher! Preacher Birdwell!"

Minnie Hollis had shrieked and men had shoved her back roughly and run into the pool. Johnny, observing, stayed where he was. He wanted to help. He could swim: he knew every hole, every snag, every ledge. But there was no use; and he realized that, too. Older men would only have glared at him and, speaking as roughly to him as to Minnie Hollis, warned him to keep out of the way.

They had found Preacher Birdwell in time. Dragging him out from under the snag, they carried him to soft grass and laid him down gently. Praying began, misty and uncertain, as thin as a wandering hill breeze. Johnny felt the terror in it, the mystery and darkness that had settled on the people so swiftly.

When Preacher Birdwell opened his eyes he lay quiet, clutching the grass. There was no longer fire, Johnny had seen, or confidence or trust, or glowing zeal in those eyes. There was fear, unspoken—the same dread, deep-buried but full, that rose swiftly in the dark church on the Piedra. Only after Preacher Birdwell lay still a while, gathering his strength and feeling the friendly nearness of living people around him, did he get up, once more the shepherd with arms lifted high, and shout in his old glorying way. Johnny remembered, and somehow would always remember, those words: "Praise God! God showed me the Darkness and done brought me back! Praise God, folks, for this day! . . ."

In Texas, under a sky whose stars were silver spots in blackness, Johnny rubbed his thighs slowly in the fashion of a horseman taking his ease. He had not stayed at the meeting. For him all there had ended—the scenes in the clearing, the new laughter and talk, and his life in the Tennessee hills. He had walked away into still woods, along the trails that he knew so well. There, he felt, he came closest of all to understanding those things—questions of earth and sky, and of the fear in men's eyes—which as yet no man, neither preacher nor any other man with whom he had talked, had explained.

Later that evening he had gone seven miles to his grandfather's cabin. There he ate, drank a little good whisky, sat by the rock hearth, and told his grandfather what he intended to do.

"I been expectin' it," the old man said. "No Christmas was ever satisfied with where he was born. I come from Virginia to Carolina to here. Your pa could have stayed in Carolina, but look where he is. West Tennessee. And now you. There's lots of country lays west. No tellin', Johnny, where or what it'll be with a young feller like you." His grandfather had said no more, but had given him outright the fine Hawken rifle and, to match it in quality, the roan gelding. It was after that, beyond midnight, that the long trail opened, leading west, always west, through swamps and timber to prairie, and from prairie to the knobs, dry creeks, banded clay bluffs, and the gray, blowing sage wastes of Texas.

Hitching forward, Johnny raked cottonwood stubs into the fire, waited for flames to spring up, and reset a pot of Mexican chocolate to boil. The noise of his activity, though slight, was enough in the steep cut of the creek to awaken men of the late guard shift and others who had spread their beds close to the blaze.

Wrapped to the chin in his old blue blanket, Epps stared out at the campfire and spring-pool and at the lean figure whose shadow, distorted by the firelight, flickered like a cloud shadow on the face of the stone. Since the night at Los Vientos Epps had kept his distance, causing no trouble and, as far as Johnny was concerned, tending strictly to his own affairs.

He spoke now for the first time in three days. "What the hell, kid, you still up?"

"I reckon."

"What time is it?"

"Can't be more than eleven o'clock." Johnny, in that moment, felt willing to forget. "I got some of that Mexican chocolate here. You want a cup?"

"Not me. Once I go to bed I don't like to stir around." Epps' voice became slightly mocking. "You goin' to set up all night, youngster?"

Johnny stared straight ahead. "I can't tell yet. I'm just messin' around. And if you want to know, the name's Christmas."

"All right, Christmas. But you needn't to worry yourself, I ain't goin' to shoot you—not yet."

"I ain't worryin'." Johnny's answer came instantly. "I was just thinkin'. Wonderin' how some fellers, like you, could get low enough to steal out of a church."

Epps sat up like a man hard-struck. His eyes showed yel-

low light. Johnny, watching carefully, saw a tell-tale quivering of lips.

"That's the last of it," Epps said. "Of all the greenhorn bastards I ever ran into, you're the freshest. This is the second time, Christmas. You're old enough to know better."

Johnny shifted his rifle a little. "What you waitin' on? I'm right here."

"I'm a-tellin' you."

Johnny laughed suddenly. "Epps," he said, "you talk a good fight. You've run several men out of this outfit, but maybe not for the reason you think. They was good men. They wasn't afraid of you. They just didn't want to get that close to you."

"Now, by the Lord! . . ."

"Watch yourself, Epps. Look out what you do."

From a shadowed quarter of the camp, a voice intervened:

"Hey, you two! What's all this? We don't want no trouble here."

To his right, where a dozen men had bedded down, Johnny made out the tall form of Gitt, who had moved clear of his blankets. Clad only in socks and the long muslin underwear which he would vary for no season, Gitt picked his way over creek brush to the fire and stood rifle in hand, shivering and indignant at being aroused.

Johnny did not change position. "No trouble, Tom, far as I'm concerned. It's all up to Epps."

"To me?" Epps forced a laugh. "After what you been sayin'!"

Gitt turned quickly. "I know what was said," he pointed out. "A man couldn't sleep around here for you, Epps. You been tryin' to bait certain people for a long time. Take my advice: quit it. Some of us are gettin' God damn tired of it. Especially now. We're in a ticklish enough spot, in this country, without you pickin' fights. Or maybe you clean forgot about that."

"That's a-tellin' him, Tom!"

"Sic 'im, old man! He sure as hell needs it!"

"Shut up, all of you bastards, and let a man sleep!"

Throughout the camp whistles and catcalls arose as other men looked on from their blankets. Silence fell almost at once, however, as Weatherby himself picked his way, cursing, to the spring-pool.

"Now," Weatherby was careful to exclude Gitt from his question, "what's goin' on here?"

"Not a thing, Wax," Epps said.

"Not a thing, huh?" Glaring, Weatherby pawed at his lips

with a huge, unwashed hand. "God damn it, Willie, I thought I told you to steer clear of Christmas! Tom's right. You know this ain't no time to stir trouble. If you want fight, wait till you get back to Anton. As for you, Christmas," Weatherby said, showing anger, "I know all about you. That church deal and what you done said. Callin' me names behind my back! To me you ain't nothin' but a overgrowed kid, too cocky and big for your britches. Some day you'll get it." Weatherby glanced swiftly at Gitt. "But I don't want no part of it. What you do after this ain't none of my business. When we hit Pear Creek you'll get your split and be on your way."

"You ain't tellin' me nothin'." Johnny's eyes glinted. "I wouldn't stick for no money."

"That's plain enough." Weatherby stood with feet apart, facing the camp. "I reckon you boys heard that. I can't do nothin' about it." His voice became almost wheedling as he added: "All I've tried to do is help everybody get along and give everybody a square deal. But when it comes to this there ain't but one thing I can do. Now, for Christ sake, let's everybody settle down and get some sleep. We got a long ways to go."

Flinging a last look at Johnny, Weatherby stalked back to his bed, knocked the sandburs from his socks, and, outraged, pulled his blankets over his ears.

The moon was a round white eye, the desert dark space matching darker space when midnight fell. Lightly shifting airs had died. Trees stood sentry-still about the camp. The fire had burned far down, leaving only coals, like garnets in gray ash, to cast their banded tints upon the banded wall.

Gauging the moon, Johnny circulated quietly among the men, reawakening the guard relief. His Mexican chocolate brew proved as strong to the taste as it was sour, the men who drank it inclining to be sullen and short of temper as they faced the long hours before dawn. Finishing, they took up their weapons and vanished one by one, on foot, into the darkness, making for prearranged rendezvous points. Johnny, gazing cryptically after them, refilled the pot, tossed in more chunks of chocolate, and, once more a figure immobile against the red sandstone, awaited the return of the early guard shift.

Well-seasoned, dried, and frayed to fragment tinder by untold days of sun, the cottonwood stubs flared brightly, sending up wisps of gray smoke scarcely more visible than pipe smoke. A quarter of an hour passed, then another, the minutes slipping away effortlessly like the unnoticed flow of time

in still places. Men slept, lulled by the fire's familiar crackle. At no point in the camp was there movement. None of the sleepers were restless or struggling in dreams. Yet in this utter lack of sound, except for the sputter of flames and the musical seep of rock-water, Johnny came alert, strangely, as if awakened by a thin cry of warning.

Some yards away his roan gelding, Tennessee-bred, stood like a desert mustang, taut-legged, its head high and ears pricked forward. Walking to his mount, Johnny smoothed its rump and, noting the cold shaking of the flanks, slipped his hand from forelock to muzzle to prevent any sudden nicker.

"What is it, feller?" he whispered.

Sighting down the flat nose, Johnny scanned the cut-bank channels, draws, and bordering sage crests that lay to the northwest, up-creek. Coyotes, he knew, or yellow, slavering desert wolves had spooked the roan more than once, coming too close to camp. Rattlers, big, mottled Texas diamond-backs, slithering between sage clumps, sounding warning from the mesquite and always spreading their rotten musk on the winds, had been known to stampede whole cavvies, throwing camps into confusion. But these explanations, plausible as they were, failed to satisfy Johnny. The roan was too tense. He himself was too sharply alert, too struck by the seeming innocence of stars and moon and by the remote sky, to let the matter pass.

Johnny glanced again at the moon. Earlier, when he had stirred chocolate for the second guard shift, it had hung straight in the south, its beams filtering into the creek at a tangent to flow. Now it had reached its midnight crest and was floating downward, with the slowness of a feather caught in currentless air, to its vanishing point on the earth's rim. Johnny came partially to the answer. A full hour had passed. Long since, the last relief had left camp. There had been time to change posts, time for the most distant guard of the early shift to return. Yet out of the night had come neither talk nor low laughter, nor even the quick steps of a man intent on his bed.

The roan, never inclined to stray far, had been close-hobbled that night, on the best grass. Stooping, Johnny loosened the horse-hair knots, then, going to his saddle, took down his rawhide riata, fashioned a hackamore out of it, recoiled it and tied it to strands of the name. Having taken these precautions, he threw sand on the campfire, reducing it to the faintest red glow, picked up his rifle, and sought the long form of Tom Gitt.

Gitt was sleeping hard. He started up as Johnny shook him. "What the . . ."

"Sh-h." Johnny put finger to lips. "What you make of it, Tom? The guards ain't come in."

"How long's it been?"

"A good hour."

"The hell it has!" Gitt, his face serious, sat up and gazed at the slumbering camp. "You hear anything?"

"No. That's what kind of puzzled me. I thought I better tell you."

"Huh. Time's tricky at night, Johnny. It might not be that long." Gitt's eyes fell on the roan. "What'd you do, slip his hobbles?"

"Sort of. Figured I might take a look around."

"A-horseback?"

"No. Just takin' no chances."

"All right." Gitt nodded and settled down. "They're probably havin' a little game in some draw. But I'll listen out for you."

As quietly as he had come to him, Johnny left Gitt. A few moments later, commencing his scout among the cut-banks and drift clumps of the stream bed, he was lost beyond the last gleam of the fire.

Up-creek, a quarter-mile distant, was one of the clay peaks peculiar to that region. A spike a hundred feet high, the peak was flanked by nests of desert rock, covered on its lower slopes with sage and mesquite frames, and flattened at its tip by a fragment of sandstone that sat like a frying pan, tilted and shining, under the moon. Visible for miles from the south, it had served that day as a guide-mark to the dripping-spring, and afterwards, as a central lookout for guards. It was toward this cone, rising like a blunted fang almost at the edge of cottonwoods, that Johnny gravitated, keeping well in creek draws.

While still some rods from the cone, Johnny stopped. What made him stop there, he could not have told. He had come upon nothing. The sage was as motionless as it had been, the old cottonwoods as dignified and silent, spreading their moon shadows over the sand. There were tracks in the creek bars, but he had examined them and seen that they were boot tracks, openly made and familiar. It was only that the strange feeling within him, that warning so faint yet so clear, would not subside. The night itself seemed to have changed. It was no longer friendly. Darkness was there, but it was the darkness suddenly of a buzzard's wing, a diseased and ominous black, cupping him in its mass, veiling his sight, and smothering all the desert under its gloss.

Not until he had reached the clay peak itself, where boulders rose in wild, jumbled bastions and vantage points, did Johnny come upon an object foreign to rocks and slopes, a misshapen form, partially exposed, that dangled seemingly without support from a loose slab of shale. Moving with greater caution, he approached the object from below, making his way to the very rim of the slab and staring upward, with an abrupt, startled shudder, at the arms and sagging head of a man.

Blood, already thickening in the desert air, dripped from forehead and mouth, and more slowly, like stained water from stalactites, from the slim, nerveless fingers. Gingerly, as if half-expecting the figure to rise and guffaw at its own joke, Johnny lifted the head. The parted lips; the small ears and black, clotted brows; the eyes and thin, small nose: in spite of blood, bruises, and mutilation of which Johnny was only gradually becoming aware, the features were recognizable. Gavin. Bart Gavin—dandy of the outfit. gambler, gunman, lady-killer in every deadfall in north Texas. And scalped. As Johnny realized that—as he stared at knife slashes, the stripped skull, and at the arrow that had struck below Gavin's left shoulder—he shrank back. Grimacing, his rifle held in unfeeling hands, he crouched for protection under the shale.

In that moment the moon, shredded by a new flight of clouds, revealed a second head, neither bloody nor hanging grotesquely but upthrust among near-by rocks, tensed in a wild way, questing from side to side as eyes sheltered by angular brows swept the desert in the direction of the dripping-spring camp. Johnny saw the scalplock and slanted eagle feather. He saw the arched nose, the coppered back half-obscured by a buckskin quiver, the smooth right arm, and the hand clutching arrows and a stubby bow. To him, where he crouched not thirty yards away, these features, blended so perfectly by the night, created an image of death more terrible, in its impact, than that inspired by any companion predator of the desert.

Comanche!

The word was like a snake in his mind. Starting, Johnny raised his rifle, sent a ball crashing through the shaven head, and saw the skulker drop. Following the shot with movement as swift, he flung himself full length on the slope, in the rank and covering sage. At the same instant, as he had guessed, a third figure made its appearance, bounding stealthily toward Gavin's body. As the Comanche slowed, peering in doubt, the cap-and-ball pistol flashed and Johnny, looming fierce and

dangerous in the sage, ran for a boulder crack in which to reload.

The gun reports, rolling out over cottonwoods, draws, and the creek bed, brought the desert alive. Working frantically with ramrod and powder-horn, Johnny listened, stunned, to the noise of action around him. From all sides shouts and the war-cries of Comanches were rising, while in a different key a musical tinkling, so fragile that the tones were quickly broken, fretted over the sage. The tinkling, metallic, giving off a bell clearness, was a sound known to Johnny better perhaps than all others. Spurs. Like dust spirals, caught without warning by stronger spates of wind, his thoughts scattered, carrying him back to a previous dawn. Once more, facing black Piedra cliffs, he heard the comment and muted laughs of raiders. Again, at a river ford, he heard a final rifle shot. The tinkling, continuing, told but one thing. Mexicans! Somehow, Mexicans and Comanches had come together. Somewhere in that great sprawling basin they had formed their war-party and moved north, following the wheel-marks as easily as they might have followed the road to Tres Arboles.

In the midst of the tumult, Johnny considered that. But Gavin, he asked himself. Freeman, Dave Fink and the others —how in God's name? His mind turned guiltily to the guards, and he knew. It was that argument by the fire. Epps' talk and his own. Weatherby's yelling. Everybody's whistles and jeering. It had made perfect cover, perfectly timed. And Tom Gitt. With a sickening sense of calamity, Johnny thought of Tom Gitt. Tom had missed, missed that last shot from the island. Some Mexican, playing it smart, had got clear and struck down the Piedra. Johnny trembled, his eyes darkened, he cursed and rammed the lead viciously home. One man, one Mexican from Los Vientos, could have told the full story. But shots and wild cries, Comanches dead in the sage and Bart Gavin dead in the rocks, told enough.

Already action in the creek-bed was far advanced. A new kind of yell, the cracked ejaculations of raiders aroused and leaping for weapons, was reaching the clay cone, followed by the redoubled shrieks of Comanches and by the strident, more hate-filled shouting of Mexicans rushing the spring. Johnny, out-flanked, shuddered and kept to his boulder crack. The war-party was big, stronger than he had believed. Well beyond timber on the other side of the creek, rifle-fire was stabbing the night and cries lifted, mingling like the frayed yapping of coyotes and showing with fearful clarity the completeness with which the camp had been surrounded.

Like sparks catching in sage, gun duels flared redly, lasting

but a moment before dying out as if squelched by a spatter of rain. More than once Johnny, watching these swift, flashing actions, gripped his rifle and stepped forward impulsively only to stop. With a bitterness that left his mind dry, shredded like the dust of an alkali flat, he realized his own helplessness. Time and again he questioned himself and arrived at his answer. Surprise was complete, intervention by a solitary rifleman useless. At best it could mean two shots, death for two enemies, discovery and certain death for himself. Not even Gitt, had he been there, would have attempted it.

Within the creek-bed itself individual struggles became evident as raiders, breaking free of the camp, were flanked or met in hand-to-hand fight. Once a single rifle shot, booming out with the heavy resonance of a buffalo gun, brought a quick time of quiet. Over the sage in that moment floated only the faintest rustlings, as of an invisible force gathering itself for attack. Knifings, head-blows muffled by sand, the *thuck* of arrows striking home—Johnny seemed to hear each of these sounds. Then war-cries concentrated, and the noise of fierce scuffling, during which sage branches snapped and rocks dribbled down a draw side, reached the clay cone. There were no more rifle shots from that quarter.

Up-creek from the spring, where the cavy had been held, hoofs struck an abrupt drum-beat on sand. Startled, hope rising fast to his heart, Johnny saw a silvery dust line and marked its eastward course through a coulee. His mind swung to the roan, to Tom Gitt lying alert and waiting, and he too was crying out suddenly, lifting his rifle high, and running down through the sage. Before he had gone twenty yards, gun flares checked him, making him hide. Like a smashed arrow the dust line exploded in the midst of the flashes, confusion spread, and beyond that there was nothing but a wild and uneven pulse-wave of hoofs to be heard, a frayed and cloudy dust-veil to be seen streaming away from him, as if borne by strong winds, into the south.

Sheltered by the very rocks into which the first Comanche had fallen, Johnny looked out upon a struggle swiftly reaching its climax. Among cottonwoods below the spring the most furious firing broke out, showing that a stand had been made. For such a battle it was a perfect place: the big, gray trees grew most thickly there, down-timber and drift interlaced in strategic barricades, and shadows reached their darkest hues. Mexican gloating and the quavering Comanche war-whoops changed often to screams in those moments, telling plainly of the deadliness of raider knives and cap-and-ball weapons. Yet, the outcome was never in doubt. Within ten

minutes, as Johnny stared with flooding horror at the scene, the last shot had been fired, the last struggle had ceased, and the last shriek of a raider had sunk away in the night.

Afterwards, fresh sounds arose.

Querulous, thin, high-pitched, spasmodic, the Comanche chant of victory and many scalps filled the creek-line. Johnny felt its redness, its savagery cold within him, and re-checked his weapons. Going to Gavin, he looked for knife, powder-horn and bullet-pouch, and appropriated them. Seeking the Comanches that he had killed, he scalped them in reprisal, hung the trophies at his belt, and only then faded, alone, to the north.

Jornada

THE desert is a chameleon, sensitive, susceptible, changing hue with every change of sun. Sky brightness, arching from the white of noon to rainbow flares of dawn and sunset time, leads to subtler desert brightness; sky moodiness, born of heat and dust or of skittering clouds and rain and cutting cold, brings desert gloom of gray and black. The desert is a mirror for the sky, a cupped reflector, marking every shift of stars and slanting sunlight beam, every color bloom, every storm-made rift and lightning crack, all ebbs and flows of life itself encompassed in its range.

So it was that night. Sometime before the dawn, clouds rolled like pitch-pine mountain smoke above the western quarter. In the long, long distance thunder spoke and there were lightning flashes, platinum chains that ringed the clouds and, seeming cold, crackled in their intense heat. The desert hush, known to every rider of the sage, fell quickly and gave way to surface stirrings, last whispered warnings of the storm. The wind was full, rain fresh and cool, pitting bars and finding every root, washing dust away and smoothing out all tracks.

In the rain Johnny walked with the firing mechanism of his rifle covered, his hat pulled down, his black homespun jacket soaking up the wet. Oblivous to the chilling drops, he wandered only in a general northwesterly direction, pausing but few times to observe his back-trail, and paying even less attention to the increasing brokenness of the country into which he was moving.

His mind was black. Like those older visions of the desert, mirages bearing lines of distant groves, horizon-bounded settlements, and blue, sweetwater lakes in the midst of endless browns, visions of that midnight shifted constantly ahead of him. The sight of Gavin haunted him. The thought of painted killers, followed by their tinkling, slinking allies, sent shivers through his strap-thin frame. There was nothing real about those visions, nothing warm or human in those cries or shots or spaces of full silence, upon which to set his hands. Cottonwoods, the crystal spring and sandstone wall; sleeping figures on the grass; redly glowing coals, a pot of chocolate boiling, tousleheaded guards to drink it: only these and other campside sounds—horses grazing, hobbles creaking, the canny flight of night-birds over bars—held him closely, as they always had, in the grip of their reality.

For a time Johnny sat in a draw out of the way of the lightning. The heat of many spring days had concentrated in the storm, finding release in the vertical bolts that smashed so viciously, like the blue blades of knives, at the countryside. Grimly he lifted his head, listening to the giant thunder-roll, feeling the rain that changed suddenly to hail and dryly pelted him, rattling like bones in the draw timber and transforming darkness into quartz whiteness. Sorrow, an inexpressible bitterness drowning all despair, settled over him. Shame seized him. His cheeks became flushed and he shook as with chill. Never before, the fact mocked him, had he been so helpless in the face of an enemy. Never before had he been set afoot in the desert, forced ignominiously, like some slow-walking beggar, to seek the safety of the settlements. Once or twice, as anger flashed in him like the bright, transient lightning, he almost turned back, daring discovery in the hope of re-taking his roan. But again caution, the same guarded estimate of position stayed his impulse, and with the slackening of the hail he went on, guiding north.

After storm, dawn is the desert's most beautiful time. Then no heat, no vibrant life tension is left in the earth. In all the sky there is nothing but a wonderful coolness, air washed and free, perhaps a cloud, last vestige of the roaring thunderheads, floating like a sage tuft on the clearest of water. Color comes with a white glow in the east, an opaqueness changing to a salmon hue, spreading, brightening, breaking forth in Indian redness. Rays of the sun shoot far out then, clay peaks burn at their tips as wood knots burn, translucently, and the redness seeps like blood through the sage.

It was in this pre-dawn time, while mist following the rain still hovered over the desert, that Johnny went down by buffalo

trail into the caprock canyon of a larger river. There, among cedar breaks, gravel slipped suddenly down a bank and hoofs clattered in shale. Before Johnny could turn, seeking protection behind a drift clump, horsemen emerged from a side-gulch. Drawing rein sharply as they sighted him, they jerked their mounts to the right and leveled rifles across their crooked arms.

In the half-light Johnny counted them, a party of seven, raiders from the creek camp, dirty, ill-organized, as tense as trigger springs. One of them was Weatherby, the only man mounted alone. Another was Barstow, nondescript, red-bearded; another Epps, sunk in a silver-bordered Mexican saddle, with Mells riding behind his cantle. Still another was a tall frontiersman who slumped forward a little, his left arm blood-stained and useless—Tom Gitt! Except for Gitt, whose greeting carried in it a significance that Johnny did not then suspect, there was no sign of pleasure on the part of these men. There in the wild Texas canyon, they sat dully, staring down at him. It was not only as if strangers had met in that moment. It was as if those strangers were hostile, ready at the slightest move to challenge and settle accounts with their weapons.

Weatherby, gaunt-eyed, the drawn lines of his face and the wet disorderliness of his beard manifesting the terror through which he had passed, was the first to break silence. His words were ponderous, bleak, like those of a man whose mind is made up, who settles judgment arbitrarily upon another man considered at fault.

"How the hell did you get here, Christmas?"

"I walked."

"I didn't see you durin' the fight. Where was you?"

Gitt interposed. "I can tell you that, Weatherby. . . ."

"Forget it, Tom." Johnny held his ground stubbornly. "If it's anything to you, Weatherby, I was out lookin' around."

"Out lookin' around, huh?" Weatherby, lifting his eyebrows, glanced at his companions. "Just like that. I suppose you didn't see nothin,' didn't hear nothin'?"

"No, I didn't hear nothin'. But I seen several things. Bart Gavin, for one."

"What did he say?"

"He didn't say nothin'. He was dead when I seen him."

Queerly, with the coming of sun rays it seemed darker in the canyon, abruptly colder, as though storm air had moved down. Epps, half-sheltered by Weatherby's bulk, was smiling as he had at midnight, mockingly, with hatred unconcealed in his eyes. Like a thin but brilliant line, a streak of light breaking through a thick but ugly black, one thought marked itself on Johnny's mind. It was a final thought, one that cleared away all doubt and left him cool, at peace. They might shoot, that

dawn. He might go down. But if he lived, as surely as he walked the earth a day would come, where and how he could not say, when he and Epps would meet.

Weatherby was still talking, mouthing his words.

"That's pretty thin, Christmas," he said. "First you say you went out, then you say you seen Bart Gavin and he was dead, and then you claim you didn't hear nothin'. You expect us to believe that?"

"I don't give a God damn whether you believe it or not."

"Oh?" Weatherby spoke more sharply. "What made you go out? Why didn't you go to bed like I told you?"

Johnny grunted. "I'll turn in when I get good and ready. Besides, I was thinkin'."

"What was you thinkin'?"

"If you don't already know," Johnny said, "it ain't none of your business."

Again silence fell, like a wing folding. The horsemen sat alert, their figures blackened, made big by the new eastern light. On the packed sand Johnny faced them squarely, his boots planted deep. Gitt kicked his pony forward and said in terse, anxious tones:

"Now looky here. All of you. If Johnny ain't goin' to tell the whole story, I am. It was a hour, maybe two, after the last guard went out. Johnny come over to me and woke me up. Told me Gavin and them hadn't come in. He said he didn't like the looks of it, and I didn't either. We talked it over and Johnny went out on a scout. I say it's damned lucky for us that he did."

Weatherby listened absently, picking slack lips. To Johnny his thoughts were plain enough. Weatherby was weighing the advantage of a killing against that of reinforcement, even to the extent of one man, in a still dangerous time. He was calculating, too, probably, Gitt's moves and the effect of rifle-fire in the canyon. Watching each of Weatherby's gestures, Johnny began to laugh to himself. One shot—and he knew that his Hawken rifle would ring loud among those caprock cliffs and gulches—would call Comanche scouts in. Furthermore, certain details of Weatherby's equipment had not escaped Johnny. Outraging him, they left him nevertheless more determined and patient, more than ever sure of the outcome.

Weatherby was blustering at Gitt. "That's what you say. But what does it prove? Nothin'! Christmas claims Gavin was dead. But he don't say how he knowed."

"He had a arrow right through the back," Johnny explained.

"So?" Weatherby turned swiftly. "You knowed Comanches was there!"

"I knew somebody was there."

"Why didn't you warn us?"

"You heard shots, didn't you?"

Gitt nodded. "You damned right we did."

"But them wasn't yours!" Weatherby shouted. "They was Travis's or Freeman's! Anyhow, prove it!"

Johnny stepped clear, at once, of the drift clump. Fumbling at his belt, he freed twin black objects suspended behind his knife and flung them onto the sand.

"That's proof," he stated, as Weatherby stared at the Comanche scalps. "Now, Weatherby!" Johnny's voice cracked like a quirt on the still air. "I'll thank you, by God, to hand over my roan!"

For what seemed a full minute Weatherby continued to sit, like a man turned to stone. As the silence became ominous, the raiders, remembering a first law of the frontier, the right of every rider to the exclusive use of his horse, waited to see what he would do. At last bestirring himself, but offering no remonstrance or apology, Weatherby dismounted, handed the loose hackamore coils to Johnny, and turned away. Something snapped, then, among the onlookers. As the hulking man who had led them, still a smoldering, defiant figure, walked toward Epps, his eyes smoky with humiliation and the heat of his anger, his companions neither moved aside nor addressed him. Smiles admitting, instead, of little misinterpretation appeared on drawn faces.

It was strange, too, Johnny noted, how many rifles had come to bear on Epps in that moment.

Dawn brightened fast into day. The mist had lifted, revealing prairie-dog towns, lone hackberry trees, cottonwoods, chalk and sandstone cliffs still glowing with their earliest light, and, above the river course, miles of flat desert rim. Exchanging places so that Gitt rode double with Johnny and Weatherby held sullenly to the high cantle of Epps' Mexican saddle, the horsemen, fearful even of the click of hoofs in the canyon depths, traveled only as far as the river. Following its channels upstream to obliterate their tracks, they came out on bald rock and stopped at once in a fort-like depression. There, hidden from rim observation but commanding a full view of the ford, they staked their mounts short, sought the shade of scrub cedars, and settled down cheerlessly to await the coming of night.

Selecting a spot some yards away from the others, where the lacy shade of cedars was thickest and where he would be able to rest undisturbed by small talk, Tom Gitt scuffed stones out

of the way, raked together a pile of dryly fragrant needles, and lay down, cupping his head in the battered crown of his hat. Crossing his right arm over his eyes, he remained still, a man in pain and tired to the bone, but expecting nothing, asking nothing of his companions.

Johnny waited no longer than he needed to check his roan for bruises and cuts before walking over to his friend. Water was near at hand, in a pocket constantly being renewed by seeping river currents, and he filled his hat there, carried it up, and braced it with cool, flat rocks at Gitt's side.

Sympathetically he bent down to look at the left arm, which Gitt had managed to wrap at some hour before dawn and which lay now stretched out, bloody and stiff, in the sun. Johnny saw that it had been opened in a ragged glancing slash across the muscle, bone-deep.

"Hurts pretty bad, does it, Tom?" he asked.

In reply Gitt, pulling back his right arm, gazed at Johnny with eyes that were very clear and still, soft-gray eyes, holding in them not only welcome but a strange, direct question. Johnny, shocked by the change in Gitt's face and by the starker whiteness of the hair that grew along the temples, leaned even more closely over his friend, his own eyes meeting question with question.

Gitt moved a little, re-adjusting his body on the needles. "By God, boy," he said, "I'm glad you've come. The arm's bad enough, cut like it is. But that ain't what was worryin' me. Them bastards pretty near sunk me."

Johnny nodded. "It must have been tough. I done what I could, but it wasn't much. There was too many."

"No, you don't understand." Gitt spoke in a whisper. "I don't mean Mex. It was Weatherby and Epps. I been kind of expectin' it. They tried to throw me, leave me there at the spring."

Johnny waited in absolute silence.

"They would have, too," Gitt continued, moistening his dust-caked lips, "if it hadn't been for Mells. I had your roan. I clum him the minute I heard your two shots. But then a God damn throwin' knife come from somewhere and I like to never got loose. There was hell to pay, everybody runnin' for it, gettin' mixed up and scramblin' for horses. A bunch of us hit out up a draw—I couldn't tell at first who they were—and it was after we done broke clear that I seen Epps and Weatherby was among 'em. Weatherby commenced to get tricky right off. Said they couldn't afford to have no cripples along. He took the roan. He knowed I was too hurt to do much, with him backed by Epps, and he yanked me plumb off. He would have left me, too, only Mells wouldn't stand for it. What Mells told Weather-

by was enough to burn your ears off. I didn't know he was that kind. Always pretty quiet and easy-goin', seemed like. But it was Mells got me here."

Pivoting on his boot-heel, Johnny took in the lower section of the cliff-base camp, where all but Stinnett and Mells himself, who had taken the first day-guard, were to be seen lying under the cedars. There, as big as life, Weatherby was holding forth as if nothing had happened, talking his way out of taking the roan, and, with Epps hanging like a bug to his elbow, voicing fresh plans. Again, at sight of the fly-blown raider, still so full of brag, still scheming to undercut the very men who had helped him, darkness, the buzzard blackness of the previous midnight, warning of something poisonous and ill-omened, settled on Johnny. What he had to say then, in tones repressed but extraordinary in their virulence, brought a smile to Gitt's lips.

"You and me, Johnny," Gitt said. "We're in the same boat, in a way. Only, I reckon you got the edge on me."

Johnny shook his head impatiently. "That arm'll get all right, Tom. It'll take time, that's all."

"Maybe. But I was thinkin' about something else." Gitt's gaze was straight and unwavering. "You know, Johnny, it's a funny thing, this business of livin'. A man can go on for years and never notice no change. He keeps stout and has a good time and does pretty much what he wants. Then all of a sudden something makes him face up. That's what's happened to me. I'm forty-six. I didn't know it till last night, but I'm gettin' old."

"Shucks!" Johnny felt a warmer sense of friendship, tinged with sadness born of the truth. "You're just wore out, Tom. And who wouldn't be? I'm tuckered myself, and I ain't been through a third of what you have. I'll fix that arm right. My ma showed me how to do that long ago. We was always havin' accidents, seemed like. Then you can get some rest—all day—and you'll be rarin' to go before dark!"

Gitt was silent for a time. Then he chuckled low and a quick twinkle, filled with the humor of a man who had seen far too much to deceive himself, appeared in his gray eyes.

"I thank you for that, Johnny," he said. "I wish it was so. But it ain't—and you and me know it. Now, I'll put my cards on the table. I got to find out where I stand with you, boy. This business ain't ended, not by a long shot. There's bad blood in this camp. Not only that. Them Mex and Comanches ain't just coolin' their heels. They'll be combin' this country. If you got plans for yourself, you better carry 'em out. If you ain't, then, by the Lord, I got some ideas."

It was Johnny's turn to smile. Thinking ironically of the loss of his blankets, extra clothes, saddle, canteen—of everything,

in fact, except his horse and Hawken rifle—, he felt as stripped as the very rocks and desert canyon about him. "I ain't got nothin', Tom," he said. "You know that. I'm as bad off as you."

"Head east from here," Gitt told him, "and you won't have much trouble. There's Americans over in there—quite a bunch of 'em by this time. You could make it to San Antone, or back to Tennessee if you wanted."

Johnny laughed. "What would I do east?"

"It's the safest thing, boy."

"Well, may be. But there's other places."

"Now you're talkin'!" Gitt became positive, full of new life. "I got contacts, Johnny, in right good country—mountain country, the most beautiful you ever see. There ain't any question in my mind we could team up and make a stake for ourselves. That's what I need, and you may be young, boy, but it's never too young to start. If we could make it to Bent's and then to the Rockies . . ."

"Bent's!" Johnny's heart leaped. "Man alive, Tom!"

"Sh-h!" Gitt glanced at the camp. "We don't want no one to catch on. If I ain't plumb out of my head, there'll be talk today. Maybe this afternoon. Weatherby ain't any fool. He knows every man here has got to stick or there won't be any of us come through. That's where I'll hook him. But, Johnny, I got to ask you one thing. If and when that talk starts, don't do nothin'. Don't say nothin'. Just leave it to me."

Johnny, squatting with his back to the men at the basin's lower edge, began to laugh silently. His eyes were bright. Bent's Fort? The Rocky Mountains? What words, he thought, could have a sweeter sound? What wouldn't he give to get to that country? Not even Gitt, shrewd as he was, could know that. Johnny's mind flashed ahead to northern plains, forests, rivers, snow peaks—to all that faraway land of which he had heard in Anton and, earlier, in the Tennessee hills—and he went swiftly to work on Gitt's arm and replied:

"It's all yours, Tom. Say what you want. Do what you want. I'll back your play every time."

For the remainder of that day the raiders kept to their pocket, alternately sleeping and watching. In mid-afternoon Johnny, lying on guard behind a dwarf cedar, thought he saw smoke above the far canyon rim; but presently, in the thin, clean atmosphere, the columns broke into smudges of fresh-blown dust and fell, like puffs of discolored haze, into the gorge. Later, in the coolness of twilight, Weatherby became restless. He glanced speculatively at the southwestern sky, in the direction of the dripping-spring. He scanned the river course and near cliffs for signs of life, looked with discontent and moody anxiety at a camp without fire, meat, or cooking-

pot, and then, as Gitt had predicted, wandered over as casually as possible for a talk.

Eyeing both Gitt and Johnny with caution, he said:

"How's the arm, Tom? I see you got it cleaned up."

"Yeah. It looks to be all right." Gitt was pleasant, as if he had forgotten a certain incident. "Won't be long, I expect, before I can use it."

"Good!" Heartened by his reception, yet still cautious and not a little puzzled, Weatherby added: "I suppose you fellers been talkin' the same as we have. Sort of wonderin' what we ought to do now we're here."

"Ha!" Gitt laughed outright. "Here ain't much of a place if you ask me, Weatherby! Holed up. Not enough guns. No grub. Comanches on the prowl all the way from here to Anton! You're right. We have been talkin'!"

"From here to Anton?" Weatherby, catching the phrase, was startled. "What makes you think that?"

"Who wouldn't think it? Them wagon tracks tells the whole story. Headin' northeast day after day, with only one place to go? Even Mex could figure that out, not to speak of Comanches."

"Yeah, but Anton. That's a long way. Pretty far into our country."

"Whose country? After last night?" Gitt laughed again, forebodingly. "Empty desert and a little one-horse deadfall on a creek ain't no obstacle. Look at it from their angle. They know as well as you do there wasn't but one bunch of whites in this country, and they know what happened last night. They'll spread like the devil's own from here north. Wipin' us out won't be the half, Weatherby. There's still Los Vientos. We ruined them people, and they sure as hell ain't forgettin'."

As Gitt talked, other raiders, aware that a decision was being made, wandered over and stood about curiously, listening. Even Epps, moving jerkily, his arms crooked out from his sides, came into the cedars, keeping close to Weatherby, scowling, and giving every sign of a man who would still welcome trouble. Johnny, however, remembering his promise to Gitt and finding the little raider's strut as tiresome as it was ridiculous, met Epps' gaze only for a moment before turning back to follow the course of the argument.

Weatherby summed up what had been said. "That's the way it is, boys. If Gitt's right—and I half-way believe he is—there ain't much use of us headin' for Anton."

"Then where will we head?" Epps said, curtly. "Maybe Gitt can answer us that."

"How'd you guess it, Epps?" Gitt's voice remained even. "Hit for Bent's on the Arkansas. That's what I said. We talked

about it six, eight months ago, at Anton. You was for it. So was Weatherby. So was every man that was there. Now's the real time to do it."

"What? With this outfit?"

"We'd have to take it slow and keep out of sight. A lot of night ridin'. But who cares about that?"

"Oh, no. You know that country as well as I do, Gitt." Epps shook his head dramatically. "Nothin' but dry from here north. Jornada, the Cimarron desert. That's enough to stop us by itself. I can just see us, ridin' double three days at a stretch without water, with a outfit like this! And if there's Comanches here, there's Comanches there—and Cheyennes and Arapahoes and Kiowas! I ain't a plumb fool."

"You're wrong about the Cheyennes and Arapahoes, Epps," Gitt said. "They're stayin' north of the Arkansas, and I mean north. Besides, 'Dobe Fort's on the Canadian. There's probably Bent traders there right today. If there is, we'll camp alongside 'em and hit back to Bent's when they do."

"Not me. We're in bad enough shape, without gettin' in worse."

Weatherby had been standing as meditatively as he had stood some nights before, on the left bank of the Rio Piedra.

"Now wait a minute, Willie," he said. "Let's not get in too big a rush. I got some questions to ask. First off, how many men here wants to stick?"

"What you mean, stick, Wax?" said a raider.

"I mean, see the war out. Stick to Sam Houston and Texas! Go back to Vientos and rip and tear, blast the hell out of 'em!"

A wave of laughter, low, cynical, filled with the disillusionment of men who knew that they were lucky enough to be alive at that moment, rolled out from the close little group. Even Weatherby, popping blood-streaked eyes, broke down then, chuckling and coughing as he thought of his joke.

"All right," he said soberly. "How many men wants to hit north?"

To Johnny's surprise, no raider answered. Instead men continued to stand, some with arms folded, others slouching, cradling their rifles in the instinctive fashion of horsemen. All were serious of feature, wary, still-eyed, thinking it over.

"Not me," one said at last. "I ain't been to Bent's but I've sure heard about the Cimarron desert. A feiler'd need a real outfit like Epps says, and this sure as hell ain't no outfit."

Gitt began to play his aces.

"There's beaver galore in them mountains," he said.

"I ain't never trapped beaver."

"Ask Epps. There ain't nothin' to it. Six dollars for prime, straight through, at Bent's."

There was some hesitation. Men shifted, staring at Epps.

"That's right." Epps had become reflective. "I've killed 'em with sticks. Up in Bayou Salade—on the Big Bear—damned near anywhere. If a feller could only get there with traps . . ."

"There's traps a-plenty at Bent's," Gitt said. "And what would you say if I was to show you an outfit?"

"Where?" Epps challenged.

"Charlie Creek."

A haggard raider objected. "That's two hundred mile from here, Tom. Northeast. Further'n Anton."

"Far enough away to be safe. Besides, I got a friend there. Ed Biggs."

Weatherby gave an exclamation. "Ed Biggs! You a friend of his, Tom? For Christ sake, why didn't you say so?"

Epps was sullen. "I never heard tell of him."

"Well, I have. That old bastard don't do nothin' but horse-trade." Weatherby turned to Gitt. "You think he'd ante an outfit?"

"If he's there, I'd stake beaver on it."

"And if he ain't?"

"What's the difference. We can keep a little northwest and scout Anton first. If things are all right, we'll get horses there. If they ain't . . . Well," Gitt looked about him and shrugged, "where else is there to head except east?"

Later, in a lifting breeze, the little party moved out, Weatherby once more in the lead and being careful to keep within the rough block shadows of the cliffs. Although Gitt rode double with him, even clinging to his belt as the roan took buffalo trails into coulees, Johnny traveled like a man alone, showing, in the solitude that gripped him close, neither need nor wish to break the new-found stillness of the night. To Johnny, in that hour, the twisting, glittering river, the canyon's walls, the sage flats opening at each tributary mouth were as distant as the night before, mirages changing ceaselessly, ghost forms of moon glow spreading ever wider on the earth. Like dust his thoughts rolled back, drifting over aimless Texas months to Tennessee, bringing recollections of those older, darkly timbered hills, of clearings, settlements, and of the people he had known, all cloudy, cramped, too full of death in life. New thoughts, new words came then. Bent's, the Arkansas, Taos, and the Bayou Salade. They were clear words, strange and richly hued. Softly Johnny spoke them to himself and kept his trail, moving toward the lakes and forest stands, valleys, ridges, crags, snow-peaks—Gitt's mountain land—with which they filled his mind.

In fresh dawn-light his thoughts shifted to still another quarter and he said:

"Tom."

"Yeah?"

"I keep thinkin' of something. It was when we was crossin' the south ford at Vientos, with the wagons. We heard a shot."

"Well?"

"Well, I was just thinkin'. Wonderin' how come them Mexicans and Comanches got together so quick. You reckon you hit what you aimed at that mornin'?"

"He fell like I did." Gitt was riding half-asleep, his head on Johnny's shoulder. "But you never can tell, boy," he muttered. "You never can tell."

2: CENTRAL ROCKIES

Bent's Fort

IN rain and unseasonable cold, for it was but the first of September, 1836, a trail party broke through timber to a ford, heedlessly crossed channels and quicksand bars, and, under gray clouds that had brought sunset early, made for a square and ugly structure visible beyond the north river bank. Though wet to the skin, ragged, half-frozen, and worn to the point of emaciation, riders in the party worked with the vigor of men just starting out, jerking their mounts, gesticulating, and doubling back time after time to singe the rumps of exhausted but wildly straining pack animals. The cries of the horsemen were high, their curses sharp, as flat as whip-cracks in the slanting rain. It was with a terrible intentness, with the urgency of men seemingly in fear, fleeing from some peril more vicious than the heaviest prairie storm, that they clattered past the curious watchers at the gate and stopped only when well within the patio.

Instantly, then, the atmosphere changed. Features which had been drawn to a rawhide tightness relaxed. Eyes which had been desperate with anxiety and with the gnawing desire to see trail's end broke into a thousand sparkles, like mica catching the sun. Even the shouts themselves changed, reaching new heights and becoming more impetuous and lighthearted. They were like those of men suddenly released, faced no longer with fear, privation, and danger but with freedom, the prospect, incredibly, of a roaring and untrammeled night in some favorite haunt.

On every side, as Weatherby, Epps, Johnny Christmas, Gitt, and other men from the Texas desert celebrated arrival at Bent's, figures appeared. Some buckskin clad or heavily

blanketed, and three or four surprisingly in the uniforms of United States dragoons, they slipped out of fort doorways and gathered about the travelers and their mud-spattered ponies. Among them one man in particular, a full-bearded frontiersman whose buckskins and moccasins were so softly tanned that they seemed to glow in the settling dusk, watched the newcomers for a time with cool, almost skeptical interest, letting the commotion die down before drawling:

"Gitt, man, what the hell are you doin'?"

Gitt straightened, as if unable to credit his ears.

"Fraser!" He whirled to shake hands. "My God, am I glad to see you!"

Fraser was grinning. "Looks like you been travelin'."

"That ain't the name for it!"

"Well, here." Unhurriedly Fraser signaled an old Mexican, mustached and as dark of face as scorched wood, who slouched beside the patio's brass cannon. "Martin, show these boys where to drop their outfits, will you? We close up tight here after sundown, Tom. I expect you know why."

"Trouble south."

"Trouble and more." Significantly Fraser nodded toward the iron-plated gates, topped with a watch-tower, belfry, flagstaff, and swiveled spyglass. "We put all the stock in the corral and kick out all the Indians except one or two. There's a war on between the Kiowas south and the Cheyennes and 'Rapahoes north of the river. We get along but we ain't the ones to take chances. There's too many camps on the creeks." Having completed his warning, Fraser added: "Come on, Gitt, I hear the supper bell. You and me got talkin' to do."

"Wait a minute!" Epps, his eyes hot at the manner in which he had been ignored, stepped out from his mount. "Remember me, Fraser?"

Fraser grunted. "Who in God's name could help it? What's your business, Epps?"

"Now look, Fraser. If you're thinkin' about them Bayou furs, forget 'em! That's what I done."

"That's what you done? I should think so. You're the one got 'em."

"We didn't have no contract. Remember that. First come, first served!"

"A man's word's his contract. Leastwise as far as I'm concerned, Epps."

"Oh, hell!" Thrusting his hands into his belt, Epps laughed. "You tickle me, Fraser—you and your lawyer talk. Just because you got left! Where's Bent? I'll see him."

"Bent's in Taos."

"Where's Harlow, then? I'll talk to him about it."

"He's up on the St. Vrain. If he ain't on Green River."

"Who the hell's in charge here, anyhow?"

Fraser's grin was elaborate. A man of medium height, with the toughness and solidity of Beecher who had been cut down at Los Vientos, he waited for silence to fall before letting his own laughter roll out, loud and deep, over the compound.

"No traps for you, Epps! Not as long as I'm in charge. And you won't get 'em at Taos and you won't get 'em at Vrain. Why don't you try Astor's outfit up on the Columbia? Or Mackenzie—the British ought to have some! But they won't let you trap their territory, not if they got eyes in their head." Fraser, careful to keep his position clear, repeated his welcome to the train as a whole. "The rest of you boys," he said, "Martin'll fix you up. Come on, Gitt, I got questions to ask."

Gitt hesitated. "I got a young feller here. My pardner—Johnny Christmas. . . ."

Fraser's appraisal was brief. "Well, bring him along. Looks like all you boys could stand something to eat."

Laughter spread after that unevenly through the crowd, reaching the fort quarters and seeming to flow back in a soft, rippling wave. Gitt contented himself with a smile. Johnny stared at Epps, then shifted his gaze to Weatherby who stood alone, a sodden, discomfited, thunder-struck figure, by his horse. Waiting no longer, the old Mexican, Martin, led the way to the arched corral gate in the fort's west wall, the entire pack-train stringing out behind him in the dogged, obedient fashion of animals long used to the trail.

More slowly, knowing well that the older men would want time for private talk, Johnny followed the pack ponies across the graveled plaza, noting only the low ridged doorway, one of several giving access to supply rooms and living quarters ranged against the southern wall of the fort, through which Gitt and Fraser had stepped. Confused to the point of bewilderment, unable to comprehend the change that had come with the chill and rain-streaked sunset, Johnny stopped while still in the open, gazing hollow-eyed and gaunt, mud-caked, long of hair and half-starved, at the ramparts that surrounded him. Bent's. The Arkansas. As those words, like dreams, came in upon him, taunting him with their promise of comfort and security, the strange, cactus-studded walls about him seemed to crumble, bastions, doorways, gates, and snugly-sited rooms—all shelter—disappeared, desert spread before him and he rode as in the past, silently, patiently, like a man whose trail is endless. Flats gleaming white with alkali; spring-holes shriveled, skull sockets in the earth; river-courses sprawling dry, their bluffs like rib-bones in the sun—these things he saw. Furnace winds by day, sinking to a sighing breeze at night; haunted lobo

howling, far from camp; the snort of frightened ponies; the slithering of great rattlesnakes in sage—these things he heard, in dread, or felt within him. But again, the thick adobe walls of Bent's rose high. In windows, buffalo tallow light appeared. Voices—the deep commands of men, the softer, acquiescent responses of squaws and Mexican women—drifted over the patio. Cottonwood smoke, blue, fragrant, carrying cooking-smells that awakened sharp hunger, eddied in the rain-mist, and Johnny moved on, finding feed and a dry place for his roan before retracing his steps to the south doorway.

Gitt's weathered face, relaxed for the first time in weeks, was proof enough that talk with Fraser had gone well. Urging Johnny to come in, Gitt introduced him to the Bent trader, whose handshake was as brief as his first appraisal had been, and then, with a wink and raised eyebrows, sat him down at a table on which had been placed food in quantities and varieties such as Johnny himself had seldom imagined. Platters of venison and buffalo steaks, swimming in juice; tamales, beans, and tortillas sprinkled with bright-red chili pepper; unbolted, coarse-grained bread, like that which he had often seen in preparation in Texas; wild plum jams; and coffee in a mug of Mexican silver, hand-shaped and beaten—all came together before him in a glistening mass. Johnny ate heavily, while Fraser's smiling Mexican wife filled and refilled his mug and the older men, leaning back with their pipes, looked on in open amusement. When he had finished, blinking not only at the heaped table but at the room itself, with its robes covering the packed-earth floor, its strange cottonwood chairs, lamp, gun-rack, and shelves for condiments, Fraser pushed forward a tobacco pouch and said:

"Had enough, Johnny?"

"My God, yes. Thanks! I ain't had a meal like that . . . Well, not since I can remember."

Fraser was pleased. "You and Tom here struck it lucky. Comin' in at the long end of the season this way. We've got plenty of everything, from Taos and the Missouri. But I've seen the time, Johnny, when we was lookin' for salt for moccasin soup around here."

"When was that?" Johnny asked.

"Oh, most any year. Along about January and February, when the trail's pretty much closed."

"Well," Johnny said, "I'll make a point of it. I'll trade in September."

In the general chuckle Fraser fixed round, light-blue eyes on Johnny and spoke in a cooler voice:

"Gitt's been tellin' me about Texas, Johnny. I hear I ain't the only one to have trouble with Epps."

"No," Johnny nodded innocently, "I don't reckon you are."

"There's this about it. This fort's a business proposition with us, young feller. We're up to our necks right now outfittin' men and sendin' 'em west. This is neutral ground, you might say. When a man comes in here he leaves his grudges behind. We've got a strict rule about liquor, and we don't take kindly to gunplay."

Johnny gulped in surprise and Gitt laughed and made a hurried reply:

"Johnny ain't after gunplay, Fraser. You can bank on that. Eh, Johnny?"

Johnny returned Fraser's gaze. He was thinking that the remark was uncalled for. "That depends," he said quietly. "I ain't out lookin' for trouble, if that's what you mean. I don't want nothin' to do with Epps nor Weatherby, neither—not after tonight. I've told you that, Tom. I don't even want to talk about 'em. But I ain't side-steppin' in case they start something."

Fraser's answer came instantly, in open friendship. "That's good enough for me," he said. "If I put it to you too straight, boy, I'm sorry. It's like I said in the patio: we got to watch ourselves here. It's no place for feudin' or quick tempers. We're tryin' to do business with the Mexicans—that's Mexican territory just across the river—and God knows how many Indian camps. At the same time we got to keep our eyes on sharpers like Epps. The dirty renegade. First come, first served, he said. I'll serve him a dish, by God, he won't like. But he won't stick around long. . . . I'm satisfied of that. Just stay clear of him while you're here, both of you, and I'll see he don't bother you. With this Kiowa-'Rapaho ruckus and these picture-book soldiers that just showed up, we don't want anything more on our hands."

Gitt was sitting close to the corner cottonwood fire, enjoying his pipe of Bent-mix tobacco. Apparently Fraser's warnings and abrupt manner had not bothered him. At mention of the soldiers seen in the patio, he glanced up, showing particular interest.

"I been intendin' to ask you about them dragoons, Fraser," he said. "They kind of surprised me. I don't recollect seein' any the last time I was here, on the way down to Texas."

"No. There was quite a bunch of 'em through last year, I believe it was, lookin' things over, but it's been pretty quiet since then. Accordin' to the story, they started out from Leavenworth or somewhere and cut up South Platte to the Front Range, then come back down by the Arkansas. That's when they hit here. Just sashayin', they said. Impressin' the Indians. Hell!" Fraser grunted his scorn. "They'll impress

'em all right. Get 'em more stirred up than ever, in the long run. I wish to hell this present bunch would move on. There's something about a uniform people don't like in this country."

"I know what you mean," Gitt said. "What are they doin'? Which way are they headed?"

"I wish I could tell you. They rode in from the northwest, in the direction of Vrain's fort but I was talkin' to a trapper for Vrain and he said he hadn't seen 'em on the South Platte or heard anything about 'em. Mackey, the lieutenant in charge, just blew in about a week ago and took over, or he thinks he has. Commandeered a whole room for himself, when we're crowded anyhow, and told me what supplies he had to have, what accommodations for thirty men, and even how he wanted his horses taken care of. Can you tie that?" Fraser reddened. "A fresh pup breezin' in, cool as you please, and takin' over Bent's? When I asked him what his business was and how long he intended to stay and what he was goin' to pay for the supplies with, he just sort of come to attention, stiff as a goddam flag-pole. 'Mr. Fraser,' he says to me. 'Army business is customarily very private business. The less said about it the better. As for payment for supplies, you have simply to carry out what I tell you. I have the proper authorizations.' "

"So?" Gitt said.

"So, I'm wonderin' about them authorizations."

Gitt, absorbing this, stared speculatively and without surprise at the trader. "It don't sound very good, does it," he ventured.

"I'll say it don't," Fraser growled. "If there's anything I hate, too, it's gettin' orders from an outsider like that. If it wasn't for the fact it's the government. . . . But, well, you can see where I stand. I can't hurt Bent's position. There'll be more soldiers along, if you ask me. And Mackey knows I can't kick him out, much as everybody'd like to see me do it."

Gitt spoke bluntly. "Looks to me like a little fancy pryin'. There's lots of country west of here. And it'd be strictly on the quiet, like they always work."

Fraser showed uneasiness at the remark. "Now, understand me, Tom," he said. "For all his hifalutin' ways, Mackey hasn't caused any real trouble. He's kept pretty much to himself, as a matter of fact, not sayin' much. But just between you and me and Johnny here, you're right. Mackey's outfit was the worst off that I ever seen, bar none. He's been tradin' for remounts here and on Short Timber since he got in. His horses were ganted down worse than yours. He was out of provisions. His campin' outfit—well, there wasn't a whole blanket in the

bunch—and his boots were shredded out and so was every hoof that I looked at."

"Rock country, huh?" Gitt said.

"I would say so."

"Bayou Salade, you think?"

"There, or south. Nobody knows rightly where the boundary goes."

"The San Luis?"

"I just don't know." Fraser was frowning thoughtfully. "If he'd got that far south we'd have heard about it, I think. There's too many Utes and Mexicans from Taos comes in here. Maybe Mackey got lost. Or maybe he was just lookin' around somewhere west of Long's Peak or over in the Grand River country."

Gitt reflected, lowering his head for a time, then glanced somewhat absently at Johnny before he said:

"Johnny'll bear out what I tell you, Fraser. There was talk in Texas. A lot of people wanted union with the States and a lot more wanted independence—a republic, free and clear, on its own. But they all talked the same on one point. They're lookin' west down there—way on past Texas. And north, too, into this country. If I'm not wrong, and these soldiers snoopin' around Bent's here make me believe it stronger than ever, we ain't through with the Mexicans yet."

Fraser sighed, ran a hand through his hair, and shook his head. "If that's true, Tom," he replied, "there'll be the devil to pay, that's all. The Texas war's been bad enough on people in Taos and down in Santa Fe. I've got friends in both places, lots of 'em. The Bents and Carson, all of them boys have got their main homes in Taos—land, sheep, horses, everything. Even my wife," Fraser added with quiet emphasis, "comes from the Mora country, this side of Santa Fe. We've got along good. I'd rather have her and her friends, I believe, than I would nine-tenths of the white men I know. But if certain people get ideas, and if these God damned uniforms keep on showin' up in the wrong places, there won't be any more trade in this country. The Mexicans'll close their frontier just like they had it closed in the beginnin'. There'll be raids and killin's and things. Then—and don't forget this—the Comanches and Apaches and maybe even the tribes hereabouts'll begin to get ideas. Trouble for two sometimes makes a pretty good thing for the third. I wouldn't give two whoops in hell for peace after that."

Across the room, in his axe-hewn cottonwood chair, Johnny had listened with more than his customary intentness. Such talk, plain-out, of soldiers and the closing of frontiers had disturbed him, leaving him irritated. It had been a long trail

from the Rio Piedra, he kept thinking, longer and hotter and drier than he ever wanted to ride again. Bent's looked good; the country up-Arkansas, westward, a far-sight better. Why there had to be talk of fighting then, when there was no fighting, he failed to understand. It was too much like those other talks he had sat in on. It reminded him too much of those plans made in Anton and many a mesquite camp and of the way war —the sudden, puzzling flare of fighting that had no sense and led nowhere—had scattered talk, plans, outfits, and even men themselves to the winds.

"Taos," Johnny said grimly. "That's where we was headed, wasn't it, Tom?"

Catching Johnny's tone, Gitt showed instant concern. "A little north of there, mostly—closer into the mountains. Bayou Salade and maybe even the Uncompahgre. Why, Johnny?" he asked. "You changed your mind about goin'?"

"No, not exactly. I don't see no use in it, though, if we're goin' to just get caught in another damned war. I'd rather head further north. Up to the Missouri or somewhere."

Both Fraser and Gitt disagreed vigorously. "You shouldn't take things too serious, Johnny," Gitt advised him, with obvious relief. "We was just lookin' ahead a little, figurin' what might happen if things ain't handled right. Nobody wants war—nobody with a grain of common sense, anyhow. A few soldiers, maybe. That's why we were wonderin'."

"Well, why don't they get rid of 'em, then?" Johnny said. "Send 'em back where they come from!"

"Ha!" It was Fraser who slapped his leg and laughed. "Don't think a lot of people wouldn't like to. But it ain't as easy as all that. It goes back to the government and that's pretty hard to buck. Besides, who knows what the hell they're here for? They're probably just wanderin' around. Probably wouldn't know if you asked 'em!"

Gitt, noting Johnny's continued glumness, made haste to change the subject. "Speakin' of business, Johnny," he said, "we sure picked up some good news. Fraser here says he'll stake us to our outfit—traps, powder, grub, everything, just like I told you. And not only that. We got friends up the river."

Johnny waited, slumped in his chair. "Yeah? Who are they?"

"Utes. Right out of Saguache. That's the San Luis. Tabby's with 'em. He's the very man we been lookin' for."

Fraser smiled. "He'll show you around, Johnny. He'll be in at the fort in the mornin' and you can meet him. If it's mountain country you want, real trappin' country, you couldn't do any better. And forget what we been talkin' about. They've had enough for a while. Both sides. You can take my word for it:

they never fight again the day after they quit. Just stick close to Gitt here and Tabby and you'll not only see things, you'll make out mighty nice."

"Don't worry, he'll stick!" Gitt winked broadly, as he had when Johnny first came in. "We ain't rode this far just to split up, have we, Johnny?" he asked.

"No-o." Johnny grinned then, stretched out his legs, reached for a steak bone and began to gnaw it like a man who appreciates a good thing. "Hell, no, we ain't. Just give me a day or two of this, though, till I get kind of straightened around!"

Before midnight the discussion broke up. For each man in a different way the time had passed rapidly, Gitt planning his fall trapping campaign, Fraser absorbing the stories of the Texas raids, and Johnny again finding himself fascinated by talk of the mountain country which lay now, the Bent trader assured him, scarcely beyond the horizon. There had been a late meal, in addition. Over fresh black coffee and a final pipe they had arrived at mutually satisfactory business arrangements, and Fraser, calling Martin, had designated fort quarters for the duration of their stay.

Saying goodnight to Gitt, whose haggard face and tired eyes revealed the true effect of the desert ride, Johnny lingered for a while in the Bent plaza. Better than any post or settlement that he had come upon, either in Tennessee or Texas, he liked that patio. It was a bare place, ugly, surrounded by walls that seemed hulking and formless in comparison with those of southern patios. Its bordering supply and sleeping rooms were little more than mud-and-stick shelters at whose doorways dogs, chickens, ducks, and even half-tame buffalo calves had settled for the night. Yet, something there—perhaps the rugged old brass cannon and the flanking towers manned by riflemen; but perhaps, too, the wind of the middle prairies, blowing clouds away and freeing frosty big stars—left him quiet, easy, in a frame of mind that he could have described to no one else. Hopes, plans, stories of that evening were still fresh in his thoughts. Under stars shining with a wonderful closeness he stood like a man listening, eyes wide and lips slightly parted, as if the sound of snow streams and rustling spruce were there in the flatter wind that slipped now with such mysterious promise around the fort corners.

The notes of a song, coming from second-story quarters above the west corral door—the cantina, Fraser had said—attracted his attention and, out of curiosity, Johnny stepped that way. Thinking abruptly, however, of fresh water for his roan, he went directly on to the door and pushed it open, passing in among the oxen and saddle-stock of the fort.

A little to his surprise he found that other men had had the same idea, congregating in the corral for a last smoke and talk before turning in. Pipe bowls made a row of fire-points at the foot of the wall, where men squatted. His entrance brought a scuffing of boots and changes of tone to a flat, low pitch as talkers shifted to look at him. But darkness was heavy there, unrelieved by the tallow gleam in the patio, his own eyes were tired and slow to focus, and it was a minute perhaps before figures became more fully outlined in the gray-black.

As he moved on to the corral center, discovering his roan in a cluster of saddle-stock, one of the figures detached itself from the wall and followed him. Making a heavy, direct approach that spooked the horses and caused snorts and an alert stamping among them, the stranger stopped almost at his elbow and Johnny noted the square-cut jacket, trousers, and curious high boots of a dragoon.

"Lookin' for something?" the soldier said, not unpleasantly.

"No." Johnny was cautious. "Just thought I'd go water my horse, maybe. Why?"

"Just askin'. We got our own horses in here, remount stuff we been pickin' up around the camps. I got orders to sort of look after 'em."

"Well." Johnny shrugged, smoothing the roan's back and rump. "That's your business, I reckon. I'm just lookin' after my own."

"Yeah. Say," the soldier peered more closely, "I remember you. You was with that bunch come in late this afternoon, wasn't you?"

"That's right."

"Well, well." The dragoon's voice carried a cordial note. "I been wantin' to talk to you, kid. The first time I set eyes on that roan I said to myself: 'Now, that's what I call real cavalry stock!' "

Johnny, thinking of Fraser's remarks, moved to the roan's head, combing out the matted forelock and firmly rubbing down chest and leg muscles. "He ain't cavalry stock," he said. "What's more, he ain't goin' to be."

"Whoa, now." The soldier laughed. "It's like I said, kid: the army's lookin' for remounts. It pays good, especially for stock like that roan. Blue-grass-bred or I'm a sucker. Grain-feed him a while, fill out them flanks, get some real solid meat on that rump. Why hell, boy, I'd almost pay to have him myself. Don't forget, too: every man's got his price!"

"Not me." Johnny was getting tired of the hearty, rising voice with its too insistent tone. "It's like I told you, mister: he ain't cavalry stock. So, if you'll just show me the quickest way to the river . . ."

"Look out, Sarge!" A new voice, unmistakably that of Willie Epps, came tauntingly from the corral wall. "You're too close. Christmas'll kill you if you touch that roan horse!"

The dragoon jumped back.

"He'll do what?"

"Look out!" Epps warned again. "I'm a-tellin' you! That's a hot-tempered hellion you're talkin' to!"

Amid the laughter and coarse undertone of jokes, the dragoon sergeant stood in his tracks. His expression changed. His broad face was uncertain, his eyes, set in shallow pockets under mere traces of eyebrow, more guarded as they concentrated upon Johnny.

"Just what the hell was he talkin' about?" he demanded.

Johnny looked at the sergeant and Epps, shook his head in disgust, and went on about his business. "Forget it," he advised. "I wouldn't pay no attention to a plain fool."

"Uh-o!" A long whistle, full of derision, floated then over the corral. "There it comes, Sarge!" Epps called, "When he talks that way he's just about to jump you! Next thing you know he'll be tellin' the whole United States Army what to do!"

"Don't worry," growled the sergeant. "Nobody's tellin' the army what to do." Addressing himself to Johnny, he added: "There ain't anybody jumpin' me, either. I just come over to ask."

"And nobody's said nothin' about jumpin' you, mister," Johnny reminded him. "Nobody except that damn fool. And I told you, far as I'm concerned, not to pay any attention to him."

"What's the matter, Johnny, afraid of a little dicker?" Epps questioned. "Afraid the army might outsmart you?"

"Epps! By God!" Johnny took a step toward the wall, then stopped, remembering Fraser's warning. He turned about once more, slapping his roan affectionately on the neck and sending it back to the herd. "Hell, no!" he called, almost goodhumoredly. "The army outsmart me? You'll have to do better than that, Epps! The roan ain't for sale, soldier, and never will be. I'll be sayin' goodnight."

"Well here, wait a minute!" The sergeant was eager again. "You haven't give me a good chance to look!"

"Look all you want to. But there ain't any price."

"Sleep tight, Johnny!" Epps said. "And don't let the bedbugs bite!"

"I ain't worried, Epps! Not so long as you're not around!"

"Sleepin' late, I expect?"

"If I'm awake before noon," Johnny said, "I'll get the rooster that does it!"

Laughing with the others, those mountain trappers, Mexi-

cans, and Santa Fe Trail freighters whose faces remained dark and unseen beneath their hats, Johnny left the corral and sought out his bunk. Hot-tempered hellion, he thought, walking slowly across the fort patio. The army. What will you take for the roan? More softly, Johnny chuckled as he pulled off trousers and boots and rolled in without disturbing his partner. He had learned something that night, something that Gitt and Fraser and Epps—Epps, by God, above all—had combined to teach him. Gitt, too, would laugh in the morning. He would wink in that secret, approving way of his and have something to say when he heard the full story.

In keeping with his intentions, Johnny slept that night with the heaviness of a man who gives himself up to fatigue as well as to ease of mind. Sometime after midnight there was more laughter as the corral party broke up and late-talkers crossed the patio to their quarters. Johnny did not hear them. The longest hours of darkness passed, bringing the smaller sounds peculiar to that time, but still he failed even to turn, disturbed neither by Gitt's snoring nor the scuttle of secretive trade-rats over the packed earth floor of the room, nor yet by the noise of frontiersmen changing guard in the towers from which they looked out, through squared rifle loop-holes, upon the plains country spreading in silver waves away from the fort.

Dawn there on the Arkansas River came silently and with an inexpressible beauty, holding in its rounded cloud streaks and blue-and-green teal wing colors the first hint of high plains autumn. In its broadening light which turned the silver range to bronze, as though polished metal had been laid upon the land, women appeared in the patio, casting shadows almost like separate beings as they went about their morning's work. Soon cooking fires were started. Smoke filled the fort spaces with its seeping sweetness and there were cheerful breakfast sounds, the crackle of flames, the clatter of pans and dishes being set out, as if this were no frontier post, isolated, dependent for survival solely upon those within it, but instead a settlement comfortable and open to all, secure in the knowledge that on every hand stood neighbors for defense.

While the sun was still red in the east, mounted parties moved out, some of them composed of frontiersmen embarking on a day's hunt, others larger and organized for the long trail, carrying on their pack strings mountainous piles of bedding, traps, and provisions. At the same time parties from the creek camps began to straggle in, breech-clouted bucks nodding aloofly at white men beside the gates, their squaws shouldering papooses and the peltries upon which to base a

full holiday of gossip and trade. After breakfast the hubbub continued for an hour or more, until all greetings had been exchanged, business arrangements had been made, and the fort was ready once again to settle into routine.

Opening his eyes on bright sunlight, Johnny lay motionless, soaking in the warmth and snugness of his robe bed. Gitt, having stepped out a little after dawn, had left the quarters door open, letting in the chill morning air to mingle deliciously with the smells of leather, buffalo robes, and adobe mud in the room. So quiet was it after the first activity of the dawn, and so comfortable and relaxed did he feel after his night's sleep, that Johnny drifted away again into the gray secrecy of his dreams. That morning, in its subtle way, was like the rarest mornings that he had known in Tennessee, when the ragged cabin clearing had lain as still as the Bent patio. A curious feeling of homesickness, coupled with the unexplained, sharp loneliness that seemed always to linger close to his heart, gripped him then and he got up ill-humoredly, muttering at the shift in his thoughts.

Finding no sign of Gitt in the patio and no hospitable smoke-streak, indicative of a good breakfast fire, rising above Fraser's quarters on the south side, Johnny wandered as before in the direction of the corral. Though he had seen many Cheyenne and Arapaho squaws on the previous evening, at second glance, in the hard early daylight, they appeared fatter, dirtier, and more stolid than he had suspected, mere shrouded lumps set up, with black-haired dolls on their laps, along the patio borders. Blanket and bead designs were all that could be asked for; buckskins and moccasins were beautifully worked, as usual. But, Johnny thought, to trade a man's freedom and travel speed for tepees, travois, dogs, squaws, and twenty papooses—that, he convinced himself easily, was something not to be considered. Continuing to feel out of sorts, for he had counted on a large Fraser breakfast, he passed through the corral gate and, failing to notice the dragoon guard who followed his movements with a sudden cynical interest, picked up saddle and bridle in preparation for a ride out to look at creek camps.

Not until he had approached quite close, holding his gear high to keep the straps from dragging, did he become aware of a change in the roan. At the same time the dragoon left his position and shuffled over, calling out brusquely:

"Hey you, kid, keep away from that roan!"

The brand on the roan's shoulder—that mark containing simply the two letters, *US*—was ragged but legible, the raw black of a fresh burn. Johnny stared at it. He let his saddle sink to the ground, then, and turned to meet the dragoon.

"Didn't you hear what I said?" The soldier, armed with pistol and knife, misjudged the white-faced figure before him. "Keep away from that roan! You God damned fool, that's government property!"

Without a word Johnny struck, awkwardly but with all the strength at his command. As the soldier, caught full on the jaw, lurched back, bellowing at other dragoons and frontiersmen who were already running across the Bent patio, Johnny stepped in, lashing at him in wild and silent fury and leveling kicks which smashed the hand groping for weapons. Suddenly men—those same men who had seemed so small and far away at the corral gate—were all about him, dragoons striking him with arms like blue clubs, Fraser shouting, Gitt and a strange, stubby, flat-faced Indian yelling at him, shaking their heads, trying to drive him back and choke him and pinion his elbows.

"Johnny! Johnny!" Gitt's voice was harsh and high-pitched. "For Christ sake, boy, stop it! Stop it! You'll kill him." Johnny scowled and kept on, using his fists and square bootheels. What did Gitt think? What would any man think? His own mind; that shoulder mark, black and shining; those words of last night, "Sleep tight, Johnny! Sleepin' late, Johnny?"—every fragment was clear. Epps. Willie Epps, and Weatherby, and that triple-striped sergeant dragoon had known all the time. They had sat there in the dark, whispered and laughed, and branded the roan while he slept. Johnny shouted then, too. Kill? Gitt had killed. Johnny had seen him. There was only one reason for fighting and that was to kill.

Eventually, they pulled him away. Men braced against him, hard, holding his arms.

Coming up, Fraser confronted him, outraged.

"You crazy hot-head!" he yelled. "I warned you last night! Now look at you! You got us all in the soup!"

As Johnny returned the look, feeling hatred for Fraser and for every man there, Gitt, quick to seek causes, ran to the roan. Bending close, he inspected the fresh, strange mark, traced wet fingers over the scar, tested the brittleness of the fringe hairs, and then, stepping out a little, surveyed the mud caked along the rump and right side. It was Gitt who, coming back, replied:

"Wait a minute, Fraser! There's something damned queer about this." Gitt's eyes were deep and concerned. "Johnny," he said, "did you sell your roan horse?"

Johnny's face was bruised and he was bleeding at the lips. "What a hell of a question to ask!" he mocked.

"You didn't get drunk or nothin' last night, after I left?"

"Hell!"

"There's a *US* brand on the roan."

Johnny laughed. "You don't tell me!"

"Now take it easy, Johnny." Anger flashed in Gitt's eyes, and passed. "I'm just tryin' to help you. The boy's been framed, Fraser: I'd swear to that." With a harder expressions, Gitt turned to the dragoon who had been disarmed and was standing by, scowling bloodily. "What do you know about this?"

"Who are you?" the dragoon retorted. "I got my orders. That son-of-a-bitch come over and started to steal the roan and call me names. I wouldn't take it."

"You're a liar!" Johnny lunged forward, only to be tripped by the flat-faced Indian. "I didn't say nothin'! Didn't even see you! All I did was come in here to get my roan, and, by God, I'm still goin' to get him! Don't think I ain't onto what happened last night!"

"There you are!" The trooper spat. "I got witnesses . . ."

"Witnesses! For Christ sake!"

"Jake here." The trooper jerked his head toward a second dragoon, whose hand was resting openly on his pistol. "Jake'll tell you. I wasn't doin' nothin' a-tall. Just standin' guard like the Lieutenant ordered. And this bastard—soon's he comes into the corral he talks fight. He sees the brand and jumps all over me. Starts kickin' me, even, before I know what the hell it's all about."

"That's right," the second dragoon affirmed, with a self-righteous expression. "I come out the door and seen him jump Johnson here and kick him square in the face. I seen the whole thing right here from the gate."

Fraser contradicted him instantly. "You did like hell. I was in the patio before you were. So was Tabby here, and Tom Gitt, and half a dozen of us. Not to speak of them Indian squaws. We saw you come out." His features dark with suspicion, the Bent trader stepped up to Johnson, the first dragoon, and said to him: "Did you put that mark on that roan?"

"No, I didn't. But I God damned wish I had."

"Do you know who did?"

"No. I don't." The trooper sulked. "If I did I wouldn't tell you. Who the hell are you, anyhow, to be askin' me questions?"

"You'll find out who I am. If there's horse-stealin' goin' on here—for your benefit or anyone else's . . ."

"Hold it up, Fraser." Gitt, glancing toward the main section of the fort, lifted his hand in warning. "Looks like we got company—just like I expected."

Having emerged from a north quarters doorway, two men, one of private military rank, the other clad in the more ornate

uniform of an officer of dragoons, were in the act of setting out across the patio. Midway to the corral they stopped, the officer, having discovered the group ahead questioning his companion at some length and then nodding, as if well satisfied with the replies. Presently he advanced at an unhurried and unexcited pace, his short body, trim and of medium weight, completely overshadowed by the orderly who followed at a respectful distance.

As the officer stepped through the gate a subtle change came over him, as though for the first time he had consented in his own mind to notice his physical surroundings and the fact that he was being watched closely by the men in the corral. Tightening the set of his shoulders, he pulled in his chin so that flesh bulged a little over his collar, held his eyes straight to the front, and walked more stiffly, almost in the fashion of the parade-ground. His boots, worn at soles and heels, nevertheless had been highly polished and seemed to cast up their own particular sparkle from the drab, moist earth of the corral. His uniform, with its flashing pattern of large buttons, had been brushed and refurbished to the extent permitted by limited fort facilities. His cap visored and flat of crown, rested without the slightest hint of rakishness on his head, in a square, abrupt way. Most impressive of all, perhaps, in the generally rough and unwashed atmosphere of the post was the officer's face, framed by its short beard and mustache and by the side-burns which fell in wavy golden cascades over the cheeks. Boyish, somewhat ascetic, too narrow, with a thinly fleshed nose and cool, penetrating eyes, it was a face which appeared singularly well-kept and smooth, as if nothing—not even the harshest winds and weather of the frontier—had done more than touch it.

Snapping to attention, the dragoons stared into space and saluted, receiving in return a quick, nondescript gesture of recognition from their commander. The ceremony having been completed, the officer, singling out Johnson, was about to address him when Fraser, his face ill-concealing hostility, said:

"Mackey, there's been a little difference of opinion here. I don't think it's anything serious, though. Just a little mistake. Nothin' that can't be straightened out."

Mackey replied without turning. "I have already been advised, thank you, Mr. Fraser. Now, Johnson, as I was about to say, I want your side of the story."

"Yes, sir!" The dragoon spoke eagerly. "It's like I was tellin' 'em, sir. I was just standin' here, carryin' out orders, just like you told me, sir, when all of a sudden this feller they're holdin' come up to me and begins to call me names about one

of our horses, sir. Then he starts in fightin' and kickin' before I knowed what was goin' on. Jake here, he'll tell you the same thing, sir."

"Is that correct, Adams?"

"Every word of it, Lieutenant, sir," said the second dragoon. "I seen the whole thing right from the gate."

"That's about the rawest lie I ever heard." Fraser spoke grimly, convinced, and deeply regretting his treatment of Johnny. Continuing, he repeated in detail what he had said about witnesses to the affair, and finished as grimly: "That's the story, Mackey. I was in the patio when your soldier here came out. I saw as much of it as he claims he did. In fact, I saw more—and so did ten other men I can name. Not includin' the squaws."

The officer rocked on his heels for a moment, smiled, and lowered his head, making it difficult to guess whether he had been impressed or merely amused by Fraser's statement. Without reply at once, he went to the roan as Gitt had done, apparently with the single purpose of inspecting the brand. Becoming interested in more than marks of ownership, however, he lingered, exclaiming in low, pleased tones as he surveyed the animal. An examination of eyes, nostrils, and teeth followed, after which he ran his hand lightly down shoulders and forelegs, slapped the full chest, lifted hoofs to note their condition, felt flank and rump muscles, and in other ways showed, to the astonishment of the frontiersmen, an expert and enthusiastic appreciation of horseflesh.

When he returned, Mackey was no longer smiling. Instead he was bland of face and business-like, his quickened stride revealing the increased interest he had acquired. Flashing a look at Johnny, on whom the full meaning of the inspection had not been lost, then at Gitt and the Ute, and finally at his own disheveled dragoon guard, he said:

"I feel, Mr. Fraser, that I am not concerned with what occurred between these two men. Clashes are all too frequent between soldiers and, shall we say, wandering, undisciplined, and untrustworthy individuals of this type. In my estimation they are quite unavoidable. You state that you have witnesses. On the other hand my men are equally certain of their ground. I am not prepared to say which statement I accept. It would be extremely difficult to establish the facts in the case. However, there is one piece of evidence which seems clear enough. The horse carries a government mark, ample proof of ownership, I should say, in any circumstance."

Fraser reddened. "Not if the boy didn't sell," he said.

"What do you mean by that?" Mackey snapped. "Are you questioning the presence of the mark, Mr. Fraser?"

"I'm questionin' everything, young feller, just in case all them facts you speak of aren't in." Turning to Johnny, Fraser added: "Boy, you said something about last night. What happened then?"

Johnny held his ground stubbornly between Gitt and Tabby, his gaze on the officer.

"I just had a talk with another soldier, that's all," he said. "I don't know who he was. But Epps knowed him."

"Epps?"

"Sure. He was there. Him and Weatherby and a whole bunch of 'em, settin' over by that wall, smokin' I couldn't see 'em too good, but I knowed Epps. I'd know that voice anywheres—and Weatherby's too."

"Hmp," Gitt remarked. "That's a damned funny thing. Epps and Weatherby's left. I seen 'em go out about the time I got up."

"Did they say where they was goin'?" Fraser asked.

"Not a word. I expect Epps had his ideas, though. They had plenty full packs."

"Well," Fraser said, shrugging, "as far as I'm concerned they can keep goin'. Now, Johnny, about last night. Did you ever see that soldier before?"

"No. But he said he was on guard. Just like this one here, only he didn't call me no names. He just come over and wanted to know if I'd sell my roan. He said the army'd pay good money for him. I told him I wouldn't, and it was right then Epps commenced talkin'. Tryin' to stir things up and get us to fight. Epps called him 'Sarge'."

" 'Sarge,' eh? And you didn't have trouble?"

"No. Epps got him kind of mad, I reckon, but I just told him again I wouldn't sell and then I left. I didn't want no trouble. And I was intendin' to tell Tom here all about it this mornin'."

Openly grinning, Fraser once more faced the lieutenant. Mackey's manner had changed. His lips had tightened and he was standing squarely to the front, the lines of his uniform emphasized by his erectness.

"Certainly, Mr. Fraser," he said crisply, "you don't expect me to accept such unreliable statements. If it's easy to brand an unbranded horse, it's easier to lie. Private Adams," Mackey addressed himself to the second dragoon, who had kept his hand on his weapon, "find Sergeant Kenyon and tell him to report to me at once."

The dragoon fidgeted. "Well, Lieutenant, sir, I can't do that. Sergeant Kenyon ain't here. He's done went out to look over more horses. He left this mornin' right early, sir."

"Did he have papers with him?"

"Not that I noticed, sir. Only that little notebook he generally carries. He just et his breakfast and left."

Gitt demanded: "Did them other two, Epps and Weatherby, go with him?"

"Just Bryce and Stevens, and they're both in the outfit. I don't know nothin' about them others."

Fraser laughed.

"Pretty queer, Lieutenant," he said. "All of the witnesses—your witnesses—leavin' camp like this, all of a sudden."

"On the contrary, Mr. Fraser," Mackey smiled. "Now that I recall, I gave Sergeant Kenyon his orders two days ago. The army moves quite independently, you understand, of civilian routine. However," he added, with an impatient gesture, "I can't waste further time in the matter. All purchase memoranda are in my files. If you care to come to my quarters, Mr. Fraser, we can have a look at them."

With frontiersmen and troopers straggling curiously after them, Mackey and the trader left the corral. Although the two men walked side by side, they exchanged no further remarks. Nor did Johnny, flanked by Gitt and the Indian, speak as he followed close on Mackey's heels. Only once or twice, on the way across the patio, did he glance out of the corner of his eye at Tabby, wondering at the ease with which the stocky Ute had tripped him. Reference to papers, in addition, had failed to impress him. Distrusting and fearing Mackey perhaps more than any other dragoon, Johnny walked again with quiet self-possession, retaining but a single thought. He meant, as in the beginning, to protest his roan horse.

Mackey's quarters proved to be as large as those of Fraser himself, furnished with a bed, buffalo robes, chairs and corner table, and cluttered as well with military equipment—a blanket roll, saddle-bags, and a cumbersome leather pouch—which showed the effects of hard use. Crossing the room to his table, from which a full view of the doorway was to be had, Mackey sat down and motioned to his dragoon orderly, who brought the document case at once. Then, still without suggesting that Fraser also sit down, he repacked his pipe, lighted it, and straightened stray papers on the table before turning his attention, with a slight pursing of his lips, to the case.

One by one the memorandum sheets were examined and discarded, settling like leaves from a branch as eyes concentrated upon them. The silence was broken only by the rustle of paper. Fraser stood close over the table, his arms folded. Gitt, to one side, leaned forward a little, his right foot extended. The Ute, Tabby, unexpectedly shy, hovered near

the patio doorway, while Johnny, his face and eyes expressionless, merely slouched, his thumbs hooked in his belt.

Eventually Mackey stopped, holding a paper for a longer time before him. In stillness that was almost suffocating, he read and re-read the memorandum until satisfied, then said to his orderly:

"These are all the papers I have, are they not?"

"Yes, sir. So far as I know."

"At least all papers related to equipment and purchases here?"

"Yes, sir. Right where you told me to keep 'em, sir."

Mackey shifted his gaze, singling out Johnny and staring at him as if seeking the answer to some unspoken question. Finding nothing, however, to arouse apprehension, either in the slouching form or in the half-lowered face, he returned to the memorandum and read:

> August 29. Short Timber. Purchase five ponies—remount stock. Cheyenne. Three bays. One paint. One blue roan—muzzle blaze—fourteen hands. Left foreleg, white stocking foot.
>
> Signed: Kenyon—Sgt.

"August twenty-ninth." Mackey looked again at his orderly. "Three days ago. You filed this memorandum as soon as it was handed to you by Sergeant Kenyon?"

"Yes, sir!" The dragoon was positive. "Just like I always do, Lieutenant, sir. I don't mess with them papers."

"When did Sergeant Kenyon give this memorandum to you?"

"Soon's he got in the last time, Lieutenant, sir. That very same evenin'. He was always mighty careful about that."

"Yes, I know he has been. I was merely asking for the benefit of others present." Nodding, Mackey tipped back in his chair, traces of a fresh smile on his lips, studied the notations and signature, and repeated: " 'One blue roan—muzzle blaze—fourteen hands—left foreleg, white stocking foot.' I don't believe, Mr. Fraser," he added, "that there can be any mistake. The date is clearly written. According to what my orderly tells me, and I accept his word, the memorandum was filed that same evening. The description of the horse is accurate—proof, I should say, that is entirely conclusive."

The effect of this statement upon Fraser was considerable. Losing his belligerence, the trader stood uncertainly, slack-mouthed. As he did not reply at once, Mackey handed him the paper and said somewhat acidly:

"I assure you, Mr. Fraser, the memorandum is in order. In addition, if you wish, I will personally vouch for the Sergeant's signature."

"Hell." The single word, drawled by Johnny, was startling. Spitting deliberately on the dirt floor, he went on to address Mackey: "Of all the rotten cold-deckin' I ever run into, this is it. What do I care about your God damn paper? My mark ain't on it. I ain't never seen this fort before; never knowed a soul in it, soldiers or anybody else, before last night. Yet I come in here and this mornin' I've got my horse stole." Johnny's voice became tighter, and his lips quivered. "What you say, mister," he warned, "ain't nothin' to me. If you really wanted proof you'd get your sergeant back. I'd make the son-of-a-bitch talk. Epps and Weatherby, too. It's a damn funny thing they ain't here this mornin'. But if you think I'm goin' to stand here and take something like this, lose the best horse I got in a frame-up, you're a whole lot crazier'n I think you are."

Mackey had risen, his face white.

"Mr. Fraser, if this man isn't . . ."

Johnny cut him short. "Don't worry," he said. "I didn't come here because I wanted to. I wouldn't stick around a place like this for love nor money."

Gitt came over with quick strides and stood beside Johnny.

"Where you goin', boy?" he said.

"You stay out of this, Gitt," Johnny, his voice breaking, shoved the old frontiersman away. "I'm just leavin', that's all. I don't like this place. And I'm givin' fair warnin'. I'm takin' my roan."

The patio was bright when Johnny went out, brighter somehow than it had been, the Plains sky intensely blue, the buckskin dresses of the squaws glittering with bead color blocks. Yet all seemed far away to him, blurred, without substance. Walking fast through silence, as if he were walking in an abandoned place, Johnny sought his room and roughly with tears scalding his cheeks, began to throw his pack together.

Gitt, suddenly, was in the doorway, Tabby close at hand. Gitt did not come in. His eyes were troubled, dark with sympathy and concern, but direct, too, and resolute. More than once, as he held his position, he swept his gaze over the patio, noting the quiet movements that were taking place there. Fraser had left the officer's room and was standing helplessly in the open, taking no part. Dragoons, each carrying a short-barreled weapon, loitered among the watchful squaws. Even Mackey himself had walked to the patio center, where he waited, pistol at hip.

"Johnny," Gitt said, "I don't blame you for feelin' like you

do. If it had happened to me I'd feel the same way. Epps and Weatherby are in this thing sure. But that's why I wish you'd think it over. Maybe in a few days they'll drift back, and then, by God, we'll straighten this out."

Averting his head, Johnny jerked at his pack-roll straps, forcing them tight, and said nothing.

"Now look, Johnny," Gitt pleaded uneasily. "This ain't no way to go about it. You can't just walk out of here and get your horse. You know what's goin' on outside? They're waitin' for you—Mackey and the whole kit and kaboodle. With rifles. They'll cut you down before you get five foot from this door."

The pack-roll was complete. Rifle, powderhorn, and canteen were in a corner. Johnny picked them up and turned to Gitt.

"Get out of my way," he said.

Gitt did not move.

"That's one thing I ain't goin' to do, Johnny," he replied. "I think too much of you for that."

"Get out of my way or, God damn you, I'll kill you."

Gitt flushed, staring at Johnny in frank astonishment. When he spoke again, his tone had changed.

"Now, that's just enough," he said. "I ain't arguin' with you no more, Johnny. Put down that gun! You ain't killin' me and you ain't goin' out of here, neither."

"Look out, Gitt! I'm a-tellin' you!"

"You dang fool!" As Johnny's rifle came up, Gitt caught it at the balance and sent it spinning across the room. Closing in, he struck Johnny on the temple, toppling him. At the same time the alert Ute darted through the doorway, scooping up knife and cap-and-ball pistol, and kneeled his dark, broad hands pressing Johnny in the dirt. "Now, damn it," Gitt said. Regretfully he looked down at Johnny, then picked up the Hawken rifle and began to clean it and test its firing mechanism. "That was a heck of a thing to have to do, wasn't it, Tabby? I hope I didn't hurt him too much. And this gun. I hated to do that. It's a mighty good gun."

The Ute shook his head. "Mucho bronco muchacho," he said softly.

"Yeah. Some colts are like that. Looks like this one's got to learn the hard way." Gitt sighed. "Better strap them arms, Tabby. He'll be after me hotter'n a rope burn when he wakes up."

Fraser had appeared in the doorway.

"You don't need to worry, Fraser," Gitt told him. "We got him hornswoggled, for a while, anyhow. But I got a hunch I ain't sleepin' nights after this."

"What are you goin' to do?" Fraser asked.

"Pull out. Quick. If you and Martin'll get them traps ready, and grub, I'll sign for 'em. Tabby'll catch up the horses. But wait!" Gitt called, as Fraser stepped out. "I ain't sayin' we're through. That's Johnny's roan. I don't know when, but we'll be back. I want it legal, that's all. I don't want to make trouble for Bent's."

"It'll be legal, all right." Fraser's voice, high-pitched, rolled out to every man in the patio. "Just as soon as Epps and that sergeant turn up. I'll see to that—personal!"

An hour later, trail packs had been tied. Without a word, Johnny mounted a piebald Indian pony and sat glaring at his saddle-tree. Ostensibly testing cinches and pack-ropes, Tabby stayed close beside him. The Ute was quiet, seeming not to notice the sulking figure on the piebald, but fully armed and prepared.

Before mounting his own horse, Tom Gitt stalked across the patio to Mackey's quarters, entering without announcing himself. Mackey was alone at the time, sitting at his corner table. Startled, he tilted back, his hand seeking his holster.

Gitt laughed at him.

"Take it easy, Mackey," he said. "I ain't goin' to hurt you. I just want to tell you something, that's all.

"I've heard about you from Fraser, Mackey," Gitt went on. "You're young, high-handed. That's a dangerous thing in this country. I'm tellin' you straight. If you ain't in on this deal, you'll clear it up quick. Get that mark off and turn the roan over to Fraser. If it ain't free and clear by the time we get back, God help you. We'll be lookin' for you, Johnny and me, and we'll find you if it takes us ten years."

Fraser was outside, at the big fort gate. A word and a handshake with Gitt, a troubled, shrewd glance at Johnny, and the trader stepped back. Ruts, wagon-tracks of the long Santa Fe Trail, led westward after that, up the Arkansas. Pack animals strung out along them. Presently, then, Bent's Fort, plains stronghold, with its bastions, gate tower, and tall adobe walls, dropped from sight behind knolls and valley cottonwood groves.

Upper Arkansas

On the trail, Gitt was in the habit of keeping well ahead of his pack-train. He liked the point position, with the freedom it gave, and the way new country opened up continually, clear of drag dust. More than that, in a region showing the tracks of sizable Indian bands, he preferred to be his own scout.

At mid-morning, on the third day out from Bent's, he drew rein on a prairie crest between two small creeks. Since dawn he had topped each rise eagerly, standing in his stirrups to scan the western horizon. Failing again, however, to find what he wanted, he waited until Ute out-riders from Tabby's Timpas Creek camp had passed, then moved down to intercept the two men on drag. At a signal Tabby kicked his pony ahead, and Gitt ranged himself beside Johnny.

"Country's changin', boy!" Gitt exclaimed. "Gettin' rougher. We ought to be close in to the Fontaine qui Bouille, if I recollect rightly."

Johnny rode steadily, sullenly on. The two-faced old coot, he said to himself. Coming over that way, grinning, and talking through his big mouth. As if nothing had happened, not a thing. And Fontaine qui Bouille? What the hell kind of lingo was that? Three times now, Johnny grunted, old Gitt had come over, cheerful, easy, trying to cover up. But if he thought that would work, he was mistaken. See a man's horse stolen, knock him out, and keep him from going back and doing anything about it. Johnny drew down his lips. That was not right, not in Tennessee or Texas, and not here on the Arkansas.

"Off to the south there," Gitt was saying. "Looks like the Greenhorn country. I ain't acquainted with that much. There's a trail through to Santa Fe, I hear, this side of Raton Pass. Not many men know it. Mexicans mostly. They say the Spaniards was in here God knows how long ago." In the face of rocky indifference, Gitt lost his cheerfulness and his voice became lower. "Look here, Johnny," he said. "I wish you'd talk once in a while. It ain't natural, boy. I'm sorry about it, but you figure it all out and you'll see I was right. They'd a-cleaned us out good, and what would it have got us? Not a thing more than we got right this minute. Besides, this mornin' . . . Well, my calculations must have been wrong. I was hopin' to show you something this mornin'."

Johnny laughed. Show? What was there to show? He had seen enough. Enough of Mackey and those damned dragoons, and Fraser and Bent's—yes, and enough of Gitt, too, and Tabby. As far as he was concerned, they could all go to hell. Just give him his gun and his roan and he would be on his way. Where? The high Plains, stretching lonely and empty, seemed to ask him that question. Nobody would see him for dust, that was all. But this way! Johnny cursed and brought his hat down on his Ute pony's ears. Har! Get up! Crawdad! Buzzard bait! Of all the horse freaks he ever had seen! Raging, Johnny beat his mount and forced it into a run, leaving Gitt to ride drag.

Noon came and they halted at a clear creek and cooked lunch. Gitt, preoccupied, moved about the camp, tightening packs that needed it and kicking up the fire once in a while. The Utes, stocky and broad-faced, without the rawboned, tall, hard look of the Plains bucks at Bent's, squatted in a close group, spearing meat from a pot. Johnny, standing aside, spoke to no one. Nor did he eat, nor help in any way with the camp work.

Later that day, Gitt tried again. He had topped a second crest, from which the prairie took a long downward sweep to a valley whose course as yet remained hidden. In the foreground, broken country was yellow under the September sun; beyond the trough, and appearing to hang suspended between plains and sky, was a sheet of purple color, without evenness or depth. When the train arrived at the crest, Gitt signaled once more to Tabby and reined in, triumphantly, beside Johnny.

"Well, Johnny" he said. "I reckon you're lookin' at something now, boy!"

Yes, Johnny admitted to himself, he was looking at something. That purple-blue streak over there, away off—fifty, a hundred miles, maybe: it was the thing he had dreamed about. The fact struck him hard. He found it difficult to believe. Yet, there they were—mountains—except that they did not look like mountains, somehow. He had expected them to rise up suddenly, big and high like a wall, snow-covered and heavy-timbered as he had heard. But that line over there, it was queer. Flat-looking—just a streak with nothing behind it, like a smoke streak. Squinting his eyes, Johnny studied it but failed to make out details. It just had a mountain look, that was all. It was rough, too: there were sharp points, peak-points, and one or two places where it seemed to bulge upward and he could see something shine. Snow? He wanted to think so. Once he almost spoke to Gitt, but then he remembered. It was only that glint, like glass-

glints striking far off, that seemed to catch him, pull him toward it, and try to make him forget.

Gitt appeared to guess Johnny's thoughts. Becoming more confident, he talked happily, letting his eyes rove the long mountain line.

"See there?" He pointed straight into the west. "That gap yonder's where the Arkansas heads out of the mountains. She goes up and up from there, through rock country, till she gets to the Bayou Salade. That's the place, boy. I tell you: I been pretty near all over the mountains, all the way to Snake River and Oregon, but I've never found nothin' like the Bayou. It's the most beautiful place a man could think of. High. My God, it's high, and full of creeks and pastures and game, and all hemmed in with peaks that never do thaw their snow. She gets cold, but the grass is damn near waist high and there's timber close in. Just right for a real mountain ranch. Taos is all right. It's wonderful down there along the Rio del Norte, and the grass is good and it don't get so cold. That's where most of the boys have got their main quarters, them as has any to speak of. Sheep-raisin' and horses. But the Bayou. . . . Well, when a man starts gettin' old, I reckon, he starts gettin' ideas."

Gitt swept his arm to the northwest, and went on:

"Off there is Pike's Peak. See it? That big knob stickin' out of the range? A little different, ain't she? Most people, when they think of Pike's, think of a needle peak like you see up the canyons. But she ain't. She's more like a buffalo hump—till you get close in. Then you find out what she really is. A tough one, full of snow and canyons and cliffs to satisfy anybody. There's a main trail runs along there to the north, past Vrain's Fort and Vasquez and then over Laramie way to Green River. That's one of the oldest trails in this country. We'll run into it pretty quick, down here at the Gap."

Pausing, Gitt twisted in his saddle, gripping cantle and saddlehorn as he stared into the southwest. He added:

"Hazy. You can just barely make 'em out. Them twin peaks, off to the south of the Arkansas. Them's the Spanish Peaks—Huajatolla, the Indians call 'em. Breasts of the world. That's the Huerfano country. Headwaters for the Huerfano and Cuchara and Graneros lays somewhere in there.

"That's the real Spanish country," Gitt mused. "Camp in there and it ain't hard to see ghosts. There's a trail heads up through the Huerfano breaks and over Medano Pass, but she's a rough son-of-a-bitch. Ain't many uses it. I don't know what Tabby wants to do. Maybe keep on up the Arkansas and hit over Mosca Pass or Poncha, way north, or

maybe hit up the Cuchara and over the Sangre de Cristos that way. It's early yet: we wouldn't likely run into deep snow anywheres. But Poncha's too far north, and Mosca—that'll run you right into the San Luis dunes. That ain't country for me, either," Gitt spoke forebodingly. "Spooky no end. There's all kinds of stories about it, about men gettin' covered up by the dunes and such things. I don't like it. I expect we'll hit the Vrain trail at the Gap and head south and west up the Cuchara. It's good country. Easy ridin' and water and game all the way."

Under the expert handling of the Utes, the pack-train had reached the meadow fringe of another sparkling creek. A wind current, following water down the little valley, was lifting sand and dust to shoulder height, obscuring the horsemen. Faintly, herding cries came out of the dust, to be scattered and lost in crest silence.

Gitt sat his horse. "Well, Johnny," he said kindly, "that's about it. That's the country I been tellin' you about. I can't tell whether you like it. Not if you won't talk to me, boy."

Like it? Johnny's eyes seemed to sink into the mountain line, deep into it, as if they were appropriating for themselves the colors that so subtly changed from moment to moment along it. Gitt did not know. Nobody, Johnny thought, no one outside, far away from him, could understand how he felt. Staring at the line, Johnny believed suddenly that he could make out the very canyons and cliff faces which Gitt had spoken of. There—that notch, like a gun-sight, and that highest peak, curved at its point: how was it possible, he asked himself, that he had seen them? That was the strange thing, to feel so strongly that sometime, long ago, he had been among them. But why? What was there in the line, with its peaks and rough gashes? Why should he recognize it at all and welcome its presence, as if he had ridden toward it many times? Questions of this kind, like older, unanswered Tennessee questions, haunted him. They frightened him but excited him, too, giving rise to an eagerness that pressed close against his heart.

As quickly as it had appeared, then, Johnny's eagerness faded. The feeling of warmth and friendship that had come over him sank back, his mind hardened, and he thought again of Bent's Fort. Gitt could talk. Let him ramble on, dream, make all the plans that he wanted to, about the mountain country. Johnny looked down at his mount, at that mangy, slab-shouldered, scrawny-headed thing the Utes called a horse, and anger, mixed with an impulse to laugh, took hold of him. What good were the mountains? What good was anything without his horse and gun, his

whole outfit? He liked the mountains. Somehow, when he saw them, he felt that he was looking at his home country. He felt that he was going to ride into them, to lose himself and probably never to come out. But that had nothing to do with this other affair. Mackey—Epps, Weatherby, and that cheap, lying sergeant—some day they would pay. That, Johnny thought, before anything else.

As for Gitt: Johnny stole a glance at Tom Gitt. Perhaps Gitt was afraid. He had been hurt, almost killed, in Texas. His left arm was still bad. And twice now he had talked about getting old and settling somewhere, just when trails were beginning to open. No mistake, old Tom was worried. But what about the roan, Johnny asked himself. Was he to let his roan go, forget everything, because Gitt wanted him to? No. Gitt had side-stepped a fight. Perhaps, in a way, he had done the right thing at Bent's. There had been no fair chance, not against Mackey and his dragoons. But even so, Johnny thought, if Gitt himself had had trouble, if he had lost his best horse on a cold-deck, affairs might have been different.

Gathering up his reins, Johnny jabbed the Ute pony into a trot. Behind him Gitt stayed for a while on the prairie crest. Once he leaned forward, as if he were about to call, but then settled back. Presently he, too, went down the slope, standing in his stirrups to take the weight off his mount. Selecting a trail that would take him far to Johnny's right, he loped past the pack-train, waved to Tabby on point, and scouted, alone, in the lead.

Sunset came, and they pitched their camp. About five o'clock Gitt had crossed the trail of an Indian party which appeared to have left the Arkansas but a short time before. Pony tracks had been scattered but clean-cut; remnants of two small fires had been discovered, their ashes still warm; and fan-like sand sprays, kicked up by driving hoofs, had indicated that the band had traveled in haste. Calling Tabby and the other Utes, Gitt had exchanged impressions. Identification was uncertain, no articles having been left at the fires. However, the lack of travois and dog-tracks, signs always associated with Plains villages on the move, had increased suspicion, and it was this fact that had forced the pack-train on to a late camp.

Well acquainted with that country, Gitt had chosen his camp-site with an eye to defense. Where a draw cut into ochre caprock, forming a cove which opened only upon the main course of the Arkansas, ponies were unpacked and allowed to water and roll. While some of the Utes sought firewood in river-side thickets, others cut stakes from talus cedars, set them in a line across the narrow mouth of the draw, and,

stringing rawhide Spanish lariats along them, made a temporary corral. Gitt, wandering a short distance west, started an antelope at a spring, shot it, and brought it in. Before sunset gave way to gray-blue twilight, all animals except nighthorses had been hazed into the corral, beds had been laid out, a cliff watch had been set, and the evening meal was well under way.

As at noon, an unnatural silence held the camp. More than once Utes looked with grave curiosity at Gitt or Johnny, then dropped their eyes to the antelope steaks that roasted juicily on stick-tips. Twilight deepened quickly and stars came out, graying the caprock that hemmed the draw. It grew cold as quickly, and among the mountain Indians, their meal completed, there was little delay in seeking their beds. With full night only a few men remained up: Gitt and Tabby at the fire, the guard concealed among cedars at the rimrock edge, and Johnny seated hunched and alone beyond the small circle of light.

Johnny was shivering and miserable, his stomach pressed flat against his back-bone. That was the way it always was, he thought, when he got hungry. His stomach seemed to shrivel up, his knees felt weak, and he got light in the head. Antelope steak. The smell of it, fresh in fresh wood-smoke—that was too much. And damn their souls, he said to himself, they would have to roast it. Once or twice he had almost walked over and taken a chunk, Gitt or no Gitt. After all, he had no gun, nothing to hunt with for himself. A prisoner, that was what he was, held against his will. There they were talking right now, Gitt and that Tabby, and probably doing more scheming.

But not for long, Johnny smiled cannily. He drew a deep, angry breath and knotted his fists. The night would get black and no moon would come. Let them talk; let them eat their antelope steak. He would never ask. Soon, he thought, they would get sleepy and the guard would get sleepy. It would be as cold as hell on the cliff, where the wind blew. The guard would not stay—not if he was like other men. Good-for-nothing bastard, he would quit, too, come down, eat big, roll in, and dream about his lodge and his squaw. But then—then—Johnny said to himself, would be the time. Maybe midnight. Maybe long after. What did it matter? He would have his guns then, and a night-horse and a haunch of that antelope, and he would be miles on his way before sun.

An hour passed, during which Gitt and Tabby continued their talk. At the end of that time they got up, appearing to have reached some agreement. For a moment or two Gitt stood framed against the fire-light, looking in Johnny's direc-

tion. There was something lonely, something almost terribly sad about Gitt as he stood there, neither calling out nor making a move to come over, but only holding his position like a man who has given up hope. Presently he turned away from Johnny and walked quietly to his blankets, rolling in without speaking further.

Tabby, on the other hand, did not seek his bed at once. Instead he lingered at the fire, cutting a fresh antelope steak and roasting it on one of the stick-tips. When the meat was well-browned, he did not eat it but re-set the stick at greater distance from the flames and went to a pile of pack-gear. Reappearing with a rifle, holster and belt, knife, and other equipment, he picked up the stick and, to Johnny's astonishment, walked over to him.

Tabby squatted quickly on his heels, holding the gun before him. Johnny tensed, watching with a certain uneasiness. Not once on the trail or at Bent's had the two men spoken, although each had had opportunity. The Ute's body seemed even rounder and more stocky in that instant, the legs and arms very short and thick, the shoulders powerful, the hands broad, with stubby, strong fingers accustomed to bow-strings. But most interesting to Johnny was the face itself, massive and wide of cheek, smooth, like dark metal in the fire gleam, the eyes hidden below black, heavy strands that lay over the forehead. At Bent's, Johnny remembered, the Ute had never left Gitt's side. He had been like a shadow, in the corral, in Mackey's room, in the fort patio, and much of the time, later, on the up-river trail. And now, all evening, they had talked, talked no doubt about him. Johnny waited, hopefully but nevertheless drawing his legs up under him, making ready to counter the first hostile move.

Tabby, however, made no such gesture. Laying the rifle and other equipment carefully upon the grass, he proffered the stick with its dripping, fresh-roasted meat.

"Tiene mucho hambre," he said in thick Spanish. "Muy bueno. You eat."

Johnny eyed the steak. The Indian's friendliness and the very nearness of food seemed to melt his anger away. Nothing like that, he told himself—he had expected nothing like that. He had thought—but the fact was, he no longer knew what to think. Not unless Gitt was still hoping, still planning those long, peaceful camps in the mountains. Tabby, too: it looked as if he might be a pretty good sort. Cooking and bringing steak over that way. It was not every man, Johnny admitted, especially an Indian who had scarcely seen him before, who would do something like that. No, he thought: there was no longer any question. Strange, how matters could seem

different after a while. Just a day or two—time for some thinking. Perhaps it was riding, but perhaps, instead, it was the night and new country. That was what he had always liked: night and new country. At any rate. . . . Johnny looked down, affectionately, at the guns. They were his guns, the rifle, pistol, everything laid out right there before him. If old Tom had really given up at Bent's, Johnny thought. . . . But no, he concluded, Gitt would never give up, not in his own mind, and not with Tabby acting this way.

Tabby thrust the stick into Johnny's hand. The Ute's dark features had softened and he was smiling, like a man whose pleasure is deep and not to be spoken of. Queer, Johnny said to himself, about that smile. It was not actually a smile but merely a curve traced on the lips, a crease in copper rock, as old and secretive and impenetrable as cliffs and the night all about them.

"You eat," Tabby repeated. His Spanish was not liquid and free-flowing, but jerky, delivered in a nasal sing-song that made it difficult to understand. "Tomas, he says you must eat, Juanito. It makes no difference how you feel. You are young, he says, you have a long body, hard to fill up. Tomas wants you to eat. He told me to tell you that. He says he killed the antelope for you, too. You, boy, you cannot get along without eating."

As Johnny accepted the steak, the Ute picked up the Hawken rifle and proffered it, also. He continued simply:

"Tomas and me, we have been friends a long time, Juanito. When Tomas come first to the San Luis, he come to my lodge. He told me he wanted furs for trade and did not want trouble. That is the way it has been. We went to the mountains together. We trapped and made many trips to the Arkansas. Tomas is a good man. He knows the mountains like Utes. He is fair. He gives a fair price for furs. They will be glad to see him again in the San Luis."

Johnny had begun to eat in silence, sinking his teeth deep into the half-raw meat. Somewhere along the caprock, eastward, a coyote howled thinly. Answering cries, metallic yaps reaching a high note, came swiftly and the Ute cocked his head and listened. With the suddenness with which the cries had broken upon the night, they ceased, but still the Ute kept his head cocked as if hoping that new howls would arise. When no further sound came, however, he turned back, preoccupied, to Johnny.

"Tonight," he said, "Tomas and me, we talked. Tomas feels very bad about this. He says to tell you he is sorry for Bent's. He says you had come a long ride together from Texas. You did him good favors and he wanted to help you. That is why

he took the gun away. He did not want to hit you, but he did not want you to have trouble with the soldiers. They would have killed you, he said. He says to tell you, too, he is sorry for the horse. It was a good horse. But Fraser, he says Fraser will take care of it for you. He is sure. Fraser promised, just as soon as the soldiers come back. But now," Tabby shrugged, "you are mad. You will not say anything. So Tomas, he says to give you the guns and the meat and for you to take his own horse. He gives it to you. He will not try to talk to you again. He does not know where you will go. But he says sometimes, maybe, he will see you."

Johnny stopped eating. Tabby's words, so blunt and quiet and impersonal, had brought a flush to his cheeks. What a fool, he saw clearly, what a fool he had been. Getting mad, staying mad, refusing, like a sulky ten-year-old, to talk even when Gitt had come over. Shame filled him, contrition, a hard, disturbing sense of what he had done. He wanted to go to Gitt then, to talk to him, and to let him know how he felt. But abruptly, hopelessness, contempt for himself and a fear that Gitt would only laugh, came over him and he shrank from the action. No, he admitted bitterly. It was too late. He had no right. He had been given every chance and he had thrown all away. And the guns—well, Johnny thought, the guns were beginning to speak for themselves. Adiós, they said. Get along. Go where you will, but go a long way. Johnny's face grew still and his eyes widened as he stared at the Ute. He nodded very simply then, set down the steak, and picked up his guns. He would be hitting the trail. Just as he had planned it: he would be miles from the Arkansas camp before sun. But there was one other thing. He would go on foot and not on Gitt's horse. If it meant his death, he would accept nothing from Gitt.

Although the hour was early, night cold had sharply increased. Blackness seemed to flow along the caprock base, closing in upon the weakening fire gleam. Johnny felt the cold. It was almost as if peak air had settled on that Plains country, warning of the winter to come. Pausing at the fire, Johnny made a last survey of the camp. Except for Tabby, no one was astir. Gitt was hidden in shadow; other Utes slept like dead men; no sound came from the box-cliff pocket where the stock had been corralled. Holding his hands low over the coals, Johnny let the warmth seep up through his body. He had not decided which way to go. West, to the mountains, was out of the question: a man would die fast, on foot, among those peaks. East, to Bent's, would mean Fraser, Mackey, and soldiers. Johnny thought about Bent's. If Mackey and the sergeant caught him, they would kill him. If not—his roan was

there, one step from freedom. It might be possible to sneak the roan out, then to ride like hell northwest for Vrain's, Green River—anywhere north. They would look for him in the Arkansas country, from San Luis to the Cimarron desert, but probably not to the north. Johnny got up. Tabby was standing some yards away, more deeply pre-occupied, his gaze directed down-river. Johnny looked at him curiously, gave a grunt of farewell, and shouldered his pack.

Again, somewhere along the dark Arkansas, coyotes yapped unexpectedly. Johnny halted. There was something strange about those yaps, he thought, something that struck with a thin falseness on his ears. Even as he listened, standing uncertainly, Tabby sprang to the fire. Dirt flew, choking the gleam. There was a scuffle. Ejaculations, instantly smothered, showed where Utes were going into action. Finally, in dead stillness, there was the click of hammers being drawn back.

Johnny's heart leaped to his throat. He flung himself headlong. Those yaps, out there somewhere, had stopped. Stopped with the fire. Stillness. There was stillness, yet movement. Something was slipping like wind through the grass. Wind? he thought. No wind was there. Only movement—nothing to see, nothing to know, but motion, soft, snaky. Memories of Texas flashed through his mind, memories of a certain night there. Christ Almighty, he thought. Comanches again, Mexicans. There on the river! Terror shook him like wind shaking a leaf, and he lay too frozen to act. There, once more! That slithering! It was everywhere, unseen, traveling past him. He kept close, close to the earth, the grass, feeling motion and shadows like poison around him.

Flame broke from the cap. Johnny rolled with the gun report, over and over. The sound split against cliffs and was answered by sound, a quick human cry, blotted out. On the river-bench blackness swirled into life. Shapes appeared, running, savage forms, armed, deadly. High up, the Ute guard loosed his howl of triumph and warning. Utes jabbered and shouted. Other rifle shots echoed; lead spattered on rock. Out of it all came a wilder, stronger cry. Gitt! Johnny sprang to his feet. Gitt! The old times! "Run, Johnny! Johnny! Don't let 'em break that corral!" Recklessly, exultantly, Johnny raced to the cliff. There by the pony herd, with the stakes and rawhide intact, he braced himself for assault. But after that—nothing. Silence. Utes in the grass: the Ute guard: the coyotes: enemy raiders hovering near, coming in under coyote camouflage—all seemed to have gone. Like a wave, Johnny thought, rolling back. It had been quick, two minutes, no more. Like a drum, the river-bench emptied of echoes. Stillness flowed in. Move-

ment stopped. It was as if a Plains gust, powerful, dangerous, had slapped at the camp, viciously slapped and receded.

Out of the silent blackness Utes gathered, square forms, cautious, peering. An abrupt command, in Ute, came from the sub-chief Tabby. Moccasins rustled; a lizard-scratching seemed to go up the cliff; pebbles clicked among cedar roots; and the guard was relieved. Tom Gitt appeared, towering, ready, near Johnny. They advanced then to a point a little eastward, where the Ute guard, crouching, was stripping the scalp from an enemy. Cheyenne. Horse-thieving bastards. The sense of triumph grew heavy. Scouts were sent out. Corral rawhides were inspected, the ponies counted and quieted. After a time the scouting parties came in. There was silence once more. Plains emptiness. The fire was re-kindled; fresh antelope steaks were cut; Utes squatted solemnly, block-faced, as in council.

Gitt found a willow stick. Carefully, in detached mood, he broiled the meat, holding it to the brightest red coals. The steak swelled and frizzled and dripped, browning, and sent out musky richness to mingle with that of other steaks broiling. When it was done, Gitt left the Ute circle and sought Johnny at the light's edge. His gesture was simple, without reservation. "Eat up, Johnny," he said. "You and me, we got ridin' tomorrow."

Red cliffs. Cliffs Indian-faced, grooved, massive, great cheek-bones and juts of rock, gleaming. Cliffs wind-worn and water-marked, below which curved a river swiftly flowing. . . .

Johnny perched on a boulder on the Arkansas bank. His long left leg was drawn up under him, the heel of his boot caught in a chip notch. His body was bent; his hands were spread upon his left knee; his chin rested full on his knuckles. His hat was tipped forward, so that he looked out through a slit between hat-brim and knee, and he was quiet, stone-still, there on his boulder.

Water flashing, in places white-crested and rough, like rock flakes, at other points smooth and darkling green, deep, pool-like, tinted with the strange mineral hues of the sunset. . . .

On the previous evening the pack-train had reached Plains' end. Where the river gap opened like a buffalo horn they had come upon the trail which Gitt had spoken of, the old trail of Indian and Spaniard, leading south to Taos and Rio del Norte settlements, north to the last outposts of the trapper brigades. Near this junction point they had ridden upon a plaza of adobes and cedar corrals, peopled by men who had a mangy, wild-haired look and by women, again squaws and Mexican women, who held aloof, bright-eyed but mute, as though fear-

ful of approaching too close. The place was filthy, dust-smothered, swarming with flies and bugs, but there the Utes had halted, making camp on clean ground, setting a strong stock guard, and waiting for council.

That evening the Rocky Mountains had pressed hard upon them. After prairie and pinery mesas the Front Range had looked almost too solid, too high. Gray-pink outpost towers, hunching green shoulders, and bald rock cliffs had faced the pack-train, bringing it, or so Johnny had feared, to a permanent stand. Only one breach, the Arkansas course, had offered any hope at all, and even that chance had seemed slim enough, ridges piling up endlessly to peaks above the gap. Yet, apparently, the Rocky Mountains themselves had not forced the halt. Apparently, as Gitt had hinted, there were ways through, secret trails known only to those who had traveled them. The Ute council that night had been short and matter-of-fact. It was a question merely of time, Tabby had said, and of the best plans for winter. Later, though even now it was starting, there would be hunting in the north, in Bayou Salade and the wide, rich Ute country beyond. Contrary to Gitt's thought, Tabby had selected the Arkansas trail. They would travel far toward the headwaters, he had said. Scouts would then keep on to the north, observing the position of game herds, and the main party would move to the left, southward over Poncha Pass to Saguache lakes in the San Luis.

Johnny smiled, on his boulder. They had pushed along since crossing the Taos trail. In two days they had ridden fifty miles west. Up, up, up, on a trail the likes of which he had never suspected, not even in the mountains. The Arkansas gap had pinched itself into a canyon. Scrub sage and the cactus that had been so full of quail, lizards, and rattlesnakes had given out. Humpy territory, cut by a thousand dry gulches, had been left behind and they had come into an entirely new country. There were cottonwoods still, Johnny thought, the old, big, gray-faced cottonwoods that seemed to grow all over the West. But there were pines, too, high, sugary-looking pines with chunks of corky yellow bark, pitch ooze, open-flake cones, and a sweet, dry smell to their needles. Willows and alders grew by the river-side. There were berry bushes and flowers—all kinds of strange, bright-blossomed flowers still growing, in September, in the bright sun. And aspens. Johnny's heart had gone out to the aspens. That very day he had passed his first large grove by the Arkansas, a white, slim grove topped with green turning to the yellow of autumn. The leaves were always quaking, as Gitt had told him, trembling and rippling like water in the wind. Aspens, he thought. They were the prettiest

tree. They were light and airy, graceful—like a woman, a pretty young woman. Johnny laughed to himself. He did not know much about women. Probably, in that mountain country, he never would. But he had fallen in love, right quick, with the aspens.

Rocks, rocks, and more rocks. Lifting his head, Johnny gazed wonderingly at the river cliffs. How high were they? he asked himself. Five hundred, a thousand feet? At any rate, straight up. Up a long way, then breaks, benches sweeping back, spires rising to needle points, balanced, sharp-edged, ready to topple in the first gust. Johnny knew now why the western mountains had been called the Rockies. The first men through them, he thought, must have had hell. Climbing, bucking into twisting side-canyons, wiggling around juts where a man could fall God knew how far. The trail that day had been bad enough. Rock-cluttered, narrow, turning this way and that, and sometimes looking straight down at the river. It had been an experience. The Ute pony, too, Johnny reminded himself; what a damned fool! A man would think it wanted to commit suicide, the way it stuck its neck out and peered down. It was all a man's life was worth just to ride the damned pony. And there was no arguing with it. It had scared him plenty that day; scared him, and got him dizzy, and made him so mad that he could hardly see straight. But he had shown no signs of his feelings. Not with the Utes and Tom Gitt around. Smart-alecky snoops, Johnny grunted. They had watched him sweating, watched him make those hair-splitting trail turns, and had laughed enough as it was.

And the river. Johnny listened, spellbound, to the river. Some that he had known, like those in Tennessee, gurgled along, slipping under weed-banks and making big, slow, muddy pot-holes of suction. Others, the little ones, seemed to dance along, finding plenty to do on their way to the valleys. But this river here, this Rocky Mountain river, was different. Clear. Icy cold. White-swift. Testing it, Johnny had plunged his arm deep into it, and it had startled him. It was like the trail. Nothing to play with. Not under the great red cliffs it had cut; not on the bend bars where its drift had piled high. Power. That is what the Arkansas talked. Mountain power. It was rocks rolling. Boulders—dead, hidden—being rolled on the bottom. It was the rolling rocks chonging, the hollow ghost-talk, that had told him in such a terrible way of the river.

Behind him, the camp was settling down. Only the slimmest watch had been set that evening, a few hundred yards down-river. This was Ute country, Johnny remembered Gitt's saying, forbidden territory to all but the strongest of prairie war bands.

In the past two days the Utes themselves revealed this fact, as they penetrated farther and farther into the Arkansas canyon. Alert, justifiably suspicious in open country where night raids had fallen upon them more often than rain, in the mountains they were a different people, laughing, joking, showing a light-heartedness that was surprising. Their campfires, Johnny noted, were recklessly big, their evening meals prodigious in the amounts of fresh meat consumed. But there was also solemnity as they had neared their home region. Already the ceremonial pipe had been passed: already the blue, thin smoke, the Ute prayer smoke, had been blown to the winds.

Johnny's thoughts turned to the pipe, with its hovering smoke. It was a long-stemmed pipe, red, its bowl carved out of blood-red sandstone, polished and round, a heavy pipe strung with the feathers of eagles. The Utes had kept a close circle, making it a secret pipe, full of power. Their silence, the stillness of their bodies, the set calm of faces and eyes showed the depth of their reverence. Only Gitt had been allowed to sit in the circle, cross-legged, blowing the smoke. But Johnny watched. He caught every detail. His own mind stirred and as before—as a long time before—he felt puzzled. Strangely, here in this western canyon he had seen Mexicans plodding along Texas roads to their churches, and a Tennessee preacher, named Birdwell, lovingly holding his Bible. Again, the feeling struck him. He was being choked: something, deep down in men's lives, was being kept from him. But then . . . Johnny shrugged, on his boulder, and impatiently broke off his thoughts. He was tired; comfortable. There was no reason for him to think, no reason to tangle himself in things past.

In the gathering dusk, Utes were beginning to build up their fire. Replacing the sunset, flame-light spread over the bar, spanned the currents, and came up solidly against the opposite cliffs. Camp sounds and the new, strong cotton-wood blaze were interesting and Johnny glanced over his shoulder. Gitt was smoothing out his blanket-roll. He worked until he had finished, then wandered to the river-bank, up-stream, and stood with his hands on his hips. Not for some minutes did he seem aware of Johnny: but presently he turned, gave a slight gesture of inquiry, and moved down, musingly, along the sandy rim.

Leaning back against Johnny's granite perch, Gitt looked at the Arkansas. Somewhere he had picked up a peeled yel-low sprig of spruce-drift and was chewing it. He chewed idly, sucking the bitter-sweet juice and spitting at times. In neither bearing nor countenance was there a sign that, three days before, anything except friendship had existed between Johnny and him.

"If this was spring, Johnny," Gitt observed, without preamble, "you wouldn't catch me campin' in here. I don't feel too good about it as it is."

"Why not?" Johnny said. "It looks like a pretty good place to me. There's high ground and plenty of wood and water. What more would you want?"

"High ground, hell. And driftwood! You just ain't seen floods, that's all, Johnny."

"I've seen plenty in Texas."

Gitt failed to realize that he was being joshed. "Now, I'm just a-tellin' you," he insisted, seriously. "Those Texas floods are bad, but they're flash-floods. You got open country to run to. That ain't the way here. These canyons are deathtraps. Take the spring thaw, or summer, or even by God right now. There might be a cloudburst a hundred miles up the river. You don't know it. It's clear where you are. The first thing you know, you're scoured out. A wave comes around the bend there, twenty-thirty feet high, and you're on your way to the Plains."

"Then why are we campin' here?" Johnny asked.

"You'll have to ask Tabby. Utes are funny sometimes. I told Tabby about it but he just says, 'No rain tonight. Clear skies. You sleep on the rocks, Tomas. I sleep on the grass and be comfortable.' So . . ."

"So," Johnny said, "you're goin' to sleep on the rocks."

"Hell, no." Gitt spoke in disgust. "I know I'm a fool. I'll have nightmares all night. But I'm goin' to sleep on the grass, and be comfortable."

Johnny laughed and scuffed the boulder on which he was sitting. He had not thought much about that boulder, as a matter of fact. But he saw now that it bore out Gitt's point. The boulder was as smooth as glass, ground by the river. It had come a long way, he told himself thoughtfully, from some high mountain place where the granite was white. It weighed tons—there was no judging how many—but still it had been one of the hidden ghost-rocks, a chonging thing at one time, rolling over and over, deep in flood, and being moved by the river. Awe filled Johnny as he imagined his great boulder rolling along and he felt the uneasiness, the sense of something monstrously big making ready to strike, that Gitt had seemed to feel. Yet, he said to himself, it was strange that night. Strange about Tabby and the way all the Utes had been acting. They seemed to know about the mountains and about the old Arkansas. They were happy. They were taking things easy. Their thoughts were on their San Luis home, squaws, good food, and good living. Not on the river.

"She can be bad, all right," Johnny admitted, soberly. "A man can tell it."

Gitt nodded. He appeared to be charmed by the river-water licking, running, spray-murmuring past him.

"She can rip and tear," he said. "But she's just a whimper to some rivers I know. They're the rivers'll get you."

"I expect you've seen 'em all, haven't you, Tom." Johnny spoke with the same dreaminess. As he felt the bar quiet and the living power of the river, an irresistible urge to talk came over him. "I've been meanin' to ask you about 'em, Tom," he said. "Ever since I met you, in Texas. But it seemed like, somehow . . . Well, I never did do it."

Gitt smiled skeptically, drawing down the corners of his mouth. "If you had tried it in Texas, Johnny," he answered, "I'd have told you to keep your mouth shut. Texas was no place for talk. But don't you forget it. We'll be seein' those others. The Grand, the Green, maybe even Snake River and the Columbia before we get through."

Johnny said: "Tabby talked about the Grand yesterday. I expect he had seen it."

"That's old Ute country. And that's the river, the Grand, that'll get you. My God!" Gitt started up, as if memory itself were too sharp. His face glowed and his eyes held a fierce light. "Cliffs?" he said. "Hell, Johnny, these ain't knee-high to what they are over there! There's yellow-rock cliffs and mesas—shiprock mesas, both sides: mile after mile of 'em. You wonder where it's all goin' to end. And that's the queer thing. It don't end. I been there myself. I commenced one time way high up at a lake, in good beaver country, and follered on down. Those canyons just got redder and deeper. They kept on, seemed to me like, till they dropped right down through the earth."

Impressively Gitt gestured, tossing his head. "They get redder and redder," he went on, "and deeper than a man can believe. And there's queer things, almighty queer things, that goes with 'em. Gray desert. That's poison. Rock-bridges, scoured out by the wind. Sometimes there's places deep under the cliffs, too, dead places, filled with dead people. I've seen 'em. People with the flesh on 'em—eyes, hair, even the fingernails—all dried up, like you see gut. And the silence," Gitt mused. "I've heard some men say they don't mind it. They're lyin'. Ask Tabby. There's such a thing as too big. You could lose the Arkansas, this whole canyon, in Grand River. And it goes on and on from there, west and south. I've heard stories. Somewhere south there's a trail, an old Spanish trail, but I ain't never been on it. Never met a man, either, who had been to the end of it."

Johnny sat stunned. It was like Texas, he told himself, when he and Gitt and Epps and Wax Weatherby had first met. He had listened then in the Anton saloon to the talk about mountains. He had thought: if only he could get away, farther north, farther west, out of the desert. And he had got away. He had come to the Rockies. They had looked high, too, God-awful high to him, and he had been happy. But now again something seemed to be stirring. Wind or a cloud, he thought, new cloud shadows, perhaps. It was Gitt's talk. It was his whispers about canyons and rivers and about other places far off, deserts, death-traps, holding dead people. Such things made him shiver, filling him with spooks and wild dreams. But it was true, what Gitt had said. Things were big. The farther trails went the more distance there seemed to be, the more silence. And a man could only feel it, and think about it, and ask as Tom Gitt had asked: Where would it end?

"The Green," Johnny said thickly. "Is that like the Grand?"

"Pretty much," answered Gitt. "Worse in some ways. You wouldn't believe it. Bile-green but sweet water—good drinkin'. She starts way north somewheres, north of Bear River in the Bad Mountains. I've never been right in where she heads. Not many other men, either: there's too many stories. Then she comes on down and hits a clay country, green desert, and that's where she gets her green color. Then she hits mountains again, south of the Henry's Fork. There's a range in there lays east and west, big as the Front Range, and she cuts right through. It's a high-timbered country, full of parks and little high creeks, wonderful for game. Beaver creeks. We'll be goin' that way. That's rendezvous country. On the south she hits Yampa River in hill country, then she curves west into big desert and it's out there somewheres, I don't rightly know where, that she hits into the Grand."

Johnny smiled. "Remember Fraser?" he said. "When Epps hollered at him that evenin', at Bent's? That's where Fraser told him to go. Vrain's. The Green. Places like that—and even farther. To Oregon. I wonder if they'll ever get up there, him and old Wax?"

In the darkness Gitt glanced at Johnny. "They will if they want a whole hide," he said. "Either that or they'll head back to Texas. I got it all figured. We'll do our fall trappin', then come December we'll take a paseo to Bent's. Fraser'll have things cleared up by that time, and Mackey'll be out of the way. We'll trade our furs and pay what we owe, pick up the roan, and come on back and forget 'em. How does that sound?"

"Good." Johnny nodded. "But what if Epps and Weatherby are still hangin' around?"

"It'll be just too bad for them, that's all." Gitt threw away his spruce twig, stretched his angular body, and prepared to return to the fire "Epps knows what he'll get if we see him first. As for Weatherby, that son-of-a-bitch is my meat. When he pulled me off of that horse, in Texas," Gitt finished, "he made a wrong move sure enough."

Beyond the bar camp, Johnny found, during the next few days, the country fitted Gitt's description well. For miles the trail remained precipitous, a rocky track leading upward over ledges, across bank-side clearings, and again into the relative darkness of river chutes. Packs were heavy, the mountain air thin. Thinking first of his horses, Tabby kept a slow but steady pace, refusing the appeals of younger Utes impatient to be home.

It was in the second week of September that they came to the great head-water bend of the Arkansas. Johnny told himself, instantly, that he would not forget that scene. Rocks, close, threatening red walls, the white-water chutes of the canyon had been left far behind. In their stead had appeared a high, open valley, miles wide and miles in length. The earth was black there, the grass emerald green near the Arkansas, but russet, a dry, rich, brilliant color beneath blue sky brilliance farther out. In the middle distance willow copses traced their lacy lines along the tributaries. Mountain bogs, lakes, and beaver ponds, in many places, cast up sprays of silver light. And beyond all, northwestward, came a darker green, the green of mountain forests, then grayness, the grayness of timberline, then whiteness, the whiteness of snow cresting soaring bald-head peaks.

Sunlight was strong, air crisp and fall-cold in the valley that morning. As pack-ponies scattered over the grass, their tails and manes blew out, black, cream, and sorrel banners in the wind. In the same way the Utes' glossy hair whipped out from their shoulders. Scouts bound for the Bayou Salade were young men. At their backs they carried round quivers, stuffed with arrows. Bowstrings caught the wind; lance feathers spun; shields bowed, dipped, and were grasped in hard fists. As Gitt's eyes when he spoke of Grand River and the Green, eyes of the Utes showed fire as they swept the high mountain country. Tabby directed the scouts' change to fresh horses, apportioned provisions, and gave his instructions. Make a fast ride, he told them, Do not stop. Do not fight. Return to the San Luis quickly. In answer the young men raised their hands, wheeled, and loped north, wild, dark-red objects in the midst of the green.

Swinging sharply, the main party struck south. Then for

the first time they were in timber, true Rocky Mountain timber, so thick and cool, so dark within its borders, and so quiet that it brought a sudden silence to the train. Like a piece of rawhide, weathered and frayed, the Poncha trail wound upward through it. Streams within it were sand-glitter streams; or spring seeps, trickling out of pockets; or shadow-flecked cascades, rough, craggy, filled with trout, that raced away through the semi-dark. At the pass crest they camped in grass at the timber-fringe, built pitch-pine fires, and slept in scented air beneath blue mountain spruce. Then, in the morning, it was down-slope once more, southward still, to a place where trails branched off, forests ceased to grow, and earth and sky, with distant mountains in between, showed openness again.

The San Luis was chipped basin country, a frying-pan plain. On its left flank, below peaks, were rolling, gleaming gold hills, sand, said Gitt, the trap-like San Luis dunes. Everywhere, out from the trail, sage fluttered gray; arroyos cut their forked courses; dried lake bottoms, alkali-white stared upward vacantly out of the plain. For a day and a night and another day the pack-train traveled west-by-southwest, through the sage. On the second evening Indian treble swept over the column. Against hills and timber, fires had been seen. Saguache! The word was like wind, a wild music, rising swiftly and blowing as swiftly away. Utes rode hunched after that, singing, exhorting. But the trail was still long. It was black-dark before the hills moved in close, fires burned their reddest, and the lodges of a Ute village stood tall in the glow.

Confusion spread, as the pack-train came in. For many minutes horsemen had ridden the flanks, madly wheeling and yelling. Now squaws and children, and yapping Indian dogs, appeared. Earing his pony, Johnny kept close to Gitt. But Gitt was like Tabby, gesturing, shouting greeting in Ute. Even as Johnny watched, Gitt dismounted, walked grinning to a fat, grinning squaw in the throng, and whacked her affectionately on the buttocks. Next, two chubby boys were tossed high and chucked under the chin. Then Gitt, turning to Johnny, burst into laughter. "What the hell, Johnny!" he roared. "Get down, get down! Make yourself at home! It's like I done told you—Henrietta's got supper ready!"

Saguache

JOHNNY awoke and looked at the triangular patch of blue sky above him. It was blue sky, he thought idly, a good, cool sky. It was sky without a cloud, without color streaks, and without a dust blur that morning. San Luis sky. And there, sticking up into it, were poles that had been interlaced, long, light-brown, stripped poles brought from the mountains. Lodge-poles, Johnny said softly to himself, in wonderment. He stared more intently. They were Indian poles with elk-skin stretched over them. For the first time in his life, he realized, he had spent the night in a tepee.

Fragrance of willow diverted Johnny and he rolled over and pressed his cheek against the dry-wood frame of his bed. Now, he said to himself, absently—that bed. If anyone had told him that there were beds in a Ute tepee, deep in the Rocky Mountains, he would have said that they were joshing him. But there it was and he had slept in it. It had been comfortable, too, long enough, covered thick with buffalo robes, and close enough to the fire on a fine, frosty morning. Except that there seemed to be no lodge-fire that morning. There was nothing but gray ash in the center pit, a few unburnt stubs, and a coffee-pot sitting black as midnight on the far edge. Those things, Johnny thought, and the beds across from him. One bed was small, built for young ones: the other was big, broad and long enough for a man and a woman. And Gitt—Tom Gitt, by God. They had come all the way from Texas, Johnny told himself, all through fighting and desert, and still there had been not a word about a wife.

"Gitt!" Johnny sat up. "Roll out, you old bastard! You and me got talkin' to do!"

Buffalo robes on the big bed humped up and Gitt's head appeared. He was tangle-haired that morning, red-eyed and still half-asleep, like an old badger coming out of his hole.

"What?" he asked.

"I said, roll out! Of all the two-faced jokers!" Johnny was laughing. "Why didn't you tell me you had a squaw and ninety-nine kids!"

"It ain't ninety-nine, it's two. Leastways, it was." Gitt yawned, ran his hand over his beard, and stared at the black top-knots that seemed to have popped out of the third bed.

"Thank God, it ain't any more. They're a handful. Cute little devils, though, ain't they—when you can catch 'em."

"What the hell made you go to Texas?" Johnny asked.

Gitt looked sheepish. "Now, you know, Johnny," he said, "I've asked myself that. When them Comanches come in and me and Weatherby locked horns, I begun to think I might be a fool. But I don't know. This here family life—it can get noisy, too."

"If you ask me," Johnny said, glancing toward the lodge entrance, "there's too much of it goin' on outside, right this minute. The whole camp's awake except us."

"Shucks." Gitt shook his head. "Don't you believe it, Johnny. I can see you ain't been in a Ute camp before. Them bucks that come in last night'll sleep for a week. Time don't mean nothin' to Utes. Besides, it's just more kids chasin' the puppies around."

"Well, whatever it is," Johnny grunted, "I know this. I'm gettin' damned hungry."

"Yeah. You and me both. Henrietta!" Unceremoniously, Gitt routed out his placid, sleeping squaw. "Damn it, woman, what are you waitin' on? And God damn you, you let the fire go plumb out! It's cold in here! What the hell do you think this is, a Navajo camp?" A stream of mixed Ute and American followed, after which Gitt looked at Johnny and winked. "They love it," he said. "Treat 'em rough, boy. Drag 'em around by the hair, crack the whip over 'em. Let 'em know you appreciate 'em. But . . . hum. We'd better be hikin'. There'll be lots doin' today. Medicine pipe." Gitt crawled out of his bed. "We'll start with some of them puppies."

Puppies, Johnny thought, as he trailed Gitt into the open. Frisky, fat Ute puppies. Gitt ran like an antelope, dodging here and there among the neighboring lodges. When he had caught two of the softest and most playful puppies, he killed them by knocking their skulls against a rock, drew them, and skinned and butchered them on the spot. Meanwhile, Henrietta—and where in God's world, Johnny asked himself, had that name come from?—Henrietta had done a considerable part of her housework. The high-colored boys, with their snapping gray eyes and solemn Ute faces, had been turned out. Lodge and smoke flaps had been adjusted; buffalo robes had been rolled into fresh lumps on the willow frames the pot had been upended and the dust and ants got rid of; and the fire had been started. With astonishing swiftness the meal was prepared. Gitt, Henrietta, and the boys dipped in with gusto. But Johnny refrained. For some reason, that morning, he kept thinking of fat, skittering puppies.

Gradually, all of Saguache, came to life. As at Bent's Fort, the first unmistakable sign of this was the clatter of fast-ridden ponies and the occasional high-pitched, exuberant yips of hunting parties on the move. Going out again, Johnny slipped a hair-rope halter on his own pony, then walked with Gitt down among tepees to the creek ford and watering-place.

It was still early, Johnny noted—scarcely seven o'clock. Considering the tall, roomy lodges, the loaded meat-drying racks, and the numerous other tethered ponies, Johnny told himself that the Utes had chosen their camp-site well. Directly westward were those hills toward which the pack-train had plodded last night, hills not dark now but blazing redly in the new sun. Massed behind them was the green of pines lifting to peaks. The camp ground was level, Saguache creek one of those foaming, chill streams with which Johnny was becoming familiar. Like a miniature Arkansas the Sagauche poured down from timber, supplied the village with more water than it could possibly use, and passed on to lose itself in the sage.

This was the short view. What lay to eastward, across valley space, drove all else from Johnny's mind.

Gitt was talking about it, much as he had talked that evening in the Arkansas canyon. His long right arm was sweeping back and forth, proudly, in an instinctive gesture of possession. His body was cast forward, as if he were trying, unconsciously, to gather all details of the great scene about him.

Sangre de Cristo. Johnny had heard that name but not until that moment had he understood its true meaning. It was the Blood of Christ, the high and legendary Mountains of the Blood of Christ. Yes, he thought, and that was it. Far across San Luis park they lay, mountains drowned in redness. A hundred miles of mountains, drenched in the blood-color, glowing, shimmering, showing flecks of white, blood-tinted snow, in the vermilion. Sangre de Cristo, he repeated the words. It was as if dawn itself had seen battle, as if the eastern sky, roiled and stirred by conflicts out of human hearing, had bled upon those mountains.

"See 'er, over there?" Gitt singled out a stupendous peak, towering in the central part of the range. "That's old Sierra Blanca. I don't know of a tougher peak in this country. I couldn't tell you what it is about her, but you ride that Mosca Pass trail and you'll see what I mean. There's something heavy about old Blanca, something you don't feel so much about other peaks. Miles and miles of slope, and rock-slides, and timber. Enough rock in her to make a dozen ordinary peaks. And she's wild. Lots of bear and elk up in there, and some of the prettiest valleys you ever did see. You pass to the

north, on the edge of the dunes, and there before you know it you're lookin' down on the Huerfano country, on the east slope. Spanish Peaks—Huajatolla—to the south, the Arkansas to the north, and straight ahead to Bent's Fort."

Johnny's eyes swept the Sangre de Cristo range, the glow of sand-dunes at one point below it, and the gray-green, shimmering spread of valley sage. He felt a stabbing sense of disappointment that they had not come over Mosca Pass, through that old Spanish country of Huajatolla and Sierra Blanca.

"If it wasn't for mountains," he murmured, "I'd say we was back in Texas somewhere. It's got a real desert look about it, like that country north of Vientos. Not so much mesquite and cactus, maybe, but Spanish—the same dry look and pretty near the same color clay. Where's the del Norte from here?" he added suddenly. "And what'd you say was the name of that place where Fraser and the Bents and them fellers hangs out?"

"Taos." Gitt faced due south. "The del Norte comes out of these," he indicated rugged western mountains, "then makes a bend and hits down the valley. See how open she looks to the south? Don't let it fool you. There's mountains all the way to Taos, on both sides. Cinder peaks out all by theirselves like those old Texas clay peaks. And canyons. Comin' up on that country, you wouldn't think it had canyons. But they're there," Gitt said, "and believe me, they ain't easy to deal with."

"What lays to the west?" Johnny asked.

"Nothin'. Mountains. Hot-springs. Then you run into mesas and it's Navajo country."

"When you think we'll be hittin' to Taos?"

Gitt glanced at Johnny in surprise. "Why, good gosh, Johnny," he said, "we just got here."

"I know it. But when you think we'll be goin'?"

"Not this fall, anyhow. We got things to straighten out here and trappin' to do. We'll be headin' north and east, not south, till December." Gitt paused, his expression troubled. "What's the matter, Johnny?" he asked. "Don't you like Sagauche?"

"Sure!" Johnny's reply was perhaps too hurried. "My God, yes, I've never seen anything like this before. You know that, Tom. But I've been wonderin'—you and Henrietta and them kids. . . . Well, it just ain't for me. That Henrietta—you can't tell what she's goin' to do once she gets started. Where the hell am I goin' to hang out?"

Gitt burst into laughter. "Now," he said, "if that don't beat all! Shucks, Johnny, forget it! This ain't Tennessee, it's the San Luis. The Rocky Mountains! Things are different here. I figured on you stayin' with me, just like we are, and that bed's yours as long as you want it!"

"Yeah, but. . . ." Johnny shuffled uneasily. "That Henrietta, walkin' around without any clothes on, and such. I ain't used to that, not even in Tennessee. A feller likes some privacy, both ways. . . ."

"Privacy!" Again Gitt roared. "Well, Johnny, if that's what you want I can sure fix you up! And be damned," he added, "if I don't think it'd be good for you! Do you see what I see around here?"

Johnny was cautious. "I reckon . . . maybe."

"I reckon you *don't!*" Striding back to the central village trail, Gitt singled out a Ute girl of sixteen, plump and smooth-faced, who was working on moccasins at a lodge entrance. "That there's what I mean, Johnny," he said. "She's out early. Looks innocent enough, don't she?"

"She's chewin' on them dirty moccasins, if that's what you mean," Johnny said.

"Chewin'—and lookin'," said Gitt. "Stick around, Johnny. You'll see what she's really after. Ten-to-one a young buck shows up pretty quick. He'll come a-whoopin' down the lane here all dressed fit to kill—best pony, best war-paint, best everything. That's what she'll be waitin' for." Gitt grunted and clucked with his tongue. "They'll cavort around and make eyes at each other, and then pretty soon the old man'll come out. He'll be all on his dignity. All wrapped up and solemn: you know how the old fourflushers can get, red or white. If he likes the young feller things'll go just a-swimmin'. 'Howdy-howdy' in sign language and all the rest of it. They'll look over the pony, and the old skin-flint'll figure how many more there is where that one come from, and the little gal, she'll just chew on them moccasins and chew and chew on 'em till she goes damned near plumb through 'em. But if the old buck don't like the young 'un . . . Uh-o!" Gitt gave a symbolic swing of his foot. "Look out! That gal'll go in quicker'n a flea in a blanket and there won't be nothin' left of that buck but tail-feathers and a big cloud of dust."

Johnny absorbed this. "Was that what happened to you, Tom?" he asked.

"What?" Gitt's eyebrows shot up. "Are you joshin' me, boy?"

"No. I'm just interested, that's all. You must have had to do something to get Henrietta."

"I don't know just exactly what you mean by that," Gitt said, darkly. "But look." His tone changed and he nudged Johnny. "A white trapper comes in, see. He's lookin' for trade and a way to keep his scalp while he's gettin' that trade. He wants in solid, see: straight up with the head man and all the rest of the tribe. What's the answer? You know as good as

I do. And what is there about a white man a squaw likes? I couldn't rightly tell you, except it's a change from the usual. But there it is: it's the same in every tribe I ever run across. For a white man," Gitt chuckled, "the question ain't how to get 'em but how to keep clear of 'em."

Johnny was gazing with greater shrewdness at the industrious and impassive worker in front of the lodge. When he spoke his voice, too, was different, seemingly more compact and dry.

"You mean even her?" he said, off-hand.

"Sure! Her and a couple more if a feller wanted 'em." Gitt thrust his face close and dropped his words to a whisper. "Pretty nice, eh? A young filly like that—keep a man's lodge clean, make up his buckskins, cook, and do all the dirty-work for him? I'm puttin' you straight. That's the only way in this country. It'll get you in solid. Keep a knife or an arrow out of your back. And by far, it's the best thing for business."

Johnny was silent for a moment. "What's her name?" he asked.

"If it's the one I'm thinkin' about, it's Pepita."

"That ain't Ute."

"You can be thankful it ain't," Gitt said. "If it was Ancapagari or something, you couldn't remember it. But what's the matter?" he asked. "Don't you like Pepita?"

"Sure, I do. I was just wonderin', that's all," Johnny said. "How come Henrietta's name's Henrietta?"

Gitt swallowed hard. "I don't know," he said, turning scarlet. "She, well, she just looked like Henrietta, I guess."

Johnny thrust out his lips, moistened them reflectively with his tongue, and stared anew at Pepita. After some minutes, he said:

"What if a feller don't have any lodge? What if he don't have nothin' to offer?"

"Shucks! If he's young, white, and good-lookin'? He could have the pick of the tribe!"

"Besides," Johnny went on, more circumspectly, "I thought you said she was spoke for. Looks to me like a good way to start trouble."

"We'll see, we'll see." Gitt nodded, taking the possibility into account. "I'll talk around a little and we'll keep an eye out. If things are already set, that rooster'll probably show up one of these days with a buck deer on his pony. That's the way a lot of 'em do. He'll hang the buck up on one of them trees, and if the little gal goes out and starts to dressin' it down we'll have to begin over."

"And if she don't?" Johnny said.

"Just leave it to me." Gitt winked. "I know how to handle

these things. Meantime, Johnny, mix around a little. Let 'em look you over. Indians are funny that way. If a man talks too much at first, he's done. They'll let you know. If they want you to do something or test you out in some little way, play along with 'em. They're big jokers, you'll find out, so let 'em have their fun. It ain't goin' to hurt you. And there's one other thing," Gitt finished, in a more urgent tone. "Get Taos out of your mind. We'll be down there soon enough. And I guarantee you, there's good enough times to be had right here in Saguache!"

A week passed. It was a period that went swiftly and for the most part pleasantly, leaving as little trace as the yellow-bright days and blue-black, starry nights of the San Luis.

As Gitt had said they would, the Utes began to take notice of Johnny. Except in the late night hours their village was a lively and hustling place, full of laughter, chatter, and the sly, half-sadistic humor that Gitt had had in mind. Saguache, as a matter of fact, Johnny learned, was a permanent rendezvous point not only for San Luis Utes but for more distant bands, for Utes possessing a slightly different look and dress, who emerged at times from the westward mountains, visited among the lodges, and then moved on quietly to the south or back again, by travois, into the remote Cochetopa-San Juan.

The first true evidence of Ute interest and watchfulness came to light almost at once. Breakfast was over, that second morning after his talk with Gitt, and Johnny had stepped out and was walking north toward Saguache Creek when a horseman lashed down the lane behind him. There was a momentary soft beat of hoofs, a single whoop as pony and rider brushed past, flicking a pocket. In rising white dust Johnny saw the Ute sweep on, then pull in and fling himself off at the very lodge where, in the previous dawn, Pepita had worked at her moccasins.

So, Johnny commented to himself, flushing but keeping his regular pace. Jokes were one thing: running a man practically down, trying to scare him and make him a laughing-stock, was quite another. And so that was the rooster, he thought, whom Gitt had talked about, the Ute buck who would ride in all flashy some day and make his play for a squaw. Coming up to the lodge, Johnny measured the grinning, shuffling Ute, then shifted his gaze to the entranceway. Just within, as he had suspected, Pepita was waiting. He saw again that she was plump and well-developed, with thick lips and broad cheeks, a short but nicely shaped nose, and bland, inviting, openly pleased black eyes. Her hair, even in the lodge shadow, was glossy, heavy, and pulled tightly back from her forehead. Her long buckskin dress was neat, her moccasins trim, softly tanned

and beaded in a bright, intricate way. Her hands too were strong, as Gitt had pointed out, wide and flat, already well accustomed to work. If any doubt had lingered in Johnny's mind, after Gitt's remarks, it dropped away in that instant. Shifting his eyes once more, sardonically, to the Ute, Johnny thought of a new lodge, ponies, and of a sub-chief named Tabby, and, smiling to himself, continued his walk to the creek.

A second incident took place not many days later. Mid-afternoon at Saguache invariably found Utes wandering out to a flat space near the lodges, where they held foot-races and other sporting competitions. Attracted by loud and gleeful cries on one occasion, Johnny walked that way and was at once surrounded by grinning participants. Sign language was mixed with Ute and considerable Spanish, a bow and long-feathered cedar arrows were thrust at him, and he was invited to enter the contest. The result was ludicrous but not humiliating, and Johnny, his arrows flying in all directions, laughed as loudly as anyone. Next, he was matched against short-legged, barrel-chested runners, and, although he seemed to improve his performance, a dozen of the mountain Utes outdistanced him.

It was only in horsemanship and in the use of his Hawken rifle that he excelled. Nor was this fact lost upon him, as the afternoon's games were brought to their close. Johnny had seen the uneasiness of the Utes on the Plains, close to Bent's. He had marked their clannishness, the way in which they had huddled about their campfires at night, and the haste with which they had taken the trail, finally, toward the mountains and timber. Fine warriors and brave as they might be, he began to understand, against Plains horsemen—against the larger and perhaps even more savage bands of Arapahoes, Cheyennes and Comanches—they were safest in their own country, far back in the rocks.

So time went, at Saguache. September days were full days. The Gitt lodge became more and more cluttered, it seemed to Johnny, as Henrietta cooked, sewed buckskins, and packed, as the boys romped, and as the two white men themselves made their preparations for trapping.

Along Saguache creek and close on the western mountains, the season showed change. Creek cottonwoods dried out, their leaves growing brown-yellow, dropping to stream-bed gravel, and scuttling in wind that came down the gulches. Oak-brush low on ridges flamed into scarlet. Aspens by the millions broke forth in yellow, in a marvelous clear-gold against the unchanging ever-green dark, and mountain summits once gray now stood powdered white. Often, as the San Luis autumn progressed, Tabby came to the lodge, smiling at Johnny and then

going out with Gitt to talk in low tones. An air of readiness settled over the camp. In many lodges Utes were waiting. But scouts from the Bayou Salade were delayed, and, for news, the men of Saguache were forced to rely upon chance riders and upon the trapping parties which were beginning to move northward from Taos.

For some days Johnny had sensed it: the vague, almost mystical relationship between Saguache near Poncha Pass and Taos below the San Luis. It was a relationship hidden in Saguache, exposing itself only in Spanish words now and then, in a piece of equipment or a silver-filigreed ornament, or in a Ute face that was different, a browner face, angular, intense, and more highly colored. Yet the connection was strong, an unbreakable link, embedded deep in the past. When, for this reason, a Taos party trailed in, unpacking one evening and camping without invitation on the best ground, Johnny noted the fact but could feel no surprise.

Gitt seemed to know men in the party. They were the Montoya brothers, he told Johnny. Big ranchers and landowners in the del Norte country. They were sheepmen from way back, with a grant from some Spanish king who had never seen the del Norte or Taos. Their main ranch, Gitt had heard, lay somewhere to the southeast of Taos, in mesas and cedar breaks miles from the river. They were hard operators, hard on their stock and hard on their men. Watch, Gitt said, how they treated their packers. Watch right in Saguache. Along with their señoras and high-combed señoritas, the Montoyas were like a few other families. Fancy-dressers; big-livers. Pirates. Throat-cutters. Around Taos, or maybe it was mostly Santa Fe and old Albuquerque, they rode fast and handsome, keeping other Mexicans down and ranging their sheep far beyond their own grants, right up to Blanca Peak and the San Luis dunes.

What were they doing there in Saguache? Gitt listened to Johnny's question and then grunted and spat. It was hard to tell. Del Norte Mex were afraid of the Navajos and Apaches. They had been raided too many times; they had lost too many sheep and herders. Del Norte Mex mixed with the Utes for protection, yet they kept to themselves. The Montoyas, now, Gitt conjectured, might be headed over Cochetopa, northwest. They liked to travel, liked to hunt in big, fat-equipped parties. All the comforts of home when the Montoyas hunted. Then again, Gitt said, the whole jaunt might be a blind. There were stories. Somewhere up in that San Luis country, so the word went, lay old Spanish mines. Rich mines, of gold and silver. Maybe in Cochetopa; maybe north of Blanca in the Sangre de Cristo. God only knew and only one thing was certain. Steer

clear: keep your hands free. With Texas gone and Americans moving in west, the del Norte Mex were men to be watched.

Johnny hung close to the Taos party, nevertheless. He was fascinated by their equipment, their saddle-stock, and by the atmosphere of their camp. Saddles he examined were heavy, with great flat pommels, deep seats, broad, darkly shining skirts, and amazingly intricate carvings and silver ornamentation. Horses in the cavayard were taller and more powerful than Indian ponies, rangier, full blacks, bays, and buckskins that gave evidence of breeding. Camp bedding was ample, tents comfortable, and about the cooking-fires was a wonderful assortment of pots, hooks, and other utensils of old Spanish design. On the whole, Johnny concluded, the del Norte Mexicans were solidly settled and rich, richer by far than their cousins of the mesquite and chaparral deserts of Texas.

All, that is, except the packers, los peones, Gitt called them, ancianos, the old men of the camp. They were like men apart. Neglected, ragged, often without footwear, they seemed to be outcasts among their own people, no better than slaves to the ranchers for whom they worked. Yet, to Johnny, they were wonderful men. In halting Spanish he spoke to one of them, a wrinkled, gentle, almost saintly-faced Mexican named Juan Gutierrez, drawing him out. Juan Gutierrez was shy at first, furtive, like the wild, forlorn women of the Arkansas plaza; later he appeared to welcome Johnny, becoming eager, pleading somehow, and bright of eye and feature. Shrewdly, noticing silver-inlaid spurs and bridle bits and the thick, raw silver on saddle cantles, Johnny attempted to turn the old Mexican's mind to the mountains. "You been in this valley a long time, Juan," he would say. "I expect you know where those old Spanish mines are." And: "No, no, señor. Mis borregos. I stay with mis borregos," Juan Gutierrez would answer always evasively, in terms of his sheep. Johnny was patient, talking for hours with Juan and the other humble, half-starved peones. Of all men, he told himself, old herders, the lonely ones, would know a wilderness country in greatest detail. They would know its high places and valleys, its lava plains, mesas, and cinder cones. Back-trails—hidden, seldom-used trails—would be open secrets to them. Some day even so, he thought quietly, he might go out with a herder like Juan Gutierrez. Look around Taos and the mountains. Perhaps, some day, take a trail that would lead him to silver.

But Johnny visited with old Juan Gutierrez once too often. As they sat together one morning beside a Saguache Creek ripple, talking easily and pleasantly, another Mexican emerged from a tent. This Mexican was not like Juan Gutierrez. He was tall, booted, elegantly dressed, and armed with a short-quirt

and pistol. Striding up to the wrinkled herder, already scarred from many beatings, he raised his quirt and struck savagely, without warning.

"Basta! Basta!" he cried.

Juan Gutierrez staggered, losing his balance. "Señor Felipe!"

Again the heavy-set rancher struck, lashing straight at the eyes.

"Tomelo! Perro! Vaya usted!"

Whimpering, his cheeks showing blood, the old herder scuttled away.

The rancher turned upon Johnny. *"Tejano!"* he shrieked.

Johnny faced him stonily. "Sure, Texas," he said. "And go to hell!"

"Tejano! Tejano! Ha!"

The Mexican took a step forward, holding the shot-quirt for an instant over his head. Then abruptly, lowering it, he swerved, laughing loud, and strode to his tent.

Johnny retreated, white-lipped. The old Texas hate, all the desire to kill and burn and destroy, to sweep an enemy from his path, had come back. Trembling, his eyes hot, he went to his lodge, picked up his rifle and returned to the lane. Across the creek, he saw with surprise, activity had sprung up in the Mexican camp. Tents were being struck, panniers packed, mounts unhobbled and saddled. The old herder had gone. The ranchero himself was far out in the sage, helping wrangle Taos ponies, Sardonically, squatting in the center of the lane, Johnny followed the ranchero's movements. He meant to find Juan Gutierrez some day, sit long with him, eat frijoles and red chili pepper, and have other talks. At some time, too, he might drop in on Felipe Montoya, asking him more about harmless old sheepherders, and, especially, about the shot-quirt he was so handy with.

Mid-September. In that time came a definite weather break, with black horn-clouds thrusting over peaks, piercing the San Luis sky, and lowering to root at the valley. At Saguache the last work was done. Bullet pouches were full; quivers hung stiff with hard-bound, long-fletched arrows; trap clusters lay about; and pack panniers like those used by the del Norte Mexicans bulged with jerky, meal, and kinnikinnik. Outside ponies grazed at will, filling up, growing fat on the tall Saguache grass. As day after day passed without news, the Utes became increasingly restless, Gitt taciturn, inclined to keep to his lodge. Among the women fear spread. There were councils. Around great evening fires the medicine pipe was smoked, Utes spoke solemnly of the possibility of disaster in Bayou

Salade, and medicine men, gazing into the north, evoked spells and chanted prayers for the safe return of the scouts.

For Johnny, on the other hand, those final days at Saguache were both eventful and profitable. With a quickness that was surprising, he was accepted into the life of the Utes. Under the wing of Tabby and tall old Gitt he was allowed even to take part in night councils, to listen uncomprehendingly to the guttural, short, dramatic speeches of the head men, and with unbroken gravity to smoke the ceremonial pipe that was passed from hand to hand. But especially was he impressed by Tewe and other medicine men, those mysterious and aloof members of the Saguache village, who exerted such influence upon the rest of the Utes. Of all men, these men seemed to believe most intensely and to follow most closely the ritual of their religion. Their medicine pouches, from which they drew powders, ceremonial pebbles, feathers, and wisps of scented sage, were objects sacred above all else, untouchable by the uninitiated. Their chants and dreaming, their painted faces and wild buffalo-horn headdresses, their sharp utterances before the flaming council fires were, to Johnny, stirring beyond thought. Even the Rocky Mountain country, he sensed, was a country especially suited to such evocations. Swift-falling night, the valley wind, stars, moon-brightness, and the shape of distant peaks: all added power, the force of mountain lands, to these red dwellers of the medicine lodges.

Mysteriously, too, affairs progressed in a more personal way. After the departure of the Taos party toward Cochetopa, with Juan Gutierrez shuffling in silence after his pack-burros, Johnny lingered more and more in the central village lane, opposite a certain lodge. Every morning Pepita came out with moccasins, baskets, or buckskins and commenced her work in the sun. Almost with the impassivity of a Ute Johnny watched her, remaining in one position sometimes for an hour or longer. Beyond that he did nothing, yet it seemed to be enough. Often he caught Pepita stealing glances at him over her work. At a little distance a new tepee made its appearance, the lodge-poles being set up and the elk-hides being stretched within a half-hour. Finally, when a particular Ute buck flashed by on his piebald, less reaction took place. A time even came when the Ute made no impression at all, and, ceasing his excursions, rode the lane with face surly and eyes fixed upon the twitching ears of his pony.

One morning, then, Tom Gitt stepped out of his lodge. Slowly he strolled down through the village, stopped beside Johnny, and stood for a time, meditating. It was one of those bright crystal-clear San Luis mornings. Before her lodge Pepita

worked as usual; in the background the new lodge rose fresh and trim; and in his favorite spot Johnny took the sun comfortably, his Hawken rifle pressing his thighs.

Gitt coughed, casually, and said:

"That gun loaded, Johnny?"

"A hell of a note if it wasn't," said Johnny.

"All right. Go out and get you a deer."

"What?"

"Now, don't stall around. A two-hundred-pounder. Eight points."

"I don't want no deer," Johnny said.

"God damn it, you do, too!" Gitt hopped as if pained. "Anyhow, I do! What you think's been goin' on here the last week?"

"I'll be a son-of-a-gun if I know."

"What! How you suppose you set in the council?" Gitt asked. "Where you suppose that new lodge come from, out of the air? And what happened to that Ute friend of yours? You reckon he quit on Pepita just for nothin'?"

Johnny blinked. "I hadn't thought about it that way," he observed.

"Of all the blind bats I ever see! Here me and Tabby talk our tongues out promotin' everything—get you a lodge, fix things with the right parties, get rid of that Ute—and still I got to get in behind you and shove!" In his exasperation Gitt seemed to strain the air through his mustache. "Johnny," he pleaded, "ain't you tumbled yet? You done yourself proud the other afternoon! Shootin' them arrows and racin' and lettin' 'em laugh at you! They like you: they want you to stay, want you to be one of 'em! As for Pepita, you got only to look. She can't hardly wait. Just one sign—one buck deer on your pony—and I'm a-tellin' you, she'll come a-runnin'!"

"Yeah, but. . . ." The old uneasiness stole over Johnny and he fidgeted. "This here gettin' married. A man's got to go slow. It could mean trouble. And what if her and me don't get along?"

"Get along! Fiddledeedum!" Resigning himself, Gitt settled down to serious argument. "For the last time, Johnny," he said plaintively. "I know what you're thinkin'. But this ain't Tennessee. You don't go down to the church and get hitched. These here are Utes. There ain't too many of 'em: a few scatterin' bunches here in the San Luis and over the mountains. They got the Apaches and Navajos south and west and the Plains tribes east—all enemies. These people have it hard to live, boy. Everybody's got to pitch in. That's why things look pretty free. They take marriage natural. No ceremony: not

what you'd call one, anyhow. Just a sign, like I told you. If a woman comes out and starts to work for a man, that means she'll live with him, keep his lodge for him. Maybe they get along fine. Maybe not. If they don't, somebody just gets up and walks off. And another thing, Johnny," Gitt said. "Look at it from your side. You're a thousand miles from nowhere and except for me there ain't another white man this side of Taos, and them you can't trust. You got to look out for yourself. If you're in, these people'll help you. If you stay out there's no tellin' how you'll wind up.

"That's the size of it," Gitt finished, almost forebodingly. "Now, are you or ain't you goin' after that deer?"

Johnny went after it. In the oak-brush of a gulch he found his deer and shot it, packing it without drawing the entrails. Returning to the village, he stopped in the lane, dismounted, and left his pony standing. Before her lodge Pepita waited a little, then walked to the pony, untied thongs holding the deer, and dragged the carcass to clean ground for skinning. A wrinkled squaw appeared, carrying bundles from the old lodge to the new one. Gitt came down, grinning. Tabby rode past casually, looked, and said nothing. When the deer had been drawn and expertly skinned, meat was cut and laid on the drying racks. Johnny's pony was watered and cared for. Firewood was broken. Then Pepita, satisfied and half-smiling, went into her lodge. Arranging robes, basket-ware, and cooking pots to suit her fancy, she set about making her fire.

Bayou Salade

THE scouts came in. As with the pack-train, their dust was visible for miles across the San Luis. Riders went whooping to meet them, jumping nimble ponies over the sage tufts. But quickly the high-yipping ceased, the greeters slowed to a death pace, and silence fell on Saguache.

Of ten scouts to the Bayou, six had returned. Johnny saw them ride in. Grass-fat and saucy on the Upper Arkansas, their ponies were now spiritless, no more than walking skeleton heaps. Quivers once full were empty; their food pouches were flat; their lances were broken and stripped of decoration. Yet, the greatest change seemed to show in the men. Like their ponies, they were gaunt, their moccasins and breeches

in shreds. They rode haughtily, sullenly into camp, staring neither to right nor left. Their faces were like blocks of dark stone, their eyes obsidian points in the heavy-boned cheeks. Two of the scouts carried wounds. Three dangled scalps raw-red at their belts.

Where had it happened? How? What tribe? Like wind these questions eddied and rustled through Saguache. Johnny got the story from Gitt. For one day the scouts had followed the Arkansas, then had cut over rock, eastward, to the Bayou Salade. At sunset of the second day they were well out in the park, on its grasslands. All signs had pointed to good trapping and hunting. Streams they crossed were full and trout-clear, the number of dams, lakes, and beaver lodges very great. Antelope flocks were as thick as mountain bird flocks, sheep had been seen on the ridges, and there had been many buffalo from the Plains herds. Excited, the Utes had continued their foray to the north, reaching head-streams of the South Fork of the Platte. It was there that trouble had come. Cheyennes. The word seemed to cling to Gitt's tongue. A large band had broken from an alder patch. Their horses were fast. The Utes had run in a bunch, seeking the rocks. In hand-to-hand fight many Cheyennes had been killed. Scalps were proof of that. But the long Cheyenne bows had reached far, farther sometimes than Ute bows, and so only six Ute scouts had returned.

As the extent of the loss became plain, sound swelled over Saguache. Beginning at a point near the creek, it spread outward like a pool ripple until the most distant lodge had been touched. High, tremulous, with the piercing sharpness of animal howling, it was unceasing, a black sound that ebbed and flowed, stemming from earth and sky and stream as certainly as from human life. Appalled, Johnny listened to it and retreated before it, wanting the privacy of his lodge. But there he found that death had struck closest of all. Pepita, hard-working, impassive Pepita, sat by the entrance, howling and swaying, reaching up with crooked fingers to snatch at her hair, and rending her long buckskin dress. Johnny scarcely recognized her, nor did she see him. Her eyes were blank, uplifted. Dry-faced, she howled for her brother, one of the scouts who had not returned, and Johnny, shivering at this revelation of wildness, walked away quickly, remaining alone until her mourning was done.

Later, rage took possession of Saguache. In a frenzy Utes dragged cottonwood logs and pitch knots from a burnt-cedar ridge, piled them high, and, as night settled, struck fire with Gitt's flint. Emerging from their lodges, be-tasseled medicine men and chiefs in full headdress stalked to the council ground.

Already, a great crowd had gathered. Painted Ute warriors sitting in a circle, squaws standing tight-packed and silent behind them: every adult of the band was present to follow the prayer rituals, listen to speeches, and to take part in the chanted war songs of vengeance.

Well to one side, Tom Gitt and Johnny stood by themselves. Gitt's face was serious. When Johnny suggested that they move closer in to the circle, as on previous nights, the old trapper refused. He had been in and around the Utes for ten years, he said. He knew how hot-tempered they were, deep down. He knew how they felt about the mountains, and Bayou Salade, and especially about their dead scouts. That was why he said, stay clear. This was Ute business—a war council. No white man with sense would force his way in.

As leader after leader stepped into the fire-brightness, speaking either in monotones, with dignity and restraint, or in bursts accompanied by sharp, impassioned gestures, Gitt interpreted for Johnny.

"They're workin' 'em up," he muttered. "It'll take 'em maybe till midnight. Watch the medicine men, Tewe and them others. They got more power than any in lots of ways.

"It's a funny thing," Gitt continued, "about them medicine men. Nobody seems to know much about 'em. How they pick 'em, and so on. They're like some white men you meet: they just got a natural touch. Full of hokey-pokey. You'll see 'em go out sometimes, all by theirselves, and they'll be gone maybe three or four days. Nobody knows where. Just out. Then they'll come back, lookin' starved and beat down, and stay in their lodge till everybody's just bustin' to know what goes on. Then out they'll come with some big story about talkin' to the Manitou, and seein' eagles with arrows for claws flyin' east toward the 'Rapaho, or some such thing, and the whole band'll believe 'em. Heap big medicine, them medicine priests. And they're a lodge by theirselves. Those signs and spells and them little medicine kits they carry: that's all secret business. There's nothin' wrote down. It's all handed down word-to-mouth, strictly in private. That's one way," Gitt said, "of holdin' their power, I reckon."

A speaker finished and the Utes gave a shout. The next man to come before them was old, bow-legged, pot-bellied, with silver-streaked hair falling thickly over scarred features. Fresh excitement seemed to run through the Utes. As the old man faced them, a doughty, dramatic figure against the fire-red, he was greeted with clapping, stamping, and even louder shouts of approval.

"One-Ear," Gitt whispered. "Old Gotchy, I call him. See

that right ear and those claw marks? He got tangled up with a Blanca Peak grizzly. He come out of it half-chawed to pieces, minus an ear and part of his nose. He's big medicine hereabouts, old Gotchy is. He killed the grizzly with his knife, or so the story goes."

Gitt was shrewdly following the old chief's harangue. He went on: "Gotchy's a trouble-maker. All the chiefs are—even Tabby—and don't you forget it. They're man-killers. That's how they come to be chiefs. But it don't look like Gotchy wants trouble right now. No, sir. He's talkin' about the weather this time.

"Early fall, he says. There's a bad winter comin', mucho snow in Saguache. The buffalo are on their way out. No game: there won't be nothin' left here, Just snow, and cold as blue blazes, and nothin' to eat. Why . . ." Gitt frowned. "The lyin' old coot! It's goin' to be good and he knows it. But now he's on the Cheyennes. He says get 'em. Sure, get 'em! But wait till the spring. Wait, then go north to the Bayou and count plenty coups. Meantime . . . well, if I ain't a son-of-a-bitch! The old bastard's slick as a weasel! You hear what he said? Pagosa. The rheumatiz has got him and he's talkin' Pagosa!"

"What's Pagosa?" asked Johnny.

"Mineral springs. The Big Medicine springs. Over southwest."

"It sounds pretty good."

"That's just the trouble," Gitt whispered. "It is good. It's one of the best mineral hot-springs in the mountains. Utes come to it from all over. Trappers, too, when they get down in that section. You can thaw out: warm up and take it easy when there gets too much snow in the high country. In a way," Gitt added, "I wouldn't mind goin'. It's mighty pretty down there. Plenty of game, and you ain't far from desert. A man can hide out. But Pagosa ain't for us, Johnny. Not now, it ain't."

"You reckon old Gotchy'll sell 'em?" Johnny said.

"He ain't sold 'em yet."

"What if he does?"

"Well," Gitt set his jaw. "Henrietta'll just have to make out. She's travoised before. Me, I'm trappin' the Bayou, and I'm trappin' it if I have to do it alone."

Gotchy finished, gave a last look about him, and stalked from the circle. Utes who had clapped and stamped greeting were silent now, impressed. At once, however, a younger Ute, taller, muscular, thin, leaped into the firelight. Standing straight and tense, he spoke with great rapidity, gesturing in an imperious way. He was a scout from the Bayou. The Cheyennes,

he screamed, would still be there; there among the prized lakes and meadows of the north. They would be laughing, dancing in triumph over the Utes. Flat-footed filth of the Plains, they would be trapping, hunting, making fine camps in the Ute mountain land. Trembling, the scout held his broken lance high, then dashed it aside and tore the Cheyenne scalps from his belt. Contemptuously, deep in his anger, he mocked the old men—men in favor of Pagosa—and cried out for war.

Another scout and still another leaped to his side, until all survivors faced the band at Saguache. The pride with which they held themselves, the black, flashing challenge in their eyes, and their wounds, hacked equipment, and battle trophies had the profoundest effect. Mutterings were heard. In semi-darkness a squaw wailed; Utes looked up, startled; some broke the circle. It was like a storm moment when clouds gather, lightning shows, and heat can be felt. But again older men intervened. Gotchy sounded warning of restlessness and winter desperation on the part of the Plains bands. Looking at Gitt, Tabby spoke of the need to hunt, trap, and trade; and other head men, long wanderers of the mountains, pointed to the dangers of snow and starvation. Eventually, a compromise was worked out. Breaking camp at Saguache, the old men and the women and children would move to Pagosa. The young men, under Tabby, would take extra arrows, catch their best ponies, and ride in force to the Bayou Salade.

The matter settled, Johnny lingered for a few moments with Gitt, then said good-night and walked alone to his lodge. The late valley wind was blowing, raising dust-feathers at the entranceway. Inside, Pepita had a small fire going and a pot of dark, rich venison broth coming to a boil. Her greeting was quiet—a lift of her head, a look, the faintest mark of a smile—as if there had been no mourning that day, no throbbing war council that night. Crossing the lodge, Johnny threw himself onto buffalo robes. Studying Pepita, once more he was filled with the mystery of her, with the feeling of something so deep and silent and secretive about her that he would never fathom it. Hours before, she had cried out like any wild thing, in sorrow over her brother: now she worked about her lodge, calmly, efficiently as though all were forgotten. Young, with a strength that amazed him, Pepita seemed nevertheless as old as the oldest man in Saguache, steady, deliberate, close-rooted. Johnny wondered, suddenly, whether she would cry out for him, openly and without shame, as she had cried for her brother. No, he decided, probably not. He was white, a stranger, different. She would live with him, work for him, and never complain. But if some day he were not to return, if his own

scalp were to hang some night in a Cheyenne or Arapaho lodge, she would not cry out before others. She would accept the event, absorb it, and sink quickly back into her Indian red.

Bayou Salade. The South Park, some trappers called it, most southerly of the three central parks of the Rockies.

Beyond the junction of the Poncha Pass and Arkansas canyon trails, the Saguache party forded the river close to its head-waters. Heavily armed and alert, with a fan of scouts ahead, they took the slope of a ridge, passed between timber walls, and attained a comb crest. From that point, at an elevation of ten thousand feet, they looked out and down upon the famed mountain park.

Red rust. A lipped basin, rusty-red with grasses curing, silver-veined with glinting streams. Bead lakes along the silver, shining. Yellow-orange aspen patches, bank-willows golden-colored. alders blackish-brown, the hue of blood long dried. Wind. the true peak wind, hollow, flowing over stone as through a hollow wing-bone. Shadows small and ragged, traveling shadows, cast by clouds of marble whiteness. Mountain masses, north and south and east: the frothy white of quartz: the spark of mica lights in granite: spruce lines, green, slope-clinging spruce lines, marching up to boulder fields. This was the Bayou Salade. This was the game country, old hunting-ground of the Utes—high-lonely, watered, more beautiful than the San Luis.

Warily, the Utes began their descent, striking south-by-southeast. Tabby and Gitt knew where to go. By late afternoon they had led the party to a region of lakes and interlacing streams, where game signs were thick and where spruce grew to the meadows' edge. There Tabby turned, putting his mount over down-logs to a clearing that was completely timber-walled, offering evidence neither by trail nor by stream gulch of its presence. Working rapidly in the dusk, the Utes cut poles and furry spruce branches, carried them in, and fashioned lean-tos of a semi-permanent kind. In strategic places fire-pits were dug deep to smother the glow. The upper pool of a seeping spring was roped off, ponies were staked or side-hobbled, traps were laid out, and the heavy, black, warm buffalo robes were spread. To Johnny, engaged in framing a double shelter for Gitt and himself, the clearing afforded a perfect campsite. Sloping a little, it was gravel-dry, its grass tall and autumn sweet. The mountain wind was broken by spruce; smoke rising thin from small fires would dissipate quickly; all sound would be muffled. Cheyennes, Arapahoes or any wandering horsemen, Johnny thought, might pass within a hundred yards and not discover that camp.

Long before the first dawn in the clearing, Gitt awoke Johnny. "Roll out," he whispered. "It's time to be doin'." Gitt was fully dressed already, his fur cap pulled down, his jacket tied tight against the cold. He held a Ute bow, with a quiverful of arrows.

"What's the bow for?" Johnny muttered.

"You'll see," replied Gitt, restlessly, in deep excitement. "Let's just be a-goin'."

They went out through the timber, down a rocky bench-slope, and into the meadows. As they left the camp farther and farther behind, Gitt became more cautious, hunching a little and peering into the region ahead. It was the darkest time of night, when diamond star clusters shed only the faintest glow, peaks were obscured, and when tree clumps were like solid knolls on the land. Occasionally, stepping into a hole or stumbling over a hummock, Gitt cursed in a suppressed voice but then quickly grew silent. How long they walked, or in what direction, Johnny could not judge with accuracy. He followed, mystified but obedient, until Gitt crossed a stream trickle, threaded his way into dwarf aspens, and, without explanation, sank down upon the frost-laden grass.

Light was slow in coming. A hair-line at first, it ran along the park rim, revealing the black tips of mountains. Gradually it broadened and became a colored wing-band, showing striations of rose-pink and gray. Stars above the band winked out, the wind ceased its persistent searching, and stillness followed the light. It was the stillness of sky, not of the meadows. Johnny, looking, listening, picked up the earth stirrings. Bird twitterings, sleepy and unafraid, were like tiny bell tinklings. The chirp of a chickadee was bright: mice rustlings were fine and soft in the aspens; and, in some open space nearby, there was the sudden trilling, upswelling song of a lark.

Water sounds, too, breaking into tone facets, became distinguishable. A rippling tumble told of a gravel stretch, shallow, mossy perhaps, without obstacles on its bottom. At points farther along deeper tones spoke of smooth water, flowing over deadfalls or dams. Presently less regular noises intruded, destroying the rhythms. A businesslike but unalarmed slap caused a chickadee flutter. Bank-scratching began, pebbles rolled, and there was an audible shaking. Finally a chirring sound broke over the open, followed by bark-cutting, chipping, and the snapping of fibers.

Gitt grinned and made a sign. Flat on his stomach, the bow and quiver clutched before him, he led the way to the aspen rim-line. There Johnny, concealed in tall grass, looked out upon a lake and a stick-dam, strange, rounded stick lodges, and upon a finger point, running into the lake some rods to

the south, where fresh aspen stumps and trunk lengths showed that work was in progress.

Gitt put his lips close to Johnny's ear. "See 'em?" he said. "There on the point?"

Johnny saw them. Beaver. Ten or fifteen of them, working in the grove or at the lake's edge. Rocky Mountain beaver, he thought, a hundred yards from him.

"Big, ain't they?" Gitt whispered.

Johnny's eyes shone. "Big! I didn't figure 'em. Not a-tall!"

"What did you think?"

"Five pounds, maybe. Like a muskrat."

"Thirty to sixty," Gitt said. "And look at that fur! Glossy. October-November prime. But it'll take doin'," he warned. "They're the smartest things in the mountains."

Johnny could understand that. The strange stick lodges had been placed well toward the middle of the lake, in deep water. Though the beavers themselves seemed to work as a team on the point, he noted that one at least was always on the alert, facing either the water or the crossed shadows of aspens. And the dam—its location between the throatlike banks of the stream, its length and straightness, and the solidity of its construction: the dam, Johnny thought, murmuring, was little less than a miracle, a piece of work that he himself could scarcely have duplicated.

"It's their busy season," Gitt whispered, half-amused. "They're like the chipmunks and the rest of us. Fixin' things. Puttin' in stores for the freeze-up.

"Watch close," he continued, "and we'll maybe see some go to work on the dam. They probably haven't worked on it all summer. Lazed around, got fat: plenty water, plenty to eat. So now they've got to mud up, put a stick in here and there. You can see some sticks now, fresh-cut, wove in on the far side. They got a weak spot there, maybe, or faster current and not so good bank."

Gitt was still flat on his stomach, almost brushing Johnny's ear with his lips. He was holding the Ute bow in a position of instant readiness, a flint-headed arrow fitted to its gut string. Yet he had given no explanation as to its use, nor did he seem in a hurry to do so.

"Beaver are the damnedest," he whispered. "The way they can figure things out. Look at that lake! It's pretty, in just the right place. Food supply—aspens—right alongside. Plenty room for the lodges. And deep enough. That's important," Gitt said. "The main item."

"Why so?" Johnny asked.

"Well, because she gets forty below in this country. A bad

location: a shallow lake or too little stream and they'd die. If they ain't fixed right they get trapped in their lodges."

"Can't they gnaw out the top?"

"Did you ever try to gnaw iron?" Gitt said. "Go out there now and tear down a lodge. I'll bet you can't do it. Anyhow, you'd have a hell of a time. When the freeze comes it'll hard up that mud and put ice on top a foot thick."

Johnny studied the lodges again, and the dam. "All right," he said. "But I still don't see it. Them beaver need air, I don't care whether the lake freezes over or not. There can't be air in the lodges right now, if they're solid. Not with the entrance-ways under water. So it looks to me like the beaver'd suffocate as it is."

"You got me," said Gitt. "I've wondered, too. The only thing I can tell you is this. Come spring, you'll find some lakes full of beaver and others with old dead carcasses in 'em, floatin' around. The live lakes have had water runnin' in from the creek and out by the dam, all winter long. The dead lakes have been really dead, no water comin' in, no water goin' out. Everything stopped. But if you'll notice, fresh, runnin' water's full of air bubbles. You can see 'em when you get your thin ice, in October. Big bubbles movin' down, right under the surface. I wouldn't swear to it, but maybe that tells the story."

Full morning opened and warmth spread, drawing steam from the beaver pond and a white frost-mist from the meadows. Welcoming the sun, the two men kept their position, thawing out after the pre-dawn chill. Gitt, following beaver operations at the lake foot, apparently felt no hunger pangs, but Johnny, his stomach caving against his backbone, could not help thinking with envy of the spruce-clearing camp, its fires, and of the steaks that even now would be adding their savor to the wood-smoke.

As Gitt anticipated, with the growth of light the beaver colony showed increasing activity. Trimmings from the aspen point were floated out or dragged along the top of the dam to sections that needed reinforcement, then interlaced and mud-chinked with a skill that brought murmurs of astonishment from the observers. On the point itself more and more beavers seemed to be gathering, standing full-length and bracing with their flat, paddle-like tails as they gnawed and chipped at the soft, whitish wood. Three times aspens of good size swayed and fell with a crash, the beavers slapping warning, like the most cautious of woodsmen, and scuttling with sure instinct out of the way. Once down, the aspens were quickly swarmed over, succulent branches and the dry, dead-gray twigs were stripped off, and the work of cutting into food lengths for lake bottom storage was commenced.

Soon a drift of workers along the point became perceptible. An old buck beaver, taking his time, unaware of the quiet watchers down-wind, waddled here and there among the aspens, looking for the softest and fattest trunks to be cut. As the beaver approached, Gitt gathered himself and Johnny discerned the reason for the Ute bow. It was silence. A rifle-shot, crashing out upon the placid grove and pond, would put every beaver to flight: an arrow, well aimed, would take its course soundlessly and kill, too, without a sound. At thirty yards the old beaver stopped and stood erect, exposing its fat round belly and ribs. Propped awkwardly upon his right elbow, Gitt loosed his Ute arrow, only to see it wobble and wing high, ghost on through the aspens, crack into one of the white, graceful trunks and hang, its shaft quivering.

For one startled instant all was still on the point. Then from somewhere near the dam came a tail-slap, sharp, flat, like a broad piece of wood striking water. Other reports broke upon the air, geysers arose at the dam base, and suddenly the point swarmed with alarmed, waddling figures. Grove-side splashes came simultaneously. Ripples rolled out, the bottom ooze was roiled, green water-tunnelings shot directly toward the lodges. That was all. Within half-a-minute the lake itself was deserted, the dam stretched like a porcupine breastwork between the stream banks, and in the grove only aspen leaves, a gray jay or two, and the chickadees swirled in continuous motion.

Gitt looked at the bow, sighed, and grinned.

"That's what I get," he said, sheepishly. "We should of brought Tabby. He can shoot one of these things. And that old beaver was plenty good medicine."

"He looked tough as a boot to me," Johnny said.

"No," Gitt said, "I ain't talkin' about meat. Them little musk glands is what I was after. Smell-bait. It's a funny thing about beaver. They carry little oil-sacks under their forelegs. Castoreum, I've heard it called. Take some of it and mix it with spice-root or willow-root—damn near anything's good—and you can prime your traps right. You've seen the way a coyote'll sniff at greasewood and bears'll go miles to scratch their back on one particular tree. Well, beaver's the same way, only more so. They'll make mud-pies or sprinkle musk on a bank or some old aspen stump and every beaver in the neighborhood'll come over and see who's passed by, and leave their own brand. You get the drift, Johnny?"

"I'm beginnin' to," Johnny said.

"Sprinkle dope right and you got 'em. Only you have to do it right. Coyotes ain't nothin' to beaver when it comes to steerin' clear of a trap." Gitt stood up then and stretched, unlimbered his back, and swung his arms to start the circulation.

After a moment of looking about him, he stripped to the skin, laying moccasins, leggings, and buckskin jacket on a grass tuft. "Come on, Johnny," he said. "Strip down. Time's on the fly."

Johnny was shocked. "Strip down?" he complained. "Where the hell do you think I'm goin'?"

"In the lake."

"For God's sake, man, do you know what you're sayin'? This place has been cold enough without takin' a swim!"

"This ain't no swim," Gitt said. "This is business. Leave our tracks on that point and there wouldn't a beaver come near. Me'," he continued with a grin, "I can't swim a lick but I get around. In and out like a frog. Fall-trappin' and spring, you'll spend half of your time in the water."

Gingerly, with muted yelps as they sank navel-deep in the mountain pool, they edged south a hundred yards to the point. There Gitt worked fast, finding the high-bank places, the chutes where aspen lengths had been skidded down from the grove, and the packed slide-spots where, he said, beaver kittens had played.

Having located his trap-sites, he picked up a green stick four feet long and three inches thick, possessing a strong branch stub perhaps a third of the way from one end, and said, "This here's the idea. You put your trap on the bank, in the mud, and set your bait-stick maybe a foot ahead—tied with a string so you don't lose it or leave it behind. Then bury the string and splash water on; get rid of your sign, but don't splash on the bait. Next, you stake in the water, out from the bank where you don't leave no tracks or smell. Stob down, so the trap-ring can slide over easy and catch. And remember: always put your stake deep. You don't want to be chasin' traps every place in the lake.

"All right," Gitt went on, as he worked. "Pretty soon after you set Mr. Beaver comes swimmin' along for the grove. He smells that bait-stick and makes for it, and climbs square into the trap. Nine times out of ten he'll put a foreleg in it—and then, believe me, there's action. Back into the lake he goes, trap, bait-stick, and all, swimmin' like hell for his lodge. And what happens? The trap chain takes up the slack, he pulls the ring down over the stob, and that settles him. He can't get to the lodge and he can't get out on the bank. So, he drowns, right where he is and quick and easy, not a mark on him. If you didn't play him that way," Gitt added, "he'd ram around and maybe get free. Jerk loose or set on the bank and swivel a foot off. I've seen more than one foot and claws in a trap and no beaver. But set your trap right, like I say—hit 'em comin' and goin'—and you got beaver and the best fur to boot."

Gitt finished and surveyed his bank sites with satisfaction. He would bring traps before the next dawn.

"Well," he said to Johnny, "how does it strike you?"

Johnny was thigh-deep in the frigid mountain water. His lips were blue; his skin was rough with goose pimples; his teeth clacked hollowly, like turkey-bones.

"I can't quite figure it," he said. "It sounds reasonable enough. But I can't figure which is gettin' the worst of it—us or the beaver."

Ice came with October. No more than bank slivers at first, frosted mica-sheets below the grass fringe, it broadened and thickened with each successive dawn, cramping the streams. Autumn light was cut off. Shadows deepened; rock-and-moss bottoms showed a new gleaming black. Soon in the Bayou Salade trickles and the smallest lakes were covered over, quiet, settling down to their long wait for spring.

The Utes, Johnny discovered, were not good with traps. They were too impatient, too easily discouraged. Of all things they hated most the pre-dawn rolling out, the stumbling, wet scout across the meadows, and the dark, hard, freezing work at the trap-sites. In addition, Gitt told Johnny one day, the Utes were afraid of the lakes. Look at their camp, he muttered; study the way they kept to high ground. There was a legend or something—an old story, much like those of the Spaniards—warning them to keep clear of low ground. Probably, he remarked, there was a good bed-rock reason. Probably they had been careless once, camping in a dry-sand arroyo, and had got washed away, with some drowned, in the night. At any rate, in Bayou Salade the younger Utes were quick to make known their thoughts. Foraging north to Platte head-streams, they came back to strut about the camp, talk big, and look down-nose at the trappers. Squaw-work, they hinted. Not fit for hunters. Not fit for war-parties against the Cheyennes. Stalking past Gitt's lean-to, they peered in at him, sniffed, curled their lips, and stalked on. But Gitt only smiled, passed a joke now and then, and, with subtle persistence, showed them how to trap beaver.

For Johnny himself the Bayou autumn was transcendent, a season lovelier than any that he had experienced. It was not alone the work at stream-side and lake, getting fur. It was the fact that the Bayou country, though seemingly empty, was full of secret, constantly shifting life forms, some smaller and weaker than beavers, others much larger, but all fitting to perfection the wildness, color, and natural beauties of the great mountain park.

One morning just at light Johnny awoke to look out upon

the clearing. A heavy hoar frost had crystallized during the night. Grass was shroud-white, cooking ashes were dead, and the piles of cut aspen were brittle beside the fire-pits. As Johnny kept to his buffalo robes, he caught movement in the spruce opposite. Something shadowy, a form grayish-black, blending both with the hoar frost and forest, was drifting there, slinking, doubling back, and freezing stone-still to peer at the camp. With fast-beating heart Johnny realized what it was. Wolf. A timber wolf of the mountains, huge, bushy, with a tail that seemed to float by itself, like a feather. There was no time to wake Gitt, no time to rise up, grope for a rifle, take aim, and fire. The visitor was careful, sniffing hungrily but keeping within the spruce fringe. After a moment it wheeled about and was gone, in deep stillness, and to Johnny its passage was as startling as its arrival, a ghost symbol, like the ending of autumn and the first dread warning of winter.

Another time they were out early, pulling traps along a willow-brush trickle. The blood-light was still on the park rim when a strange, vibrating call, whistle-shrill, broke over the meadows. Instantly, Gitt sank into the tangle. Again the call sounded, so strong and full, so resonant and wild that the men listened spell-bound. A minute later, from a spruce point reaching into the meadows, an animal stepped, dark of side, tall, belled, heavily antlered. Johnny needed no word. It was elk: Rocky Mountain bull elk, in its prime both in season and age. Deliberately, suspecting nothing, the lone forager moved into the open, stopped, and, throwing back its head, once more sent its challenging, haunting signal over the park. From another quarter then, in timber, lifted an answering call. Elk talk, Johnny whispered to himself. Bugling, the most wonderful and frightening music that he could imagine. Frost gave it bell-clearness: it seemed to crack the silence into unnumbered crystals, to wing a long way toward the gray slopes of rock. Johnny wanted to stay in the willow-brush, to watch, to see if other elk would step from the timber. But Gitt was more practical. The great animal, with its towering horn-spray, was well within range. Taking fine aim, Gitt fired, the elk lunged to its knees, struggled up, and then collapsed and lay quiet. Johnny had never eaten elk steak, or liver. He ate it that night, among the dark spruce trees, while the fires of the Utes were still bright.

That month, too, snow fell. It began one mid-October dusk, very slowly and stealthily, like the coming of the wolf to the timber fringe. Within an hour it had reached a depth of three inches, bending the spruce boughs, rimming fire-pits in which flakes had melted, and transforming the camp into a spirit-place inhabited by huddling, discomfited figures.

Bloody-handed, even his beard and face spotted with the blood of beaver pelts, Gitt sat in his lean-to where he could observe the whole camp. He was not surprised, as Johnny seemed to be, when Tabby left a group of blanketed Utes and came running.

"Ho, Tomas!" Tabby said.

"How you doin', Tabby?"

Tabby beat snow from his blanket and turned his eyes to a sky gray-black and ominous in the last light, shredded, wet, with cloud-wisps scraping the sharp tips of the spruce. Talk was a mixture of American, Spanish, and Ute.

"Bad warning," Tabby said. "Mucho snow here pretty quick. Most of them," he shrugged toward Utes hugging the fire-pits, "most say to go. The Bayou Salade is not good from now on. They say it is too high. Storm come, wind, more snow, maybe the snow gets too deep for the ponies. They do not like to stay here. They say go to Platte River, fight a big fight against the Cheyennes. Then go to Pagosa."

Gitt shook his head. "They been lookin' three weeks, Tabby," he said. "Clear up to headwaters, and over on the Arkansas, and into Platte canyon. What have they found? Not a thing but tracks and old camps. Them Cheyennes are long gone," he emphasized. "Way to Platte Forks by this time, or out by Ute pass and the Manitou. Down on the Fontaine qui Bouille. You know that."

"Yes, I know, maybe," Tabby replied. "But them—no. They do not forget. They say we waste our time here. No scalps, but plenty meat. Plenty beaver already."

Gitt slapped the pile of beaver fur beside him, took up a pelt, stroked it, and handed it to Tabby.

"Early prime," he said. "Three dollars at Bent's. Thirty-seven in three weeks. That ain't bad but it ain't good either. The next six weeks'll see the real trappin'. Full prime—five-six dollars a skin, not a hole or nick in 'em. As for snow, Tabby, I've been in this Bayou country before. In '33 it played the same trick: it worked up cloudy and snowy, then cleared up all of a sudden and just went a-sailin'. No real blizzards till Christmas. She'll do it again, this season, if you ask me." Gitt nodded, with his eyes on the clouds. "A hundred, a hundred-and-a-quarter skins, that's what we got to have, Tabby. Johnny and me, we owe for every damned thing we're usin'—traps, powder, lead, everything. And we'll clear it all up in six weeks if we stay."

Tabby remained silent, and Gitt went on:

"It ain't as if that was the whole of it, either, amigo. If them young bucks ain't forgettin', neither are Johnny and me.

There's other reasons for Bent's. A feller named Mackey, soldier-feller. Then Epps and Weatherby, them we come up with. We'd sort of like to know where they are. And the roan horse. You ain't forgettin' the roan are you, Tabby?" Gitt looked quietly at the Ute.

"No. No one forgets." Tabby's gaze came to rest on Johnny, who was sitting deep within the lean-to. The Ute hesitated, and weighed the beaver pelt in his hand and ran his fingers through the long, dark, richly glowing fur. "I know how you feel, Tomas. Juanito and you—you got to go. Like I told you, I stay in Bayou Salade as long as you stay. There will be good trade at Bent's. But the others—you see how they talk. They do not like this place, this camping and trapping. I do not think they will stay."

"Some might, if you asked 'em," Gitt hinted.

"Maybe four-five. Tewe, maybe. Not any more."

"That's enough." Gitt nodded decisively. "I never did like crowds, anyhow. Find out who wants to stay, Tabby. We'll let the rest of 'em head north and then we'll change our camp from this place. Them boys, you watch, they'll ride their butts off and never find nothin'. Them Cheyennes never was for the high country this time of year. But us: we'll trap till the snow drives us out, right up to December. Then we'll hit down by the Manitou springs, you and me'll go into Bent's, Tabby, while Johnny hides out, and then we'll hit over Medano pass or maybe take the Taos trail to Pagosa."

As it turned out, Gitt was right regarding the Bayou weather. The snow which had fallen at dusk melted within twenty-four hours, leaving timber and slopes dark with soaking and the meadows a-light with myriad water-glints. Except for skift-storms of the same kind the weather held clear for weeks after that, skies ice-blue, winds bracing but not too strong, the undercurrent of mountain cold deepening and becoming most evident, as was customary, in the dawns.

Again as Gitt had predicted, the beaverskins piled up. No matter how many beavers sought out the bait-sticks, fell into traps and were drowned, more always seemed to be waiting. Fifty. Seventy-five. One hundred. The fur was of primest quality, bale after bale of it being rounded off, tied, and set for protection in dry shelter corners. Only late in November, when the first true weather change threatened, did Gitt consent to give up his quest. In temperatures plumbing sub-zero, with blizzard clouds swirling and sleety-snow forcing even the tough Indian ponies to stand rump to the gale, Tabby, Gitt, Johnny, the medicine man Tewe and three or four other Utes broke their last camp. Behind them, as they retreated across brittle

stream pastures, they left the peaks and broadest reaches of the Bayou Salade, alone, suddenly desolate, magnificent in the face of the winter.

The new course led them southeastward into a country of hard-running creeks, spring bottoms, jack-pine and aspen stands, and knob sandstone outcrops. It was a little like sailing, Johnny thought, with the wind dead on their backs, pushing against the huge, shapeless buffalo-skin coats which Gitt, wisely, had insisted upon bringing from Saguache. On the third morning the little party trailed out of turkey-track gulches into a basin almost as high and wide as the Bayou Salade, buttressed on the east by a mountain mass awe-inspiring in the extent of its slope forests and in the black heaviness of snow clouds obscuring its heights. When Gitt sighted the great peak he turned in his saddle, lifted his arm triumphantly, and shouted back against the wind. Pike's Peak, the same that they had seen before, from the Arkansas country. They were close now, he shouted. Close to low country, Manitou and the Plains, less snow, more sun, and clear going and warmth. That same forenoon the pack-party struck a lodge-pole trail so broad that not even snow had hidden it, followed it through a chain of beautiful sheltered little parks, penetrated a yellow-rock pass, and made camp among head-branches of Fontaine qui Bouille on the prairie flank of old Pike's.

They approached Manitou springs, Front Range medicine springs, about noon the next day. Riding with extreme caution, for this, Gitt muttered, was a region sacred not only to Utes but Arapahoes, Cheyennes, Comanches, Kiowas, and even to Sioux bands of the northern Plains, they entered a valley, discovered a stream-bank trail up which they turned, and climbed a little toward the base cliffs of the mountain. Soon, on a slope shaded by the peak bulk, they moved toward color splashes in timber, ringing a pool of sulphurous, evil-smelling water beside which Gitt refused even to stop. Perhaps fifty yards farther on lay the natural fountain he sought, a basin of sun-sparkling, clear-bubbling water, rimmed with a white encrustation like salt, which fed a high trickle of the Fontaine qui Bouille and which, they guessed, had given that tumbling piedmont river its name.

Satisfying himself that no hostile parties were near, Gitt dismounted, went down on his stomach and drank deep, making smacking sounds. The Utes were more deliberate, their medicine man Tewe mumbling a few words and depositing bright-colored arrows, of finest Ute workmanship, at the basin-side before putting his lips ceremoniously to the water. When Johnny's turn came he found the spring cold and delicious,

hissing a little with its bubbling, liquid effervescent, aerated, sharpening the palate and quenching thirst more adequately than the purest snow-water of Saguache or the Bayou Salade.

Gitt, filled up, leaned back against a yellow-pine trunk, his buffalo-skin coat thrown open.

"Sody," he said. "A lot of people wouldn't believe it. Natural sody-water, comin' right out of the ground. But there she is, clean and bright as a dollar. I don't know of a better mineral spring in the mountains."

"How come this one's all right and the other one stinks?" Johnny asked.

"That's one of the mysteries," Gitt said. Settling more comfortably into his coat, he tamped his pipe. "A hundred, maybe a hundred and fifty feet apart; both on the same level, just about; both got the same general source—and one of 'em sour and one sweet. I've heard talk about it from Taos to Snake River. Everybody knows these springs are here, but nobody can figure 'em out. Nobody except maybe the Indians. Once in a while a medicine man'll come up with a story, but that's all it is. Just a story."

Johnny chose his own yellow pine, scuffing up the root layer of needles. The valley, he noted, headed against the mountain wall and crossed his line of vision at right angles, dropping fast out of the piedmont country. Despite blizzards in Bayou Salade and on the western slope of Pike's, the wind was quiet here, temperatures were only slightly below freezing, and blue sky patches gave brightness. It was one of the prettiest valleys that he had come into, Johnny told himself, a rock-flanked groove not more than a few hundred yards wide, snow-skifted but not too deeply covered, free of brush, its timber park-like, its meadow spaces sign-dotted and laced with many game trails.

Curiously, on pine branches near the spring had been hung moccasins, bits of buckskin and flannel, and even buffalo robes and blankets that already had begun to shred out. The ground was bare of grass and packed down; and hacked pines, cook-sticks, and circles of ashes long cold gave evidence of the numerous parties that had visited there.

"What's all them things?" Johnny asked. "Looks like Short Creek after revival."

"Short Creek?" Gitt said.

"Tennessee."

"Oh. Them there's charms," Surreptitiously Gitt nodded toward the medicine man Tewe, who stood motionless, in an attitude of reverence, beside the spring. "Mostly 'Rapaho, from the looks of 'em, but considerable Cheyenne and Ute, too.

Every buck that comes past will leave something. You seen them arrows Tewe laid down?" Gitt said. "Good-luck pieces, and a prayer for Cheyenne scalps. It's a funny damned thing. The Cheyennes or 'Rapaho'll come by and stop on the way to raid the Utes, and the Utes'll come by lookin' for the Cheyennes and 'Rapaho, and they won't neither one pay much attention to the other. Not as far as the spring goes and the things they leave here. Neutral ground. It's too big medicine, I reckon. Either there don't nobody claim the Manitou, or they all claim it. I can't figure out which."

"It makes for mighty good campin', though," Johnny said. "Timber, water, and game all over the place. How far you say it is from here down to Bent's?"

Gitt showed abrupt interest. "Damned near two hundred mile," he said quickly. "Too far. If you're figurin' on stayin' here, Johnny, forget it. You might go along for six weeks and never see no one. Then, some night while you're snoozin' away, crrk!" Gitt crossed his throat with his finger. "That's all, boy. No. We come up here because Tabby and Tewe and them wanted to, not because I did. They never miss a chance when they're this side of the mountains. But I wouldn't let you stay. She's a trap."

"I don't know why we have to split up a-tall," Johnny said, with a note of complaint. "I don't like the idea of stickin' out on some creek. I'd like to go into Bent's, too, now we're here—and not for no trouble, neither."

Gitt smiled. "What would you do, Johnny, if you was to see Mackey ridin' that roan?"

"I'd kill the son-of-a-bitch." Johnny made the statement quietly. "Only, that ain't goin' to happen. Fraser promised."

"Not even Fraser can buck the army."

"What you mean by that?" Johnny said.

"Now, hold your horses, boy. I ain't sayin' anything, really. Just figurin'." Gitt placed his hand on Johnny's knee. "Fraser ain't one to back up. But if Mackey's still there, and Weatherby and Epps, it wouldn't make no difference about the roan. There'd be trouble anyway. That's what I'm gettin' at. That's why I think we better split up, just for this once."

"And me stay away." Johnny sat sullenly against his tree. "What if I say no?" he challenged. "What the hell if I go to Bent's anyhow and see for myself?"

"Well, Johnny," Gitt said, "if you're goin' to do thataway, we'll forget the whole thing. I ain't gettin' these other boys into trouble just because you and me can't stay out." He gestured toward Tabby and the medicine man, about whom the younger Utes had clustered. "This is business with them:

tradin', gettin' rid of their furs. They ain't thinkin' about nothin' else. You can see that, can't you, Johnny?"

"Yeah. I expect I can, at that." Johnny's voice was resigned. "Can't ask 'em to mix in—and I wouldn't want 'em to, either. Tabby took enough chances as it was."

Gitt drew back, then, and with quicker, more confident movements refilled his pipe. "That's right," he said. "Now, Tabby and me'll hit on ahead from the Springs. The rest of you better camp somewhere down the Fontaine qui Bouille, not on the Arkansas. Keep out of sight. We'll pick you up in ten days and hit for Pagosa by the Taos trail. How does that strike you?"

"It don't." Johnny grimaced. "But if that's the way you want it." Without further words he left Gitt and walked over to the Utes, where he watched in glum silence as Tewe went through his meditations, placed offerings from time to time, and prayed to the spirit of the Manitou springs.

The Fontaine qui Bouille ran like vein-silver out of the mountains, southeastward past rounded Pike's with its understanding crests, and on into the flat tree-cactus triangle of the Arkansas gap. The new camp had scarcely been made before Johnny learned one more fact about the Rocky Mountain country: that often, on the storm approaches to winter, the high Plains could be more terrible than peak-lines themselves. At noon a slatish cloud-bank formed in the north. Within an hour creek-bed leaves were still. Snow began to fly, small flakes wandering as if lost among the cottonwoods. By three o'clock the snow was riding steady on a rising wind. At twilight clouds were stone-smooth overhead, the Fontaine qui Bouille was shut in, and a full Plains blizzard was raging.

For Johnny and the Utes, and for all the wild things in that region, the next two weeks brought nightmare, a time of life-and-death battle. Never had Johnny seen such snow or faced such brutal gale winds. Never had he felt such cold, cutting its way through the heaviest robes. There had been too little time to set camp. Firewood gave out and the men floundered like idiots in the creek-bottom, hacking at timber. Crouched against a rock buttress, with untrimmed logs forming flank windbreaks, they clung to the fire while Tewe, fear in his eyes, passed the medicine pipe and laid prayer pebbles about him in mystical circles. More terrible in their significance, game movements took place in the valley. Deer and antelope clustered in pockets for warmth and protection; rabbits held to brush clumps; buffalo drifted out of the open wind-spaces and stood black and miserable against the white. Within sight of the camp, in that second week of storm, deer, antelope, and buffalo froze to death by the score. Yellow

prairie wolves came in very close, jack-knifing through the snow to carcasses; death cries and a vicious ghost-howling were constant at night.

On the seventeenth day, horsemen were sighted down the Fontaine qui Bouille. It was in the time after storm, when sun struck golden-white fire from the earth. Breaking trail in thigh-deep drifts, Johnny met the party at a chimney rock half-a-mile south.

Gitt was in the lead. His face and hands, his hair, eyebrows and beard, his buffalo-skin coat and moccasins double-wrapped with blanket strips told their own story. Ice was thick on him. His wind-stung cheeks were flaked; his fingers and nose showed the gray of frost-bite; and great chap-cracks ran vertically across his lips. In cold passing twenty below his breath made brilliant white steam clouds that floated away, unbroken for many moments, on the still air. Behind him Tabby, the pack-ponies, and two other Utes followed in single file, holding as grimly to the life-sparks left by the storm.

Gitt did not step down. He seemed a part of his saddle, carved there, as if he would never step down.

"We didn't get him, Johnny," he said.

"That son-of-a-bitch."

"Who?"

"Fraser."

Gitt leaned slowly over his saddlehorn, his eyes crackling. "God damn you, boy, don't talk about Fraser that way. He was my friend."

"He promised," Johnny said.

"Yeah. He promised. And now he's dead."

The words were like an earth-shock. They struck Johnny full-force, shook him, and left him ashamed.

"Some of the boys was in from Taos," Gitt said. "They told me what happened."

He went on: "It was a week after we left. Fraser went up to Big Timbers to trade. You remember Big Timbers. There was a mixed camp in there—'Rapaho, Cheyenne, Kiowa —everybody but the Comanches. Fraser stayed with the Cheyennes. Little Bird's lodge. They were good friends. There wouldn't no Indian have bothered, not at that camp. But somebody come to the lodge one night, late, and called Fraser out. Shot him down where he stood."

"Mackey?" Johnny said.

"Epps."

"Epps!"

"Not for sure. But I got it figured." Gitt's stare was as bright as snow-glitter. "Mackey was back at the Fort. Besides, Fraser and him hadn't had real trouble. Nothin' to cause a killin',

anyhow—and everybody was watchin' Mackey. He couldn't've made a move without somebody seein'. But Epps: there hadn't nobody seen Epps, nor Weatherby, either. Just been talk at the Fort, wonderin' where they had got to. They was last seen down-river on Sand Creek, at a Cheyenne camp, but they could've come west. They was with a renegade outfit. Two Fingers'."

Johnny tried to recollect. "Two Fingers?"

"Don't it mean anything to you?" Gitt said. "Remember that little night fracas we had on the Arkansas? Somebody aimin' to run off our horses?"

"I sure do."

"Them was Cheyennes." Gitt looked at Tabby for corroboration. "That was about the time Fraser got shot. Maybe a day or two early. And now. . . . Remember what Tabby's scouts said, about that fight in the Bayou?"

"You damn betcha! Two Fingers!"

Gitt nodded. "The same bunch."

Johnny's frown deepened. "But I don't see. . . . If there was white men. . . ."

"Catch onto yourself, Johnny," Gitt said dryly. "Any white man can paint. That's most likely what they did at Big Timbers. Painted up and snuck into camp after dark. Who was to tell? It was Little Bird's band they were comin' to, all of 'em Cheyennes."

"And after Fraser got shot?" Johnny said.

"They hit west. Hidin' out. Maybe lookin' for fur—somebody else's. Anyhow, to Bayou Salade."

Johnny stood flat-footed in the snow. Like Gitt, the Utes and pack-ponies were ice-sheathed, strange, gaunt, fierce, dogged figures against the earth-white and sky-blue. Johnny wondered, in awe, how they had survived the great storm on the Plains and how they had traveled that far.

"What about Mackey?" he asked.

"You know what he was," Gitt said. "A hard son-of-a-bitch. Used to tellin' men off. Right today nobody knows what he was doin' at Bent's, or where he come from or where he was headed. One mornin' he just packed up and left—dragoons, remounts, and all. He didn't say nothin'. Not even good-bye. All anyone knows is, he headed down-river, due east."

"And took my roan with him," said Johnny.

"Yeah. There wasn't nobody to argue. He took the roan with him."

Catching up his reins, Gitt moved toward the camp. Johnny did not follow. He climbed instead to rimrock above the Fontaine qui Bouille, from which he could look out at the country surrounding him. In storm the Plains had become a

white waste, island-less, without limit, quivering beneath sky color-bands that arched low, like Arctic-blue rainbows, on the horizon. Somewhere in that whiteness were Mackey, the stiff-riding soldier, and Weatherby and Epps. Or maybe, he thought, they were yonder there in the mountains, hiding on those wolf-gray slopes away off to the west. Somehow, it made little difference. Johnny had a strange and sure feeling. It was like the cold he felt now, the dry, crimping cold that lay close to death. It might be on the Arkansas, or on the Grand or Green rivers that Gitt had talked about, or down on the black lava tablelands of the Rio del Norte. But trails would cross. Johnny told himself that. Trails had a way of crossing, quickly, like the undefined crossings of turkey-track lightning, in the big Western country.

Pagosa

CONTRARY to Gitt's promise, they did not strike for Pagosa by way of Cimarron canyon and Taos. Gitt gave two reasons. Blizzards had made the southern passes too dangerous, and there was too much raw feeling on the Rio del Norte. That fall had seen incidents. In country southwest of Bent's, along Cimarron tributaries, traders had been ambushed—goods stolen, wagons burned, stock driven off. People knew who had done it. Apaches had been sifting up from the south, throwing in with Mexicans close to the Arkansas. The Mexicans still wanted to trade, Gitt said. They wanted American guns and supplies, but on their own terms. No concessions, no rights for States-side freighters. With things like that going on it would be wiser to stick to the north, taking the old Spanish Peaks trail to San Luis, and making a paseo to Taos later on, after winter had had a chance to cool tempers.

Crossing the Arkansas and cutting south some forty miles, the pack-party swerved west in the shadow of the legendary Huajatolla, entered a snow-drifted pass that kept them below timberline, and came safely into the San Luis through a canyon south of old Blanca. On that long and tiring ride Johnny's mind turned from Bent's Fort to Pepita and the new winter camp at Pagosa. For many weeks he had thought only casually of Pepita. Perhaps, he said to himself, it was because of Gitt, who, on leaving Saguache, seemed to have dropped Henrietta and his bright-eyed boys out of his life. But perhaps, too,

Johnny admitted, it was his own fault, his own state of mind. There had been too little time in Saguache, and it was all too hard to believe. He a squaw man, with a lodge and ponies and a bed and squaw of his own? Even now the idea brought him bolt upright in his saddle, so that Gitt, Tabby and the medicine man Tewe looked at him strangely. No, he assured himself. It was a joke, all a big hoax. What had old Gitt—practical, hard-headed old Gitt—told him that day? Business. That was all it was. Not like a wedding. Just a good trade. Get tired of the deal, see something better, and get up and walk off. He was free. Both sides were free. He could pull stakes any time, with nobody hurt. But nevertheless, in the cold, flat waste of the San Luis, Johnny thought, with real anticipation, of Pepita and his big, comfortable lodge at Pagosa.

They crossed to the southwestern quarter of the San Luis, climbed black-lava slopes to the deep, frightening gorge of the Rio de los Pinos, made their way over meadows at the crest of a high but open pass, and trailed down through yellow-pine parks to Pagosa. There Pepita was waiting. When Gitt saw her, he slapped his thigh in delight. "What was you sayin', Johnny," he roared, "about somebody's ninety-nine kids?" Johnny studied Pepita's interesting situation, and, shoving back his cap, accepted the matter philosophically. Nor did Henrietta's appearance at that moment fail to reinforce his morale. Henrietta was as happy as ever, beaming, contented, and more than ordinarily apparent in front. "Go to hell, you old goat," Johnny snickered, as Gitt turned the color of Indian paint. "It ain't ninety-nine any more. It's a hundred!"

It was a little surprising though, Johnny concluded, as he stepped stiffly down from his pony and went into his lodge. Getting mixed up that way, he kept muttering—kids all over the place, yowling and screaming, and scrambling and rolling underfoot like so many pups. He could imagine. It was all Gitt's fault, too. That scheming old shyster—it seemed, sometimes, as if Gitt might be worse than old Weatherby. Just a big tongue flapping loose on its hinges. A great talker, Gitt was: he could pull the wool over anyone's eyes, even his own. However. . . . Johnny saw that Pepita had done right well by herself. Pepita and that passel of relatives, thicker than fleas. She must have aunts and uncles and cousins, he said to himself, in every lodge in Pagosa. The lodge was straight set. Dry. Warm and rich and good-smelling. Plenty wood. Water close by. Meat. Chopping wood scarcely seemed to bother her either, he saw. It was mighty fine: all mighty cozy. Johnny stripped off his frozen buckskins, thawed out, and rolled into buffalo robes. Pepita—his squaw! Johnny thought—brought him broth and venison steak and drinking-water, and said

nothing as usual. Well. So long as she wanted it. So long as they were both free, no strings, and she understood it. That morning he was going to be the last to complain.

Pagosa, too, Johnny found, was an interesting place. It was prettier than Saguache, he thought, on a swifter rock-bottom river, in taller timber, and closer to a range of rugged, saw-toothed granite mountains. Dutifully Pepita followed him on his first survey of the camp, tugging at his buckskin fringes when she wanted him to stop at a relative's lodge. There was much pipe-smoking with the aunts, uncles, and cousins, and a good deal of feasting and polite give-and-take in the matter of presents. In the camp itself were many new faces: Ute-Apache breeds from the mesa country; Timpanogos Utes from far beyond those looming mountains in the northwest; even a few visitors whose dark skins and smoldering eyes proclaimed a Spanish strain. And the springs—Pagosa, the Big Medicine, the Healing Waters! They were real boiling springs, coming out of fresh snow. That was the wonderful thing. Hot water bubbling up, full of green and red and purple lights, springs big and steamy and stinky with sulphur, better than the Manitou springs. It was no wonder then, to Johnny, that people had come from all over the mountains, no wonder that old-timers like Gotchy, hating the winds and driving snows of Saguache, had lived merely to travel south to Pagosa.

Again, Pepita took Johnny in hand. The Pagosa springs, he soon learned, were different from Tennessee swimming holes. They were too hot and swimming was against Ute traditions. Leading Johnny to an overflow trickle whose steam had kept the snow cleared away and the ground soft, Pepita persuaded him to try the Ute methods one morning. When Gitt found him a little while later, mud-packed and parboiling comfortably, with a dozen squaw relatives fluttering to take care of his needs, the old frontiersman stopped short.

"For Christ sake," he said, "don't tell me they got you to doin' it!"

"If you knowed what was good for them creaky old bones of yours," Johnny retorted, letting an aunt-in-law pat mud on his stomach, "you'd be buried in a foot. It beats all. I been a lot of places, but this is the damdest place I ever did see." The Pagosa deposits, pregnant with salts and other minerals, left Johnny limber, warm, and refreshed. After two of Pepita's treatments he became like old Gotchy, chief of the Utes. He was petulant, irascible, out of sorts with the world before mud-packing time.

The winter progressed, unhurriedly and without the tensions and alarms that characterized Plains life to the east. More than ever, Pagosa caught Johnny's fancy. He liked the clear-

water river running through its timber stands, and the strange springs whose steam floated with such sharp whiteness against green and blue in the mornings. He had time to visit with Gitt and Tabby, talking about Taos or the old times of the Texas war, smoking late beside the fire-pits, and planning the spring campaign for beaver in Bayou Salade and the high mountain parks still farther north. Utes from many points of the camp were kind and hospitable, gravely extending invitations to visit their lodges. Johnny accepted often. But most regularly he remained within his own lodge. He was tired. At times rage and despair swept over him, as he thought of Bent's Fort, and Fraser, and Mackey. Mackey, the white-faced, dead-lipped soldier, riding his roan; and Epps and Weatherby, riding somewhere, too, skulking with the skulking Cheyennes. At other times, especially when storms of the winter were blowing, he sat for long hours in silence, in unthinking content, while Pepita sewed, cooked, or sat watching and waiting, as silent as he, a red, immobile figure among the buffalo robes and curling blue of the fire-smoke.

Thus December passed. With it went the old year, so unobtrusively that Johnny, forgetting time, did not notice change. January, Cold Moon of the Utes, was steady in its passage; February, Ute Snow Moon, saw the storm-clouds spreading ever farther from the mountain core. In the new Pagosa lodge, meat gave out. Taking up his rifle and strapping on the crude snow-webs that Gitt had shown him how to make, Johnny joined the Utes on hunts. Day after day he broke trail through timber, in the park country. What he found there left his face grim and set. Except for gray jays and a few of the hardiest juncoes, small birds had migrated. Under the down-bent branches of pines, larger birds, grouse, partridge, even wild turkey, huddled together bright-eyed and frightened. Elk and deer herds had been cramped into valley spaces—yards, Gitt called them—where hoof-cut earth and shredded bark showed how close they were to starvation. On all sides the snow stretched, mile after mile of it through the evergreen forests. It was beautiful, drifted into rounded hummocks and hollows: and it was powerful, death itself, more deadly to game than a thousand steel traps.

One morning early in March, Green Moon of the Utes, when first buds were swelling in sunny-side places, Gitt came to Johnny's lodge. Bundled in his buffalo coat, armed, and carrying a pack-sack of meal and jerked meat, he called Johnny out.

"Let's go huntin'," he said.

"Naw." Johnny yawned. "I got plenty meat yesterday. I was figurin' to stay in today."

"You better take some extra powder and lead. And you got jerky and kinnikinnik?" Gitt asked. "We might need it. We might stay out a while."

"But. . . ."

Gitt was enigmatic, and not to be denied. "Get your stuff," he said. "It looks like a good day for huntin'."

Ill-humoredly, for it was cold out, Johnny picked up his rifle and pack and went with Gitt. To his surprise they stopped neither at Tabby's nor at any other lodge on their way through the village. Still more to his surprise, when they had walked some distance beyond the last spring point they came to four ponies, two of them saddled and two heavily loaded with camp-gear, which had been picketed in the secrecy of a draw.

"What's all this?" Johnny asked.

Gitt chuckled. "You feel like a trip, Johnny?"

"I can't say I do."

"Not even to Taos?"

"Taos! This time of year? I don't see nobody else travelin'."

"That's just the point," Gitt answered. "Now don't worry, we'll make it all right. There won't be too much snow to the south."

Johnny was frowning, trying to read Gitt's expression. "How come it's just you and me? How about Tabby?"

"Three's a crowd this time, Johnny," Gitt said. "We're apt to run into Jicarilla Apaches. If we do, I don't want Utes along. There's bad blood. And I don't aim to stir things up down in Taos. Not after Bent's. We'll just sneak in quiet-like and have a look around. Find out how the wind's blowin'." Designating Johnny's pony, Gitt mounted his own, took the lead-rope of a pack-animal, and without further delay plowed snow up the draw.

For three days Gitt set a hard pace. Camping late and breaking camp early, the two men floundered over a divide, pushed down a south slope where ground patches showed among the pines, and made increasingly rapid progress along the western flank of Chama river. On the second night they stopped within sight of fires which, on making a scout, they found to be those of Apaches. Across the Chama, on the third morning, they passed watchful, sullen Mexicans in scrub growth where sheep by the thousands were being held. Country between the Chama and Rio del Norte was high and rugged but relatively open, with red mesa blocks standing out boldly. Keeping well to themselves, Gitt and Johnny skirted adobe headquarter places of Mexicans, approached the del Norte by a trail which led

them into a precipitous gorge, forded on firm gravel, and climbed the opposite wall to a sage-and-lava plateau.

It was at twilight of the fourth day that they came out upon the Taos tableland. As they rode south-by-southeast, no Mexican seemed to notice them. The little pack-train passed cottonwoods, willow-lined streams and cleared pastures, and entered a lane between walls of adobe. Except for a shadowy figure or two, Taos plaza was empty. Gitt crossed it without pausing and followed a second walled lane to a hut on the outskirts.

Los Vientos. Memories of that Texas desert place flooded Johnny's mind. The same low adobes and cottonwoods and thick walls. The same night silence. The same peach orchards and the same mud-packed plaza, carts, corrals, and cedar-wood sheds. But there were mountains here, too, Johnny thought. Not black Piedra bluffs but mountains, those in the east softer, shining with snow and more rounded than San Luis peaks, those to westward a tent-line in moonlight, far across the hazy plateau and gorge-mark of the del Norte. Johnny liked Taos: he liked it instinctively. It was old. It had the oldness of a long-weathered country, beaten trails, and humped dwellings. It was a raw-earth place, full of leather smells and woodsmoke, in the heart of watered stock range.

Gitt dismounted and knocked at the hut door. The man who made his appearance was not a Mexican, as Johnny somehow had expected, but an American of huge proportions. Clad in filthy buckskins, his head large even for his height and breadth of frame, his hair shoulder-long, tangled and showing red in the candle-glow, he stood half-concealed by the hut wall, peering into the dark.

Gitt laughed. "What you know, Block?"

"Tom Gitt!" The door was flung wide. The American rushed to shake hands. "By all that's holy! Where the hell did you drop from?"

"Pagosa. Meet my pardner, Johnny Christmas. Johnny, this here is Block Ewing."

The second hand-shake was quick. "Well, what you waitin' on?" Ewing asked. "Come in! Come in!" Leaving saddle- and pack-animals to stand temporarily, the three men entered the hut, a structure composed of a single room with a lean-to addition. Dragging up ramshackle chairs, Ewing called to his thin and olive-faced Mexican wife: "Rustle up some grub, will you, Celestina? Frijoles and meat. Plenty of pepper! These boys have been travelin'!"

That night in Taos, deep in old Spanish territory, was reminiscent to Johnny of nights in Anton and later at Bent's on the Arkansas. Talk began with inconsequential exchanges,

filtered through personal histories, and sometime close to midnight came down to business.

"I expect you've heard about Fraser, haven't you, Block?" Gitt asked his friend.

"Old Hugh? No," the Taos trapper replied, "I don't reckon I have."

"He went under last September." Briefly Gitt recounted details. "Little Bird's camp. Up on Big Timbers."

Ewing's expression did not change. He simply waited, a massively shaggy, ugly man without apparent feeling. His eyes, large, pale-blue and shallow, were those of a man who could kill, Johnny told himself, without thinking twice.

"Ever run into a feller named Epps?" Gitt asked.

Ewing studied for a while before answering. "Seems to me I've done heard the name. Was he ever down on the Gila?"

"I couldn't say about that. He's mostly operated north, I believe. Up on the Grand and Green River."

"Runty feller? Quick on the trigger? Sandy-haired and a little bit freckled?"

"That's the man."

Ewing nodded. "I know him. I run into him one time at Roubideau camp, over in the Uncompahgre. I wanted to put him in my pocket right then. I would have, too, only another feller sort of put a stop to it. He put a rifle in my back."

Gitt was interested. "Was he a tall, loud-talkin' bastard? Dark-bearded?"

"That's what he looked like."

"Weatherby, sure as hell," Gitt said. "We was with 'em in Texas. And we left 'em on the Arkansas not six months ago."

"Well," Ewing replied, "they was on the Uncompahgre the first of December."

Gitt was silent for some moments, slumping in his chair. He seemed to weigh his thoughts and words carefully before going on:

"We've come to Taos for several-odd reasons, Block. First-off: the spring trappin'. We sort of wanted to find out what's doin'. Where the big company outfits are goin' and so on. Then, Johnny and me had a little trouble at Bent's. We ran into some soldiers, dragoons under a lieutenant named Mackey, and them and Epps skun Johnny here out of his horse. But Fraser didn't get killed on account of that. He'd had trouble with Epps. Wouldn't give him any traps. Epps left Bent's before we did, with Weatherby, and tied in with Two Fingers' band. There was a night raid later on, and then the

Big Timbers shootin'. I ain't claimin' court proof," Gitt added, "but I don't figure I need it. What I want to know is, Block, have you seen Epps right lately? Did you ever see Mackey and that damned bunch of dragoons? And do you know where Two Fingers' band is?"

Slowly Ewing shook his head. His reaction to each revelation was so ponderous and yet so murderously steady and certain that Johnny felt a twinge of uneasiness. Weatherby, Fraser, and Gitt were big men. But Ewing was bigger, a hulking figure, squarely muscled, stolid but not unintelligent of face, who seemed to fill the very hut to its corners.

"Tom," he said, "I've been south most of the time for five years. Trappin' on the Gila and clear over toward Californy. I even went to Californy one time. Took a bunch of horses to a place they called El Pueblo de los Angeles, on the coast, and come back by way of the old Spanish Trail. North of the Grand, through the Timpanogos country. I expect I've seen all the desert I want. We got up as far as Uinta Fort near the Green, and I stayed there for fall rendezvous and then come on down to Wintey creek in the Uncompahgre. Like I said, I run into Epps there, but I ain't seen him since. As for them soldiers. . . ." Ewing smiled faintly. "So far as I know they ain't been to Taos. It wouldn't be healthy."

"On account of Texas," Gitt nodded.

"Some . . . maybe." The reply was serious and direct. "Not too much. Us and the Mex, we've always made out. Playin' fair enough, I'd say, and keepin' pretty well clear of each other. After all, Taos is a long trail from Texas. These people have been here a long time, like my wife Celestina, and they're aimin' to stay. That's why it wouldn't be healthy for soldiers. Soldiers," Ewing said, "can't mind their own business. They always spell trouble. The Taos Mex, they ain't startin' nothin' but don't think they ain't watchin'. I ain't speakin' for the big fur outfits winterin' here, either, you understand. With fur goin' down and freightin' comin' up, they might even throw in with the soldiers. Figure to take over this country. But there's others don't want it. Free trappers, for instance, like me." Ewing shifted in his chair, and his features grew dark. "When the uniforms show up," he said, "—and I don't care a God damn whether it's Armijo down here at Santa Fe or some ignorant son-of-a-bitch from the States—look out. The Taos Mex ain't goin' to be the only ones to start shootin'."

Gitt rolled his head back and laughed. "I know what you mean, Block, I know what you mean!" he exclaimed. "We run into plenty at Bent's. But I don't foller what you said

about fur. Johnny and me, we just come from the Bayou Salade. There's beaver up there—well, you never saw anything like it. As soon as the snow clears we're headed back in."

Ewing shrugged. "Pockets, . maybe," he said. "I'm just tellin' you what I know and what others have told me. You take that Gila country, and the Jemez and Pajarito plateau and from here down in the Sangre de Cristos. It's done. Trapped out. Northwest, I hear tell, the other side of Cochetopa, there's beaver yet. But that's a tough country. It makes the San Luis look sick. Then there's another place I've heard of but ain't never been to. Northeast of Bear River and the Green, up toward the Yellowstone and Missouri. There's beaver in there. But I've talked to a good many men here this winter, free trappers and company men and traders out from St. Louis, and they all say the same. Five years for beaver. No more."

Johnny sat close to the corner fireplace, drinking the coffee which the unobtrusive and silent Celestina had given him. A year ago Ewing's words might have disturbed him. He might have thought that all things in the Rockies would be gone before he could reach them. But not any longer. The Western mountains were big. Only men who had traveled through them, from range to range and from canyon to canyon, could know how big. For the man who wanted them, Johnny quietly contradicted Ewing in his own mind, there would always be mountains and timber, and deer and bear and bugling elk, and the beaver.

"What's this old Spanish Trail?" he asked abruptly. "Is there lots of freightin' on it?"

"Freightin'?" Ewing's roar shook the hut. "Through them canyons and deserts? To *Californy?* Why, boy, it's all a good mule can do to get through, much less a wagon!"

Johnny looked nettled. "How was I to know?" he said. "I've been over so God damned many trails already I can't tell whether I'm comin' or goin'."

"Now, ain't that the truth!" Ewing continued his good-natured laughter. "When I hit Taos, by God, I felt the same way. I didn't expect no trails a-tall in the mountains and I found 'em all over. It takes a long time to learn 'em. No, Johnny," he explained, "when I said freightin' I meant to Missouri. You'd be surprised how many ways you can get into Taos. Down from San Luis or up the Cimarron canyon or up the del Norte, and there's a trail straight over the mountains by Mora. Eleven different ways, but mostly they come in from the south. That's the main trail."

"Through Santa Fe," observed Gitt.

"That's right. And don't think they ain't comin'. This spring there'll be trains. Well, it'll be like a solid line from here east."

"Trains—and trouble." Gitt spoke ominously, with deep conviction. For some moments he had held skeptical eyes on his friend. "Block," he said, "I don't know as I see this thing the way you do. I reckon you've heard what happened last fall."

"Over toward Texas." Ewing looked quickly at his listening wife, Celestina. "A raid or two. Nothin' much."

"Nothin' much, my foot. They're skittish at Bent's. They've had traders down on the Canadian, tryin' to get the tribes to make peace. Old Bull Hump and Shaved Head and them others, at 'Dobe Fort. The Arkansas is the dividin' line: Cheyennes and 'Rapaho and Sioux north, and Kiowas and Comanches and Prairie Apaches south. Bent's is right in the middle. And now on top of everything there's Mexicans goin' in with the Apaches. Bunches of 'em on Purgatory river and around the Rabbit Ears and Cimarron cut-off. What with them and the U.S. dragoons showin' up, I wouldn't be too sure if I was you. Not even in Taos. Over there a feller can feel it: it's like a wave rollin' up."

Ewing growled his reply. "Tom, you ain't tellin' me nothin'. I've been in this country fifteen year. Married to Celestina here about three. I'm an old settler, older than the Bents, and don't think I don't keep my ear to the ground. I've been out and around this winter, droppin' in on sheep camps and these little old Mexican ranches you find on the grants. I know how they feel and what they're all sayin'. If the time comes to jump, I'll jump. But it don't look to me like I'll be the one. Not if you come from Pagosa."

As Gitt absorbed the words, a slow grin spread over his face. "Apaches?" he ventured.

"You God damned right." Ewing grinned in return. "You know, Tom, in a way Taos is a pretty good place. Stay here long enough and you run into everybody. They all know there's a big Ute camp at Pagosa, and they know what happened to them Ute scouts in the Bayou. It's surprisin' how the news gets around."

"So," said Gitt, "there's been Apaches through here."

"Sure. Several of 'em. They're thick as thieves with Taos Pueblo this winter. I ain't sayin' how long it'll last."

"It's a funny thing, Block," Gitt confided then, with a broader smile. "The last thing old Gotchy and Tabby says to me was to look sharp for the Apaches. Why? They didn't have to tell me. The only question is: When?"

"Pagosa could be a pretty tight spot, Tom," Ewing said. "I'd be out before break-up. A month, maybe six weeks."

Gitt knocked the ashes from his pipe. "Just one more thing, Block. Who told you about that Bayou fight?"

"Feller down from Vrain Fort on the Platte."

"Did he say anything about Two Fingers' band?"

"He said he'd seen 'em hittin' down Platte canyon, on their way out from the Bayou."

"In September?"

"I reckon it was. Closer to the first of October."

"Was anybody with Two Fingers? White men for instance?"

"You mean Epps and Weatherby?" Ewing asked. "There was trappers in the bunch, but he didn't call names. Not that I recollect, anyhow. He just said everybody was laughin' and havin' a time. And he seen them Ute scalps."

Gitt glanced at Johnny, grim and satisfied. "We'll be long gone from Pagosa, Block," he said. "Long before break-up."

In all, Gitt and Johnny spent a week in Taos. While Gitt stayed most of the time with Ewing, sitting snug by the hutfire, Johnny took advantage of the extra days to ride often through the old settlement and into the plateau, gorge, and mountain country surrounding it.

Going south twenty miles, Johnny lazed away a day on the del Norte's left bank, where the water was swift and green-clear and where sun striking thousand-foot walls warmed the air and made it bright and pleasant. Going northeast three miles toward the mountains, he rambled about the ancient Pueblo de Taos, whose mud sides, ladders, and terraced apartments lifted so sharply from the sage plain. Only on one occasion did Johnny see, exposed for an instant, the fear and suspicion running deep through old Taos. He had turned back from the Pueblo one evening when he met a Mexican hazing burros along. "Como 'sta, amigo," he greeted, thinking of a certain incident at Saguache. "Do you know Juan Gutierrez? And a feller they call Señor Felipe?" The Mexican did not answer but hurried on, muttering and whipping his burros.

Johnny still liked Taos. He liked the little plaza with its hitching-racks and tiendas, the robed and hooded Indians from the Pueblo, the adobe houses and mysterious moradas, night music from concertinas, and the smiling, painted señoritas whose eyes offered such open invitation as he rode past. He promised himself that some day he would return to Taos. But in other ways, too, he was glad when Gitt filled out his visit and was ready to take the trail to Pagosa.

Birds were more numerous, south-slope buds and ground-patches larger in the country retraced by Gitt's pack-train. Outwardly, fewer changes seemed to have taken place in the Ute camp itself. Lodges looked only a little more weathered, the mud about the steaming springs only a little more widespread. Yet deep beneath the surface, at Pagosa, there was renewed tenseness, the same suspicion, hard watchfulness, and unspoken fear that had been apparent in Taos.

Ute memories were as long as his own, Johnny discovered. Although a half-year had passed since the incident in Bayou Salade, it was as if that disastrous battle of the scouts had occurred the day before. In every lodge there was the same kind of talk, low, terse, meaningful talk, as the preparation of weapons went forward. At night, beneath the tall, snow-tufted trees of Pagosa, council fires again flared, Ute squaws and warriors gathered in their tight circles, and chiefs and medicine men appeared in war-paint and headdress. To west and south a watch was set. No defense against Jicarilla surprise was neglected. But Ute minds were elsewhere. Words, gestures, thoughts were of the north, of Bayou Salade, Platte headstreams and a blue, ghostly lake in the mountains, and of Two Fingers' band of Cheyennes.

It was in the first days of April, Plant Moon of the Utes, that camp was broken at Pagosa. Although snow was still deep in the darkest timber stands the trail chosen was broad and easily cleared. At an unhurried pace the village travoised northward over ridges which Johnny had not yet explored, stopping often for a day's rest. The trail, Gitt said, was one of the oldest known to the Utes, running its length through protected Ute country. Leading well to the westward of the Saguache camp, it came to the Rio del Norte far up, at a gap opening out from mountains of the San Juan, where other hot springs, meadows laden with the new season's fragrance, the rushing del Norte, and numerous side-streams provided fine camping and trapping.

The latter part of April and the first days of May, Ute Flower Moon, were spent at the Little Medicine springs. The strange and beautiful country, the river gap with its thrusting rock pinnacles, winds smelling of snow-thaw and fresh moss and grass, the brilliance of nights filled with mountain star-sparkle—all of these reacted powerfully upon the Utes. The exuberance with which warriors had taken the trail died away and they became sullen, brooding, mystical, walking trancelike among their lodges. When at last they formed to move north, Johnny gasped and felt cold grip his spine. He saw no longer a Ute village, no longer a Ute band, wandering

in peace through the mountains. He saw, instead, a war-party full-fledged. Its lance-heads, knives, and arrow-points were bright. Its paint was red, its war plumes white-and-black, its shields a dull yellow. Its intent—attack, reprisal, blood vengeance—was plain, cut sharp into Indian copper.

They went over the Poncha pass saddle, up the now familiar course of the Arkansas, and across the ridge to Bayou Salade. At Platte head-waters trails converged among peaks, mounting a pass above timberline and going precipitously down. On the northern side lay a country startling and magnificent beyond belief to Johnny, the jumbled, dark-green, rocky mountains of the continental heights. Riding in close formation, with scout and rear-guard protection, the Utes penetrated the watershed of Grand river. Turning upstream, they kept to a main trail until canyons gave out, then entered high basin meadows which showed snow-lines still farther north.

Old Park. There Gitt reined in on a point, his eyes shining. Old Park, he said, was like the Bayou Salade. Hunting country. Trapping country. It had ponds and streams, swamps, aspen groves, and stands of spruce forest. It was peak-ribbed, a lake-and-spring park, Grand river head, source, in its way, of mesas and canyons, chimney buttes, cliffs, and clay beds of the flaming west desert. And it was battle country, soaked with the blood of Sioux and Arapaho, of Ute and Cheyenne. It showed many war scars. It possessed the remnants of Indian forts and of battle camps around which swift fights had been waged. Like Bayou Salade and the San Luis Park, like the Big and Little Medicine springs it was deep mountain country, ghost-ridden, filled with old stories, and sacred to Utes.

One evening, then, a scout circled back to the camp. Passing a spruce point a mile away, he rode with exaggerated slowness across the open, spoke a word or two with friends who greeted him, and dismounted at the lodge of old Gotchy. Presently the scout came out again, going to other lodges and returning with Tabby and the medicine man, Tewe. Gitt appeared next, whistling under his breath as he walked to the old chief's tepee. The entrance flap was closed after him, smoke began to curl from the peak vent, and finally silence, curious and strained, settled over the village.

Johnny waited, squatting, rifle in hand beside his own lodge. He had hoped to be called in, to take part in the council: but they had ignored him. Time passed slowly, an hour, then two. When Gitt emerged, Johnny looked at him critically.

"Something up?"

"You ain't just a-foolin'."

"Two Fingers?"

"It's Cheyennes, all right. There's white men with 'em."

After a moment Johnny said:

"Epps?"

"I don't know." Gitt seemed happy and perfectly confident. He kept his eyes on the meadows which ran like a horn eastward, up the small valley. "That scout," he murmured. "He played it slick. He let 'em see him, but didn't let on he seen them. He even hung around the lake for a while, up east, then dog-trotted all the way back in the open, cool as you please."

"So," Johnny said, "they follered him in."

"If they didn't I miss my guess. Ten-to-one there's a dozen watchin' us now."

Both men began, suddenly, to scrutinize their position with deeper interest. As usual, camp had been pitched on the best forage ground, in this case at a confluence of head-streams of the Grand. In the Y-fork formed by the streams, northward, and on a flanking ridge perhaps two hundred yards to the south, there was timber. Except for this the Ute lodges stood unprotected, open to attack from west or east across the flat meadows.

"When will it be?" Johnny asked.

"Not tonight. Before light in the mornin', likely."

"Well, we better get movin'."

"What? Go after 'em?" Gitt shook his head. "That'd be playin' their game. We never would find 'em, not till they jumped us somewheres. We're stayin' right here."

Johnny frowned. "For Christ sake. We'll be sittin' ducks."

"Ain't it the truth?" Gitt showed mock apprehension. "Stuck out here in the open. No gullies to hide in, no nothin'? Why, if I was Two Fingers, I'd be itchin' all over. Just waitin' to come in and grab."

"That's probably just what he's doin'," Johnny said, dryly.

"Yeah? Well, fine and dandy!" Gitt clamped his jaw. "We got several hours. Come sun-up tomorrow, we'll see who's still here."

That night the Ute campfires were allowed to die out. When all was dark, Gitt came to Johnny's lodge. He was fully armed, his rifle primed, his powderhorn, knife, and bullet pouch hanging heavy at his waist.

"Better get your stuff together," he said. "We're movin' the women and kids across the creek, into the timber."

"What about the tepee?" Johnny asked.

"We're leavin' 'em right where they are. They won't get hurt, and if they do, we can make new ones. Better take them robes and things, though. It'll be cold on the kids in the open."

"What do you want me to do?" Johnny put his next question.

"Just stick close to me. And keep everything quiet. There ain't supposed to be any movin' tonight."

While Johnny worked with the ever-obedient and calm Pepita, selecting articles he could not afford to lose, Gitt waited in silence. At the end the three went out together and down to the creek.

There were others at the stream ford, squaws burdened with well-muffled papooses, and old men who pointed out the places of smoothest, shallowest passage. After midnight sometime the movement to the Y-fork was completed. Only warriors remained to watch the way eastward or to crouch in the still lodges of the camp. The pony guard stood to the west, ready for instant flight into canyons. On the southern ridge, in the spruce fringe, a special force lay in concealment, its members disposed for defense or for swift down-slope attack from the flank.

Johnny held his ridge position with Gitt. The valley before him, he thought, was not that of a broad and sandy, gurgling river. Timber here was not scrawny, spavined mesquite; peaks were not clay cones or skeleton forms in a dry-rock desert. Yet he was reminded of Los Vientos. The down-log protecting him was like the old adobe wall overlooking the Mexican plaza. Men beside him were much like the men who had fought beside him in Texas, tense, hard, expectant. Tepees were strange-shaped things, spike-tipped, without the solidity of Los Vientos adobes, yet in their silence and apparent sleep they too were reminiscent. Only the enemy, Johnny told himself, would be different. Cheyennes were not Mexicans. If they came, the Cheyennes would be alarmed, alert, and well-organized. But still, in a way, they would be like the Mexicans. Basing all on surprise, they themselves would be trapped, caught up in surprise.

Time again passed slowly, clouds straggling the moon drifting like a leaf across its dark sea. At three o'clock, moment of the attack on Los Vientos, there was neither sound nor movement in the high meadows. At three-thirty the Rocky Mountain night was blackest; an hour later the whiteness of its dawn-streak was showing. There was a stirring after that far up the valley, a shy and cautious shifting, as if some wild thing of the forest had come to the park edge.

Utes stiffened. A mounted figure, big, erect, naked except for moccasins, breech-clout and the feather slanted forward in its scalp-lock, had emerged from spruce a quarter-mile distant. For a full minute the figure studied the camp at the stream forks. Satisfied, it lifted its lance, and other mounted figures appeared, three in buckskins, the majority, like their leader, gleaming bronze in their nakedness. The horsemen bunched, received orders, wheeled, and fanned out. Trotting at first, mid-way across the meadows they broke into a long-

striding run. Even then there was little if any noise, no more than the swish of hoofs passing through grass. Only when the figures were close in did they loose the harsh war-cry of the Cheyennes, waking echoes as they swept from both sides upon the massed lodges.

Abruptly, entrance flaps were flung open. Heavy, short-legged Utes burst forth, their knives flashing. Darting under lances, hamstringing mounts, jerking riders to earth and thrusting ferociously home, they upset the attack. Cheyennes drew back, their cries changing to those of alarm. Within seconds the first raider broke clear, running toward the stream ford and timber. At the bank he staggered and threw up his hands, pitching into the water. Other Cheyennes, caught between lodges and creek, were overtaken and slashed, or fell in the clouds of Ute arrows.

From his position, Johnny watched the figures in buckskin. On the meadows they had kept together; now they were fighting together, back-to-back in the melee. Johnny knew them. Two, at least. The largest was Weatherby. The little one, so taut, with such a sting in him, was Epps. There could be no mistake. With great suddenness the third buckskin-clad figure, the only stranger, collapsed and crashed to the ground. Utes leaped in; knives and tomahawks glinted; the stranger lay still. At the spectacle, both Epps and Weatherby whirled in retreat. Riding with a shrewdness born of desperation and panic, they took a meadow course eastward, avoiding timber and stream.

Tabby's war-cry sounded. Catching mounts, Utes of the ridge force swept out from the spruce. Splitting into two parties, the larger charging upon the lodges, the smaller seeking demoralized Cheyennes in the meadows, they flung themselves fanatically into battle. Conscious of but one figure, that of Epps, Johnny veered east. He rode with a strange and exhilarating lightness, gun poised, leg-pressure guiding his pony. Vaguely he knew that Gitt was beside him, leaning far forward, his moccasined feet rhythmically swaying. The Ute ponies were swift. On the down-slope they gained. Then, on the level, they seemed to lose ground. Plains ponies infected with terror were not to be caught. As the gap widened, Johnny's heart sank. Timber loomed ahead, promontories, ledges, and gulches perfect for ambush. Epps put his horse over rock and with a shout disappeared. Weatherby faltered. At that instant, Gitt fired—a chance shot—at long range. Weatherby howled, half-fell from his mount, straightened, and clamping his left hand to his knee, smashed recklessly into the forest.

Well after full morning, Gitt and Johnny returned. They were tired, ragged, and sullen. Empty-handed they rode into

camp, seeking their families. Although Henrietta and Pepita were safe, the general loss had been heavy. Squaws wailed before many lodges. Warriors lay receiving care for their wounds; medicine men chanted over the dying. Yet, the Cheyenne loss had been greater. In the camp, on the meadows, in the brightly rushing stream, were the signs of Ute triumph. Even Two Fingers, war chief of the Cheyennes, had been killed. His corpse had been scalped, disemboweled, spat upon, its arms and legs severed. In every quarter of the field Utes wandered with glazed eyes, counting coups, placing scalps at their belts, shouting, singing, and soaking deep in their triumph.

That night the council fire leaped doubly high. Johnny's eyes were quieter, quartz-bright, as he stared east at the timber. He thought of the third man in buckskin, lying now stripped and mutilated near the stream, and said:

"Tom, did you know who he was?"

"Who?"

"That feller out there."

"Sure. His name was Frank Miller. A pretty good man. I've seen him plenty at Bent's."

"I wonder what made him do what he did."

Gitt shrugged. "Who's to tell?" he said. "What makes you do what you do?"

There was silence for a time. Then Johnny said:

"You must of got Weatherby pretty bad."

"Yeah. A knee-shot is bad. It'll cripple a man."

"I wonder where he'll go."

"I don't know." Gitt lifted his gaze speculatively to the stars, and sat very still. "Out of the mountains," he ended. "Way away, if he's smart. Old Wax had better look out. Epps'll do something, most likely—but he'll never stick with a cripple."

3: SPANISH TRAILS

Gila West

UNCHALLENGED, three days later, the Ute village travoised eastward to the cold, blue mountain lake of which Johnny had heard. There, on a timber-lined shore below ridges and green tundra spaces, a permanent camp was set up. When Gitt suggested that they engage in late-season trapping and end at Vrain's post on Platte river, Johnny's answer was blunt. "Good God, man," he said, "haven't you had enough for a while? We've got everything we want at this place. Game, water, wood, even fish. Why not take it easy? Wait till fall and then trap this country. You go on, Tom, do what you like. Me, I'm stayin' right here." Gitt laughed understandingly and made other arrangements, and Johnny settled deeper into the camp. In mid-July Pepita's baby arrived, a brown-skinned, dark-eyed little girl whose squalls at once filled the tepee. Only with this event did Johnny seem to come out of himself. Feeling his old restlessness, and suddenly disliking the cluttered, too feminine atmosphere of his lodge, he hunted north, spending many nights alone at timberline, finding snow pockets, glaciers, and boulder fields and climbing to the very tips of the peaks.

Time was like the white mountain clouds, silently drifting, leaving no trace. The lazy summer passed and in skirling leaves the village moved, down yellowing valleys to Little Medicine waters at the del Norte gap. Skies were clear of haze there, becoming blue and colder. Trapper days arrived, long weeks away from all but men in high peak camps. Then winter fell, with graying skies, snow, and blizzard winds; spring swung round again. Pagosa and San Luis spring; breezes warmed, and a second lazy summer came.

So the seasons moved, slowly, smoothly in the deep Rockies,

rolling on from light to darkness and from darkness to the light. Johnny, following Gitt, camping, living solely with the Utes, travoising trails which led from timber stands to tundra heights, cirque lakes, and snowbanked mountain cliffs, was like a partner of the wind. In the east, beyond the Rockies, Tennessee became a space-point; Texas with its mesquite basins dimmed; even Bent's seemed continents away. For memories themselves, carried on Ute trails, were like old mountain time, drifting one into the other, rolling back, losing sharpness in the light of new life scenes.

There was a saying in the Rocky Mountains to the effect that, in the course of a year or more in the high country, men from prairies or the lower hills would increase in weight and stature. This was true of Johnny. Whereas Gitt, in his wanderings, appeared not to change. Johnny grew like a colt ranging the lush mountain grass. He lost his gangling look, the strap-like flatness, and the thinness of arms, neck, and legs that had marked him in Texas. Mountain meat and Mexican and Indian dishes—corn from the del Norte pueblos, and tortillas, beans, and peppers traded from the rancheros at Taos rounded his shoulders and thighs, thickened his chest, and filled out his taut cheeks. He added two inches in height. But more than this, he lost much of his boyishness. His beard sprouted full, a rich piñon-brown. The Hawken rifle, once carried so awkwardly, came to fit like a well tailored weapon into his shoulder-cup. Rangier, heavier by thirty pounds than he had been in Texas, season by season Johnny became more conspicuous among the Utes and yet more aloof. Warriors and even sub-chiefs of the Taos band no longer tested him. Noting his new-found steadiness, in trapping and during the alarms which spread periodically from Yampa to Pagosa; noting, too, the certainty with which he worked and the flashing directness with which he met every challenge, they respected him. Some, indeed, feared him.

One spring then—it was March, 1839, at the tail-end of a bitter winter—Johnny came to understand this. Stepping out of his lodge after a spell of particularly bad weather, he stared about him hollow-eyed and half-sick with disgust at the thaw-holes, dirty snow, and curling, newly-rotting debris of Pagosa. Stale, suffocated by his long months of hibernation, he turned finally, muttering, and re-entered the tepee.

Pepita was there at the fire-pit. There, Johnny said to himself, as she always had been, leaning over, working, cooking or sewing, her papoose at her back. She did not look at him. She would never look at him. She was silent. She would always be silent. Until the mountains' end, Johnny thought in despera-

tion, until the sun itself dropped out of the sky, she would be that way, silent, working, forever working and staying there close by her lodge.

Stonily he went past her and collected his things. Rifle. Shot-pouch and bullet-mold. A blanket—a rough-woven, big, red-colored blanket from the Navajo country. Knife. Powderhorn. Bridle, hobbles, and Mexican hair-rope. Equipment for light travel—light travel and fast.

As he left his tepee, trailing bridle reins toward his pony, Gitt saw him. Johnny cursed at that. He had hoped that Gitt would be sleeping—sleping deep in his buffalo robes, buried under the squeals of his Ute boys and puppies.

Gitt came over, taking his time. He was smiling, but there were shadows dark in his eyes.

"What's all this, Johnny?" he said. "You goin' somewhere?"

"You God damned betcha I am." Johnny's face was harsh, his glance queer. "That lodge. Pepita. The kid. I can't stand it no longer."

"What? Only one? Wait a while, Johnny! You ain't even got a good start!"

"The hell I ain't. I'm sick and tired of it. This camp. Stickin' here, doin' nothin' month after month. Not a God damned thing but just sittin'." Johnny pulled his pony to him and slipped on the bridle. "Just watch my smoke from here out."

"Oh, shucks!" Gitt laughed. "You been cooped up too long. Take a run if you want to. Out to Saguache. But we'll be headin' out pretty soon for spring trappin'. You better make it back in two weeks."

"I'm a-tellin' you," Johnny answered. "If I ain't here, don't wait on me. You'll know I'm long gone."

Gitt's laughter subsided. He stood with arms folded, staring at Johnny. Plainly, he intended to fight for his way.

"You'll be playin' the fool, Johnny. Look. Two trappin' seasons ain't nothin'. Not in this country. But we're out of the red. We can get anything we want at Bent's, cash on the barrel-head. Now ain't the time to quit, boy. It's the real time to work. We're gettin' that stake—and that's what we talked about."

"You take it, Tom. Do what you want with it."

"I reckon not." Gitt spoke in anger. "I didn't say we had it. I said we're gettin' it. But there's work ahead—work and, by God, a-plenty."

Johnny threw on his saddle, cinched up, and tied his rolled blanket behind the cantle. Gitt watched him and said:

"Where you think you're goin', Johnny?"

"South, maybe."

"Taos? I told you, boy—we'll get there. A ranch—freightin', maybe—anything we want. But you won't get it just driftin'. I've told you that, too."

"I don't expect to."

"You'll see Ewing, I suppose."

"I might."

"He won't likely be there," Gitt warned. "He'll be further south somewhere. South—or maybe west. He'll be hard to catch."

"All right." Johnny mounted and, without looking at Gitt, drew his reins tight. "He'll be hard to catch."

Gitt continued to stand. For an instant his brows contracted, his face darkened, and it appeared that he might drag Johnny from his pony. But then his long frame loosened and he shrugged and said:

"There ain't any tellin' some people. I'll be headin' for Yampa river, Johnny. Tabby and me and the rest of us. But don't wait too long. Not past April, if you decide to come back. I ain't sayin' for sure, understand. But it might be I'll be gettin' some ideas, myself."

Johnny went south. He spoke to no one at Pagosa on leaving. He did not see Pepita come out and remain motionless before their lodge, a square, short, silent figure with a papoose at her hip, as he disappeared into timber. Later, on the sunslopes which his trip with Gitt had made familiar, he raised his quirt and the Ute pony, its rump smarting, leveled out, streaking down through the sage. At times, his heart pounding, his lungs taking great draughts of the sweet cedar air, Johnny cried out in his freedom. There were no Apaches on his way south. He saw two sheep camps of Mexicans, among Chama breaks, and passed them wide. He rode alone, eating little, traveling steady in sunlight and darkness, until his Ute pony staggered beneath him and he was forced to go slow.

Taos was in spring-time. Orchards were pink blotches on the plateau. The mountains behind were green-and-white, with bands of black in them; Taos adobes themselves and the ancient Pueblo were yellow-brown, washed and dark with fresh rain. Johnny rode at a fast trot to the plaza, where he found freighters and wagons making ready for the great trails. On the other side, he sought a known lane and went at a lope, down between the flaking mud walls to the outskirts.

Celestina, Ewing's wife, came to the hut door. She was the same, he thought, a thin Mexican woman, drab and ill-clothed, yet somehow strong, a striking person as she stood in the sun.

"Si," she said, her black eyes on him. "I remember you, señor. You are Johnny Christmas. You do not come often to Taos."

"Not often enough," Johnny said. "But I'm here now. I come to see Block."

"Block is not here, señor."

Johnny's face fell. "Did he say where he went? And when he'd be back?"

"Oh, he's not far." She smiled at Johnny's expression. "He is south of Ranchos a little, at the horse camp. It is ten miles, perhaps."

"Where?" Johnny said. "Which way?"

"To the southwest of Taos, señor. Near the del Norte trail." She smiled again, slightly. "He will be glad to see you. But I have coffee, señor. Will you come in?"

"No. No, thank you, ma'am." Johnny was already looking southwest. "Later, maybe. Sure, later. But I got to see Block."

Once more he set out, traveling this time at a full, swinging lope which took him quickly past Ranchos, its few adobes perched on a knob above a clear stream. Beyond, on the bench-land, he came in among horse bunches and riders, robed Pueblos and Taos Mexicans mixed. A tent took form, sharp-lined in the sage. He saw straggling wing-fences, a range corral made of cedar, other horsemen, a cooking-fire, and a Mexican in sombrero and bright-banded serape, limned against smoke.

Suddenly, then, a rider broke away and loped toward him. Johnny's heart throbbed as he recognized him. Ewing was on a big gray, chesty, short-coupled. His fur cap was round, brown and small, slapped on his head, his flowing hair and beard stark red in the sun. His shirt, too, was red, out at both elbows. His buckskins were as filthy as ever, his moccasins unbeaded and tattered, like the tattered, flapping, blanket-roll he carried tied to his saddle.

Sweeping in, Ewing puckered his lips, whistling, mischievously, in perfect imitation of a range stallion. He gave a crushing handshake, which Johnny returned.

"Well, well!" he greeted. "Long time no see, Johnny! Where'd you come from? Pagosa?"

"Pagosa is right! I hit Taos today!"

"Where's that old bastard, Gitt? Didn't he come?"

"No. He's still north!"

"Still squawin', is he?" Ewing leaned far back in his saddle, and his laughter boomed over the sage. "Son-of-a-gun! I bet by this time he's got five hundred kids! How's he makin' out?"

"Good. Pretty good."

"Plenty beaver, hey? Well, I still say he's wrong. Not a beaver inside of five years! But come on, Johnny!" Ewing wheeled his gray short. "Manuelo's got a fire goin'. I was just headin' for coffee!"

They rode to the tent, which Johnny saw had been set up as a rain shelter and filled with supply boxes, saddles, blankets, and similar items of extra gear, including cooking utensils. Standing together on the fire's windward side, away from the smoke, they drank several cups of the black, steaming, strong liquid that the Mexican poured. Afterwards they mounted and rode out a half-mile to the east, to a knoll, unoccupied by other horsemen, from which they could observe full range operations.

It was there that Johnny put the question uppermost in his mind.

"What's all these horses?" he said. "You trailin' to Bent's?"

"Bent's hell! South and west. Californy."

"Californy!"

"Sure! What's so strange about that?"

"Nothin'! I was just thinkin'. . . ."

"Bent's got all the horses they need. But west—I don't know." Ewing's manner underwent change. He was sitting slumped in his saddle, moccasins drooping, the full weight of his body falling upon the gray's back. His freckled hands were idle, crossed on the flat Spanish pommel, his blue eyes more somber, questing the plateau sage as he said:

"It's a chance, Johnny. It's not only the desert. It's markets, and other things goin' on. Like you and me and Gitt talked about. Freightin', and the way the Plains tribes are actin', and what I hear south. I been runnin' these horses for years. I figure at least to cut my herd some."

Johnny waited.

Ewing swept his arm toward the camp, where Indian and Mexican riders were mingling. "These men are all right, Johnny," he said. "I know 'em all. I've worked with 'em, all through this Mexico country. I can still trust 'em—I think. But I'm lookin' for somebody else. Somebody used to long trailin'. And especially, somebody used to the desert."

Johnny, too, was watching the camp. He was fascinated by the rippling movements of horses, and by the strange equipment, bright colors and sudden, high calls of the riders.

"You mean me," he remarked.

"We'll go west of the del Norte by the Gila. Hit Californy. Then back by the north trail. North of the Colorado of the West, through the Pah-Utahs. I know the country. I'll give you keep, furnish your outfit, and give you fifteen per cent of trade profits—cash on the barrel-head, if there is any."

For a final instant Johnny hesitated. He was thinking, then, of Pagosa and his lodge there, of Pepita, and of Gitt, Yampa river, and trapping.

"How long would we be?"

"Six months. A year. Maybe more. It depends."

"Yeah." Johnny's gaze lifted away from the camp. Spring clouds were moving. Taos plateau slipped on to the south, toward the del Norte gorge, misty new ranges, and desert. "Yeah." Johnny nodded and spoke again, slowly. "I reckon so, Block. It depends."

The Taos party went south in mid-April, down through the walled gorge of the Rio del Norte; out past Embudo settlement at the gorge mouth; over cedar malpais and sand-rock formations; to eastward of hulking Black Mesa, where, Johnny learned, Spaniards had starved and murdered an Indian band in years long gone by; and into open valley country between Jemez ridges and the great final peaks of the Sangre de Cristos. Leaving his horses with Indians from El Pueblo de Taos, Ewing rode with Johnny ten miles into Santa Fe, capital, which the latter so long had wanted to see and of which he had heard men speak, so often with awe, in Texas, at Bent's, and on mountain trails.

For a half-day, then, while Ewing purchased supplies and hired an extra rider or two for the Gila, Johnny wandered about the ancient, hill-pocketed city. Standing in its plaza, he looked across at the Palace of Governors, thick-walled fortress in which, he again learned, soldiers and priests had defended themselves from Pueblo Indian reprisal more than a century past. Leaving the plaza, he came upon shaded convents and the stone or adobe quarters of religious orders whose members, in caps, sandals and flowing robes, seemed comfortable and fat, out of place among the more ragged, thin-faced, but subtly sturdy peons of the streets. Climbing a cedar slope to the east, he gazed out curiously, with strangely mixed feelings, upon the city as a whole, noting the extent of its twisting lanes and cottonwood-lined acequias, its many blocks of flat-roofed houses with their flowered patios and red or blue doorways, and the carved beauty of its desert surroundings.

Later, it was with a harsh, full sense of shock that Johnny returned to his camp. Taos, he told himself, frowning, was not Santa Fe. Especially in Taos, before taking the del Norte trail, riders of the high sage plateau had spoken of Santa Fe with affection, excitement, and had compared the two places. But Taos was nothing, an outpost, rough, small, a point on the edge of the north. Texas, too, sprawling beneath its great sky, had been a place of dust, mesquite, and emptiness. It was here, Johnny saw in a flash: it was here in the south, below the plateaus and gorges, that Spanish words had their true meaning, that Spanish life pulsed,

plans were made, and force lay—an old force, lazy, dust-covered, well-hidden, yet to the north, to the spreading American north, Johnny thought, perhaps deadly.

From Santa Fe Ewing led still farther into the Spanish south, along the ancient traders' trail toward El Paso del Norte, dropped down the face of a plateau escarpment; and, passing an Indian pueblo and a dusty plaza called Bernalillo, came on the third day to the river flats of Valverde. Ewing, though different from Tom Gitt in temperament, being blunt, hard and at times explosive, proved himself to be an excellent trail boss. He knew what pace to keep and how to fatten horses on the move. His camps were well-chosen, adequately supplied, and pitched always at an hour early enough to ensure supper light. But more amazing to Johnny was his manner of dealing with his Mexican and Indian riders. Whereas the blanketed horsemen from El Pueblo de Taos were aloof, prideful and quick to see insult, the Mexicans were peons of the kind which Johnny had found in other del Norte settlements, courteous, fine workers when not drunk on their native mescal, and obedient to a point that went beyond acquiescence. Ewing, demanding no more than a certain honesty and attention to business, was accorded a respect bordering in cases upon terror, a spectacle which put Johnny in mind of nothing so much as the heavy, confident figure of Felipe Montoya, on the one hand, and of the dried and haunted, scarred features of old Juan Gutierrez, at Saguache, on the other.

Somewhere beyond drowsy Socorro, Ewing turned his herd away from the Rio del Norte, south-by-southwest. Crossing a range called by some the Sierra de los Mimbres, he guided down head-gulches of the Rio Gila and swung westward along that stream, picking up a Spanish trail which, he told Johnny, had been traveled by traders and padres for a hundred, and perhaps two hundred, years. This was Apache land, he then said, and stronghold and range of the Navajos: an immense, wild basin of desert, rivers, mountains and red, impassable canyons, stretching for five hundred miles from old Sonora in Mexico to the sage flats of Timpanogos and Great Salt in the north. Week after week, in heightening dust and deepinging dryness, Ewing pressed the herd forward. They came into the region of Pimería Alta; paused at adobe camps falling into decay beside corn plots and sweetwater springs; trailed between dead, buzzard-bone ridges; reached the delta flats of the great Colorado of the West, below its trap-gorges; and forded at a marked ford of the padres. Then, facing furnace

winds and sand beneath a mirror-sky, they crossed the final desert to mountains, passed through and rode, in July, down golden valley trails to the land of California.

At El Pueblo de los Angeles, proposed trail's end for Ewing, Johnny pulled in to take a fresh look. By that July most of his impatience and restlessness had subsided. Months of travel in rock desert and sahuaro country, under livid, staring suns, had bleached his beard, scorched his cheeks a hard red, and flaked and cracked his unprotected lips. If anything he was more tattered than Ewing, sick of riding point and drag with the horse herd, tired out, and frankly willing to stop.

Again, however, change overwhelmed him. Saguache, Pagosa, Little Medicine Springs in the Rockies, even the Spanish towns of Taos and Santa Fe on the Rio del Norte, seemed now as remote as Texas and the leafy Tennessee hills, Here in the California country, he saw, were hills to be true, but hills of a different kind, lower, rounded, oak-covered, a-glow with sun-fire in fog. All of his life, Johnny thought too, he had dreamed of trails west, of new plains and peak-shapes, new forests, and new canyons and deserts. But here once more, a few miles from this California trading-post, familiar things came to their end. There were no plains, no more peak-shapes. Even the air possessed a different quality. With breath-taking suddenness trail unraveled on sand, on yellow ocean beaches hard-packed, beyond which there was nothing but noise and a surf-line, a wonderful blueness broken by white, as if, without warning, the horseman had ridden to the brink of the sky.

El Pueblo de los Angeles itself, Johnny found, was lazier than any place that he had ever come into. Quietly, waiting for Ewing to finish his trading, he studied the scenes about him. He lingered in cantinas, drinking a little wine and listening to guitar-and-castanet music and the songs of Spanish women. He loafed in the shade of house walls; stared back at the officials and queer-looking, slow-moving soldiers who stared at him as they passed; and occasionally spoke to a vaquero who had ridden in from the country. But mostly, as in other times, he stayed to one side. The California plaza, Johnny thought, fly-ridden, dusty, a little unfriendly under its music and red-painted smiles, was a place to see and take a siesta in—but not for too long.

One morning after he had sat for a while, Johnny saddled his pony, mounted in an easy, leisurely way, and rode out of the dusty plaza to the northeast, along a meandering, grass-bordered trail. Why he rode in that direction he did not ask himself. There was no particular reason. It was

only, perhaps, that no vaquero had passed; that the oak-covered hills, filled with bird-song, were inviting; and that the morning itself seemed cooler, a good time for riding.

Towards noon—the sun, at least, had marked its first quarter—the trial broadened at a bend, revealing fields. Fences were there; high-wheeled, wooden carts like carts that Johnny had seen before; spreading, solitary trees; and brilliant plantings of flowers. Near at hand a man was working, stooping over a hoe, a tall and thin figure, long-robed. In the distance were buildings. Some were sheds and brush shelters. One was more prominent, a structure straight and massive of wall, arched of entranceway, staircased, and tipped, above its dark, rich-hued adobe, with a block cross.

Johnny stopped, startled. In that instant fear seized him, a black, curdling fear that swept him into the past, to desert, a river, and a church standing in night. He heard shots again, and men running. There was a wall stretching away to a cliff. And there were rustlings, a door creaking, a room —deep and rafter-lined, with an altar—more shots, suddenly, and a black figure falling.

The worker set down his hoe. His robe, Johnny saw, was brown, and he wore a brown, snugly pressed cap. He began to walk forward, his sandaled feet, scuffing gravel, making a rustling sound. Wind caught the robe, flaring it: the arms swung wide and loose, wing-like.

Johnny brought his rifle to bear. His face was hard. His thumb held the hammer of his weapon.

The friar halted then, at some paces on the trail. He, too, showed surprise.

"I assure you, señor," he said at last, in English. "You are welcome. We have little here, but what we have we share. There are no guns or soldiers."

Johnny let his rifle sink. He spoke thickly:

"I'm sorry. I'm not acquainted here. It reminded me of something."

"No matter, señor."

The Franciscan smiled. He was a man of angular but delicate feature, with lightly sunburned cheeks. His hands, long-fingered, narrow, and of the same delicate mold, showed clearly that he was not accustomed to regular labor in the fields. "Please," he continued, gesturing. "We have not many visitors here, and you—I see that you are American. You must have come far. If you will follow me, señor, there is wine waiting and plain bread, and we have cool benches under the trees."

Johnny hesitated, then nodded his head. Still mounted, and still with a certain wariness, he went with the free-walking

friar down between the cultivated patches to the church, where two shaded seats, facing each other at the base of a strange, light-branched tree, were pointed out. On his way Johnny had time to look about him. Indians, as short-statured as Utes but docile of spirit and slow of stride, were in evidence, and more than once the sudden appearance of other friars, who looked and then quickly retired, indicated that the place was well inhabited. The tall Franciscan excused himself: bread chunks and a stone jug of wine were brought; and Johnny, feeling more secure, sat down, his rifle beside him.

"You said that our mission reminded you of another," the friar began. "We have many missions to the north, on El Camino Real, and I have heard that there are American trappers on Rio Sacramento. I presume that you have come from there."

"No. We come in with a horse herd. From the Rio del Norte."

"The Rio del Norte? I do not recall that river, señor."

"It's in the Rocky Mountain country. Away over. Taos and Santa Fe."

"Of course! Yes!" Excited, the Franciscan leaned forward, spreading his legs under his robe and resting his hands upon his knees. "And you have been there—to La Ciudad de la Santa Fe! How much we have heard of that city! It must be very beautiful, señor, and very fine. Please. Exactly—what do you say it is like?"

Johnny laughed a little. "I can't tell you much, mister. I've only been there once, myself—and that was just before we trailed here. I know Taos a lot better—up in the Ute mountain country and over to Bent's. There and Texas."

"Oh." An abrupt silence fell. The friar drew back, straighter on his bench, and his black, clear eyes lost their warmth. When he spoke again, his tone was formal. "Texas. Then it was a Texas mission you saw."

"Yeah." Johnny set down his wine.

"Tell me, señor. Santa Fe. It is a prosperous city? There is much trade between it and the south?"

"I would say so. There's a big trail goes down along the del Norte. I ain't never rode it—not to its end. But there's lots of travel on it. These here carts like you got, and big wagons, and pack-trains and such."

"Good. And to the east, I suppose? It is much the same there?"

"Even more so," Johnny said. "That's the main American trail, through Bent's on the Arkansas. Whole wagon-trains comin' through. They'll be in Santa Fe now, I expect, all over the place."

The Franciscan listened, his eyes still. "Fine," he said, almost curtly. "It must be splendid—a wonderful sight to see them coming down, out of the mountains into the city. I have often pictured it. But I, señor—you will understand that I think of other things. I must confess it. Our missions here are beautiful, but at times they seem lonely. Too far, perhaps, too out of the way. Santa Fe has many great churches. Many officials, I think, and strong, wealthy families, and soldiers."

Again, Johnny nodded. Deep within him, he was beginning to feel anger. He let steel slip into his own voice.

"That's right," he said. "There's all that. As for the soldiers, there's others up in the north. U. S. dragoons."

The Franciscan pursed his lips. "So?"

"There's trouble along the border up there. Mostly Indian now. But they're lookin' things over, I reckon. Findin' out the best camps. Way over into the mountains and down close to Taos. Where the water is, and good cut-offs to the del Norte, and so on."

Minutes passed, as the two men sat on their plain, wooden benches, facing each other. The sun went high, indicating full noon. Carts, creaking like Texas and del Norte carts, were beginning to make their way toward the mission, two of them driven by friars, the remainder by capless, headbanded Indians. There was a stir about the graceful chapel itself and on the flanking paths, as brown-robed figures, appearing for a second time, prepared for their mid-day rituals.

Johnny got up. At once the Franciscan also arose, discharging his obligations as host.

"You are not leaving, señor?"

"Yeah, I expect. Block'll be wonderin' where I got to. I want to thank you for that bread and wine, mister. It tasted mighty good."

"That is pleasing to know, señor. But surely, you will not go without seeing our mission. All visitors see it. And who knows, señor? You may, perhaps, be gone a very long time."

"Yeah, that's a fact, too." Johnny grinned, noting the words. "But. . . ."

"Come, señor. At least up these stairs. We take great pride in our choir."

Holding his Hawken rifle loosely, Johnny followed the Franciscan to the gallery and stopped. He had known what he would find. It was as if no deserts, no brown rivers filled with snags and quicksand, no hard-boned mountains lay between the old Texas and del Norte churches and that which now sat so quietly, in such seeming peace, among the California hills. The choir, he saw, had its window looking out

upon the flower plots and fields and slopes, a window which, no doubt, catching moonlight, would limn a figure strongly. The chapel sides, below, were long and clean. Fabrics spread across them. Santos stood in niches. Even ancient paintings, portraits done in dark, cracked oils, hung in suffocating silence there, the stern and death-like faces staring sharply at him from those walls.

As a bell tolled the noon-tide, Johnny went down the narrow, open stairway, again thanked his host for the wine and bread, and said good-by. At the bend in the trail he looked back. The Franciscan was standing beneath the great tree. In the distance his figure was taller and thinner, his face strained, bluish-gray, as bloodless as those of the portraits. Similarly, distance had blackened his robe, sharpening it, making it strangely cross-shaped. Johnny shivered in the bright sun. He remembered moonlight, words as soft as a plains wind, a black form collapsing. He wondered about the Franciscan, about certain words he had spoken, and was convinced that here too, if change were to come, was one who would lay aside vows, firing straight from a spire window.

Days afterwards, as they were bringing their trading to completion, Johnny and Ewing rode out of El Pueblo de los Angeles to the west, eventually topping a golden-grass hill overlooking the ocean. There Johnny, stretching prone on the slope, his eyes to the blue of sky and water, said:

"Block, I been watchin' this thing. Ever since we left the del Norte. I wonder if you really see what I see in all this."

"I've seen some stacked deals in my time," Ewing grunted. "Santa Fe's been bad enough the last two or three years. But they're new at throat-cuttin', seems like to me, compared to these people."

"No, that's not what I mean. That priest the other mornin'. It was the look in his eyes—and the questions he asked."

"They're all lookin', and askin' too many."

"You remember that night in Taos, Block? When old Tom and you and me got to talkin'?"

"When you come down from Big Medicine? Sure, I remember."

"Well," Johnny went on, "I was talkin' to another feller last night. One of these sailor fellers just come in. He said about the same as old Tom. Tellin' about a place up the coast here. The people hate us. All they talk about is Texas and the way the Americans are comin' in, all over the country. He said they run him out of a cantina one night and clear out to his ship."

"What's so surprisin' about that, Johnny?"

"After what you said at Taos that time about everything bein' so peaceful, no chance of trouble or nothin'. Don't this surprise you some, Block?"

Ewing's shallow, light-blue eyes showed amusement. "I hadn't seen Tom Gitt for a long while," he recalled. "And I didn't know you. Maybe I was just keepin' some things to myself about Taos, especially with Celestina around. And besides, I tried to let on at the horse camp."

"Yeah, I recollect you did that," Johnny said.

"What else did the sailor say, Johnny?"

"He told me he'd been north. Francisco Bay, the Oregon, clear on up. He said that's the country. God Almighty! Mountains and islands, and these big, cold, salt-water bays, and fishin'. He said they caught hundred-pound salmon right off the ship. And timber—you never seen anything like the timber. He said there just ain't anything like it."

"I know all that," Ewing replied. "I've been on the Oregon. Went in by Snake River ten years ago. But what else did he say? Did he see many people?"

"Queer-lookin' Indians, he said. With canoes. . . ."

"Indians, hell! What about whites? Hudson Bay, and them Russians?"

"Now, that," Johnny said, "that's what I can't understand." He lowered his voice and spoke almost mysteriously. "It's hard enough to believe there's Spanish out here. But them others—he says they're all over the ocean. Maneuverin' around. Slippin' in and out of the bays, like there was something big on. Spyin' on each other all the time—and keepin' their cannon full-loaded."

Ewing nodded. "The gulls a-gatherin'," he muttered. For long minutes both Johnny and he stayed silent as they gazed at the California coastline presenting, in its tawny oak-and-grass roundness, a landscape so different from the angular, more powerful landscapes of the Rockies. "She's so rotten you could put your finger through it," Ewing added, deep in thought. "I've heard too much since I come here. Indian whippin's and killin's, ridin' their own people into the ground, stealin' and cheatin' and tryin' to keep strangers out. All that's about done. That's what the Russians and British are thinkin'. You can't blame 'em, either. She's a right pretty country."

"You bet," Johnny said.

"Well," Ewing laughed softly, "if there's others lookin' her over, there's Americans, too. Maybe, some day," his eyes suddenly glinted, "we'll have to do something."

It was an hour before either man renewed talk. Johnny continued to lie prone on the slope, absorbing the sun and the reflected, rich, sweet-smelling warmth of the earth. His

mind and body, at least for a time, were at peace. He was hungry.

The California country rolled away, golden-brown, gleaming, on three sides, Johnny turned to Ewing and said:

"What you think, Block? We're through here. There's Americans north, in good country. That's what the priest said."

"He was tellin' you right," Ewing answered. "And it's a funny thing, Johnny. That's what I been a-thinkin'."

They rode west then, in settling twilight, down through the tall California grass to the coast. That night their campfire was made of spindrift of the beach, storm-borne, giving forth strange and wonderful lights, orange, purple, and red, evolved from the deep ocean's chemistry. For hours Johnny lay measured on sand, gazing at sky-stars or at the phosphorescent ghost-stars of the sea. Again he thought of Spanish ranchos, pueblos, and missions; of the ships of alien prowlers watching that shore; and, more strongly, of the trails leading away, like arrow-shafts warped by the sun, to the vast country eastward. Surf pounding so near was like the booming of guns, breaker-crests like horse-tails flying in wind. As if it were no more than clouds forming on the sea's rim, excitement filled Johnny. He would remember that surf-line, with its noise and smashing power and speed. Even now he remembered, too, what Tom Gitt had said—about Texas, and Taos, and about the Americans pressing west upon the great trails. "Like a wave rollin'," old Gitt had said. "It'll be like a wave rollin' in." Far down in his heart, Johnny felt what Gitt felt. Crashing Pacific surf was like the crash of American weapons in the Spanish deserts of Texas. Wide-eyed, Johnny wondered when all distance would fade, and when sound and the surging force-waves would meet.

As both Johnny and Ewing had half-expected, it was well after the beginning of the new decade, in October, 1841, that they set out upon their return journey to the Rio del Norte. By that month heat once more had lessened beyond the Sierra Nevadas, rain had fallen, and the northern route of which Ewing had spoken, paralleling the great Rio Colorado, offered the brightest weather, new scenes, shorter distances, and the most favorable prospect of safe passage.

Despite high customs and the bribes that he had had to pay, Ewing had done well in the California country. His trail-herd had brought a solid profit, which he had invested eventually in goods destined for United States markets. Johnny, too, had made what seemed to be excellent arrangements. With the percentage earned on the long southern ride, and under the

shrewd and generous management of Ewing himself, he had acquired mules and goods making up an integral part of the pack-train. Barring trail losses or an unpredictable drop in del Norte prices, he would realize a second considerable sum on his arrival at Taos.

The central Spanish trail, opened by adventurous padres in the eighteenth century, led the travelers quickly away from the fogs and bronze autumn sunlight of the coast. The Sierra Nevadas dropped to horizon level and the pack-train struck into desert, skull-bare, ugly, without mission or pueblo, and possessing not even the giant cacti or the occasional fully watered valley of deserts to the south. Eventually, among salt flats, boulder knots, and reed-bordered saline lakes, the travelers entered the country of the Pah-Utah Indians, root-diggers, whose wretched condition shocked Mexicans, Taos Indians, and Johnny alike. Beyond this yellow-white and orange region, below Timpanogos Lake and the Sierra de Anahuac, packed clay desert and sage plateaus made their appearance. Sandstone became red, the blood-red of Rocky Mountain strata. Gorges cut the trail. Then one day the train reached the great river itself, the Colorado of the West, moving in canyons near the main cordilleras, and striking terror in the silence and deadliness of its power.

Crossing at the old point of the padres, they left the Spanish trail and rode directly eastward into country familiar only to Ewing. It was mid-November, seven weeks after their departure from El Pueblo de los Angeles. As they emerged from canyons to confront a massive mesa wall and, in the south, peaks of a glittering snow-range, storm struck them. The Uncompahgre winds whistled hollow-bone. Dust blew like the dust on southern trails; the temperature was keen; sleet drove hard against the train. Facing this, Johnny shrank within himself. Soft coastal airs, a pulsating ocean, and filtered sunlight had loosened fibers in him. On the high plateau, he suffered. Cold, miserable camps were made; river ice had to be broken for water; and meat was cooked over cottonwood fires, in the lee of brush. Yet Johnny laughed exultantly. With wild pleasure, he scanned the unnamed peaks and listened to the wiry whine of wind. This was country of which Gitt had told him, the great region of the Rocky Mountain western slope. Few had ever been there. Even Gitt was fearful of it, telling his stories. Strong and beautiful beyond belief, this was fighting land, too big perhaps, too lofty, steep, and granite-sheathed, for men to conquer wholly.

Between the southern mountains and the mesa lay a valley of irregular contour, into which Ewing turned. Stream gradi-

ents increased progressively then, leading upward to a country reminiscent of the more easterly parks of the Rockies, with pastureland, juts, and isolated, graceful stands of spruce forest. Fortunately, in spite of flurries and low-sailing clouds, there was little snow on the slopes. The pack-train passed into a region of unimagined loveliness, a wonderful camp-and-game country, where the ashes of Ute fires were found, where elk, bear, and deer moved along snappingly cold, bluish-green tributaries, and where crested landforms, like prairie chimney buttes, marked the approach to flanking mountains. Southeastward of this nameless basin lay the old Ute trail across the Cochetopa. Still in little snow, the riders worked their way through motionless forest, crossed a round ridge below timberline, and started down with the open, flat bowl of the San Luis before them.

San Luis. Johnny was like Tom Gitt that day, Red-faced, longer-bearded, he slouched in his saddle like an old-time mountain man as he looked down, from Cochetopa heights, upon the historic valley of the Spaniards. There, he thought affectionately, off there a hundred miles was old Sierra Blanca, wanderer's guide, grim, snow-buried patriarch, guardian of that range they called the Blood of Christ. Below old Blanca, on the white-gray valley floor, were the dunes about which men had whispered—the curved sand-molds, naked, clinging, death places deceptively voluptuous and beautiful, ever-shifting with the ever-shifting winds. In middle-valley spaces, lakes lay like blue and scintillating petals, sky facets in the powdered sage. And near at hand were other forms, the sandstone spines, stream-cuts, and slopes of braided cedar, which evoked new thoughts in Johnny, thoughts to over-lie his older, pleasant memories. In that moment he seemed to take, again, his first San Luis ride. Again he seemed to come from Poncha pass to dusty flats; face mountains and a setting sun; see evening fall, with great San Luis Spanish stars in blue-black dusk; and ride, in reverie, toward fires, tall lodges, smoke, and figures by those sandstone crops. Saguache. The word, liquid, plaintive, full of desert murmurings, stirred Johnny's blood. His heart-beat quickened. His lips fashioned long-familiar words: Gitt and Pepita, Tabby, old Gotchy. He stood once more, in memory, at night councils, listened to chiefs' talk, and watched the gestures and dancing of Tewe. Staring hard, Johnny sought, and found, the new Ute smokes of Saguache.

Among the first of the Saguache band to greet the train was Tabby, whom Johnny had left at Pagosa. As the two men approached each other, they slowed their mounts. Tabby was shy and wary, keeping a little to one side and dibbling his heels

against his pony's flanks, like a 'Rapaho. Johnny, suddenly, rode straighter in his saddle, his brows knitted and eyes keen, as if he were unsure of identity. Two years, Johnny was thinking. Two years was not long—at least, not long for long trails. Yet somehow, somewhere in that time, Tabby had crossed an invisible line. His face, once fat and round and smooth, was pinched, his lips less full and richly colored. Like leather fractured by the sun, his cheeks revealed a thousand crinkles. He seemed even shorter than before, paunchier, softer now and wistful, like any man whose spring-time strength has gone and who has set himself, reluctantly, to take his down-slope course.

Embarrassed, confused, feeling not a little pity, Johnny thrust his hand impulsively over his saddlehorn, American-fashion.

"How you makin' it, Tabby?" he said.

"Good. Bueno! But you, Juanito!" Tabby leaned back on his pony, cocked his head, and made his admiration plain. "You are big. Bigger than I know you. You have been gone a long time. You have grown muy largo, muchacho!"

Johnny was pleased. "I reckon I have, Tabby," he said. "There don't seem to be nothin' I can do about it. I just keep addin' on. But you look good, Tabby," he ended, with a forced chuckle. "Fat and sassy. Livin' off the fat of the land, I expect!"

"Oh, si, si! We live all right, Johnny. Only. . . ."

Abruptly, pretense was dropped. Tabby's smile faded, his features settled into their basic red, impenetrable stolidity, and his eyes became clouded. Johnny sat his horse quietly, regarding his friend.

"Something wrong, Tabby?"

"Perhaps, yes. It is not much."

"Last time," Johnny said, "old Gotchy come out to meet us. I don't see him this time."

"No. Gotch-Ear, he is dead. Tewe. He is dead, too."

The news, broken so simply, reminded Johnny of the Taos night when Fraser's death had been talked about. It was curious, he thought, how death came. Quickly, always quickly, in the mountain country. In bright sun. Or at night under clouds or in the full of the moon. Strange, that no one could tell. Men about him seemed strong, experienced, without a sign of fear, and yet they were weak. Less watchful perhaps, or lazy or tired, or too inclined to take chances—and death struck. That was the lesson. Never forget. Never cease watching. Johnny would not debate. He himself felt safe, somehow, in that instant with Tabby, almost arrogant in his own steadiness, clarity of eye, and burgeoning strength.

"What happened, Tabby?" he said.

"You remember Pagosa," the Ute said. "The Big Medicine. When you went away and did not say good-by, we did not wait for you. We went to Yampa river—Little Snake—and camped. There was plenty beaver. We took many packs. Then Tomas, he . . ."

"I been meanin' to ask you about Tom," Johnny said quickly.

"Oh, Tomas, he is fine. But he wanted to go to California, I think. He said that would be a long ride, and he had never been there. He said he did not know the Spanish trails."

"Well, for Christ sake, why didn't he tell me?" Johnny exclaimed.

"You did not ask," Tabby replied. "He told me he thought you did not want it. He said that you were too young, maybe too long for Pagosa, Juanito, so wherever you go, you must go alone. He said that he had felt that way, when he was young. So he went with us to Yampa river, and then he and me, we went to Bent's Fort, and then, one day, Tomas looks at the big wagons at the fort and says he thinks he will go to St. Louis. From there. . . ." Tabby gestured. "At Bent's he spoke much about the Missouri. He said, there should be plenty beaver there, and on the Yellowstone. He would go and see. But he said he would be back. Maybe to trap on Uncompahgre. But maybe with wagons. He said there is much money in wagons."

Lifting his eyes, Johnny let his gaze pass beyond Tabby to Sangre de Cristo comb-heights and to the massive, distant form of Sierra Blanca. On the north side of that great old peak, somewhere, lay the Mosca pass trail so much in Gitt's mind, the ancient Spanish track which would lead, on plains' edge, to Cuchara valley and the mystic, legend-filled peaks of Huajatolla. Once more Johnny felt impatience, the sting of disappointment as he thought of that trail and of the many others which he had never seen. Chagrined, he remembered, too, his manner of parting with Gitt. It was not that he had meant anything, he tried to tell himself. It was only that he had wanted change, that something which he could not explain had drawn him into the deep sahuaro deserts of the south, far on to California, and back by way of the lonely and desolate, but beautiful, Spanish padres' trail. But Gitt, Johnny thought almost with bitterness: Gitt had said nothing of leaving. He had said not a word about St. Louis and the Missouri. The Missouri! The very name made Johnny's flesh tingle. Missouri meant north, northern rivers and prairies, northern mountains and forests. Johnny shuddered, with a delicious, warm feel-

ing, and wanted to see Gitt again, to talk to him, renew friendship, and, above all, to apologize for his brusque words at Pagosa.

"You ain't told me about Gotchy and Tewe," Johnny reminded him.

Tabby had been waiting. "It was after you were gone, a long time," he said. "After we come back from Yampa river. We stayed at Little Medicine springs until snow, then we come here to Saguache, then Gotchy, he begin to say it is too cold here, too hard winds. So we go to Pagosa."

The Ute went on, speaking carefully: "I do not know what it was. Maybe we had too much good times, Juanito. There was much snow, but our lodges were warm and we had plenty meat. Everything was going all right. Then one day some Mexicans come from Taos to Pagosa. They say the Apaches make war in April, the Plant Moon. But we say no, we have heard that before, last year. We do not believe it. We have no war with the Jicarillas. We do not want their land. So, Juanito," Tabby lifted his hand in a gesture of shame. "Maybe we sleep too much. We do not send scouts. We do not do nothing. Then one day, like the Mexicans say, the Apaches come to Pagosa. There is a big fight. We have many killed. Gotch-Ear. Tewe. You knew them. But we kill many Apaches."

"And old Tom?" Johnny said, harshly. "He wasn't there?"

Tabby started, like an old man who fears being struck. "No, Juanito, no. Tomas was not there." The Ute's features sagged, his lips quivered, and a deeper sadness filled his eyes. "Maybe," he added, "Tomas, he would have said something. Maybe he would have said to send the scouts out. We would not have slept so much, if Tomas had been there. And you, Juanito, I am sorry. You, too, I think, would have said something."

There were other questions to be asked.

"You been away lately, Tabby? Since that fight at Pagosa, I mean. You seen anybody?"

"Si, Juanito." Tabby spoke with even deeper emphasis. "It was last year at this time. Maybe later, a little bit later. I had furs, and I went to Bent's Fort. Like Tomas and me one time, Juanito, in the big storm—when we left you. I saw somebody."

Johnny was listening quietly. "Was it Epps, Tabby?"

"No. Epps was gone that morning, Juanito. I heard you speak of him. That was all."

"Weatherby, too."

"Si, he was gone—and I did not see them good when we killed the Cheyennes. It was the other, Juanito. I do not remember his name. But you will remember. It was the horse soldier, in the blue uniform."

"Mackey!"

Pressing his rifle hard, with both hands, across his shaggy pony's neck, Johnny leaned far forward. Staring at his friend, he said:

"The roan? Was he ridin' the roan?"

"Si."

"God damn. I knowed that. But how was it, Tabby? Was it fat? Stout-lookin', and good?"

"No, Juanito. It was not that. Not like it was when we were at Bent's."

"Did you speak to Mackey? Did he remember you?"

"No. There were many people at the Fort. Many wagons. I saw him only once."

"And you didn't ask him nothin'? Where he'd come from?—where he was headed?"

"No, amigo." Tabby shook his head, solemn-faced. He said more stubbornly, "He did not know me. I did not speak to him, that other morning. And he would not have talked to me. He would have told me to go away, not to talk. You must understand that, Juanito."

Slowly, relaxing the pressure on his patient mount, Johnny sat back then, recognizing the justice of the Ute's words. Gazing at Blanca across San Luis space, he thought again of the pass trail, the Arkansas, Fontaine qui Bouille, and of the free, open way, down over prairie, to Big Timbers and Bent's. It was not many miles. Two hundred. Possibly three. With a strong horse under him—a mountain-fed horse used to rocks, quicksand fords, badger holes, and prairie-dog towns—a man could make it fast, not perhaps in one ride, unbroken by camps, but in two or three. For an instant Johnny was tempted. His shaggy pony was tough. He might kill it. He would kill it, on a ride such as that. But if Mackey were there, and the roan. . . .

Johnny gave a mocking laugh, grinned bitterly, and turned back to Tabby. He knew the length of plains trails, the way they criss-crossed, the habit they had, often-times, of fading out in the sage. And he knew one meaning of twelve months of time.

"Mackey ain't satisfied with just stealin'," he muttered. "He'll run the roan down. He'll ruin it, then he'll shoot it or leave it. But so help me, I'll find him. It's like old Tom said. I'll find him if it takes me ten years."

There was still another question. Johnny was not forced to ask it. As he kicked up his pony to follow the pack-train, Tabby ranged in haste alongside.

"Pepita," Tabby said, in a distressed tone. "She. . . . She believed you would not remember her, Juanito."

Johnny stopped. Without wanting to admit it even to himself, he had dreaded that part of his return. At Pagosa he had

left Pepita rudely, unfairly, without explanation. On the trail from El Pueblo de los Angeles he had wondered about her from time to time, asking himself whether she would seek him again, or whether, hating him suddenly, she would turn away and ignore him. But this—Tabby's words: "She did not think you would remember her, Juanito"—this spoke of freedom, of choice without hate or anger. It had been as Gitt predicted, a matter of interest. When that interest faded, he realized now, she as well as he had been quick to accept it.

"Is she here at Saguache?" Johnny said.

"Oh, si, si! She waited for you, Juanito," Tabby said simply. "She thought maybe you would come back from Taos and go to Yampa river. But you did not come back, so she—she could not find meat. She had to move to her people. Then she waited some more, and Tomas, he said maybe he would not see you again, he did not know, and she went to another's lodge. Her husband would stay here. He belonged here, and he is a fine man. He hunts good and gets plenty meat. But now you come," Tabby looked at Johnny with troubled eyes, "and it is hard to tell. She do not know what to do. Maybe, quien sabe, she come back to you and you stay a little while and then go away again, Juanito."

Johnny flushed, a hot, conspicuous scarlet. For a time he could only ride in silence, his head bent and his eyes following the sway of his saddlehorn. When at last he did force himself to look up, he said, in deep embarrassment:

"Sometimes a man'll do something he gets to be mighty sorry for, Tabby. It ain't that he'll do it on purpose. It's just that sometimes he can't see how things'll turn out, not even a little bit.

"You take me, for instance," he went on. "Three years ago I wasn't nothin' but a God damned hot-tempered kid, not a brain in my head. I never should of got Pepita mixed up in it, not in spite of Tom Gitt. She's a mighty good little gal, Pepita is. She'll work day and night, and keep the lodge up, and never complain. As for me," Johnny gave a short laugh. "I'm still a rollin' stone, Tabby, just as restless as I ever was. I reckon I'll always be on the move, goin' out to Californy, or back to St. Louis, or up along the Missouri somewheres. But you don't need to worry. If she's got a good man, that's all I'm interested in. If he'll get her plenty meat and stick with her, I'll be right glad to see it."

Half-an-hour later, Johnny took leave of his old friend Tabby and rode back along the trail, giving as his excuse the fact that he had not yet discussed the night's camping arrangements with Ewing. Cutting off to the left, however, as soon as the Ute chief had passed from view, he circled the Saguache

site and, putting his mount in among the cedars of a clay knob, found a look-out position above the western edge of the village.

It was from that point, in the late afternoon, that Johnny identified Pepita in the lane below him. She sat in front of a large and well-constructed lodge, fleshing a buckskin which she had stretched and pegged on clean ground near her meat-drying racks. Her figure was as plump as ever—more plump and squat, in fact, Johnny concluded—and her movements were exactly the same, slow, methodical, gentle, infinitely patient as she worked and watched the three Ute infants who played about her. The scene stunned Johnny: he sat transfixed among the cedars. It seemed to him as if no years had intervened, as if there had been no Spanish trails, no amazed, exultant view of the western ocean, no perfumed, frankly interested women in the plaza and taverns of El Pueblo de los Angeles. Time, at Saguache, had passed beyond meaning. Time, here, was Indian time, made only of drift, of red Indian drift and of the calls and camp murmurings that scattered naturally upon the winds. Pepita herself, somehow, was like this. Nothing, yet all: boundless, yet as limited as the creatures of the valley sage, she had worked and would work until, caught up by some wild mountain storm, she too would become a part of Saguache time.

Very quietly, after the passage of another hour, Johnny withdrew. Once or twice he had felt the impulse to go down to Pepita, to sit and talk with her as in earlier days, and to hold the little Ute girl who was his own. But he had not done this. It would not have been right. Pepita was happy, he thought, happier now than she could ever be with him. Let her go, he said to himself: let her have life in her way, the slow, simple, almost unchanging life of Saguache.

In a dark mood, he followed a tributary stream-course which took him to the pack-train camp. Already, animals had been relieved of their loads, watered, and staked out to graze; bedrolls had been laid out; saddles and equipment had been placed under the fragrant Rocky Mountain cedars, for shelter. Ewing was at one of the fires, cooking meat in a skillet.

He looked up as Johnny came in.

"Tom ain't at Saguache," Johnny told him. "He left about the same time we did. He's on the Missouri."

"What!" Ewing set down his skillet. "The old son-of-a-gun!" he breathed. "What's he doin' up there?"

"Lookin' around. Trappin', I guess. The funny thing is, he didn't say nothin' about it. Just said he might be gettin' ideas, that was all. But he didn't say nothin' about the Missouri."

"Did you tell him you was goin' to Californy, Johnny?" Ewing said gently.

"No, I guess not. I don't blame him none. Not after the way I done talked to him, and acted." Johnny unsaddled his pony, drew off the blanket, slipped on the hair-rope hobbles, and dropped the bridle with its heavy, greened Spanish bit. He added:

"Tabby told me something else. He was at Bent's last year. He seen Mackey."

"Mackey?"

"The soldier-feller. He's the one stole my roan horse."

"Oh. I remember you tellin' me about him. You and Tom. Was he headed this way?"

"Tabby didn't talk to him. Seen him—knew who he was—everything," Johnny said. "He was just there at Bent's. I don't know which way he went."

Ewing, nodding, hunched closer over his fire. In the gathering dark he was a massive figure, his face shadowed, indistinct. Meat in the skillet—venison fresh-shot—began to heat again, sputtering on the broad iron.

"It's a queer thing, Johnny," he commented. "Time don't mean nothin' here. Things go on for a long while without any change. Then—in a minute—it happens. Why, there ain't nobody can say. You got to wait, Johnny—wait the son-of-a-bitch out. He'll get into these mountains. They all do. And don't you feel bad about Tom. If you think you hold a loose rein, you ain't nothin' to him. He'll trap, and traipse around up north, then one day he'll get tired of it and hit for the del Norte. It's just the way of it, here in this country."

The San Luis moon was late in rising that night. Gradually, as he waited for it, Johnny felt his black mood die, his heart lightening, lifting, it seemed, toward the new mountain glow. Memories filled his mind, memories of Spanish trails and of the places and people whom he had found along them. In many ways, he realized there in the San Luis, near old Blanca Peak, the Spaniards had accomplished much in their southern country. Their missions were truly beautiful; their towns were interesting, brightly colored, and, in the evenings, lively, their women were different from Indian women, speaking quickly and expectantly in their pleasant language, taking more care in their dress, and giving frank invitation with their dark, questing eyes.

Johnny, suddenly, was content. Saguache, Big Medicine, the Little Medicine springs: these, he knew, except for visits that he would inevitably make, were places of the past, no more than milestones on his trail. Taos. With keen excitement, he began to think once more of Taos, recalling the great sage plateau, the mountains there, the old, strange Indian Pueblo and the adobes themselves, sprawled about their plaza.

Ewing was best acquainted in Taos. Tom Gitt would come there. Traders; trappers; perhaps, Johnny's eyes narrowed, a certain soldier sometime: men from the farthest regions of the West would seek a way there. Johnny stirred, as he thought. The November midnight was cold, hinting snow. Johnny rolled deep into his blankets, felt his body grow warm, saw Ewing's fire sink, and gave a final look at the moon. From Saguache their trail led south-by-southeast, between Blanca Peak and the Rio del Norte. It was a straight trail that led straight to Taos.

Taos

IN contrast to the desolate padres' trail and to the ragged, almost squalid Ute village at Saguache, Taos appeared big to Johnny, sprawling and filled with unpredictable movement, a true cross-point of the Frontier. Although the season for overland trade had ended, the Cimarron pass, Mora trail and other trails to the northeast having been swept by blizzards, hundreds of freighters and Rocky Mountain men had chosen to winter at the western terminus. Americans, British-Canadians, slow-footed French Canucks, Bent men, Mexican prospectors and sheepherders, and Indians from the pueblos and desert camps had found accommodation in town. On that first night, even, as the California pack-train straggled in, Johnny heard the sounds of their occupation: the shouts of horsemen, the laughter and excited shrilling of women, and the fast, swirling, smoking music of the border fandango.

Ewing's hut on the outskirts was greatly weathered, standing more than ever like a natural lump upon the plateau. Arriving in frosty moonlight which served to accentuate the roundness of corners and the sag of the door-frame and adjoining cedar corral, Ewing dismounted, saying: "Adobe's warm in the winter and cool in summer, but cloudbursts can sure as hell wreck it. I'll have to fix up." Light was showing, at the moment, through the Chimayo blanket which had been stretched across the solitary hut window. At Ewing's call there were exclamations and a flurry of footsteps, and, in the midst of chattered, almost incoherent Spanish, first greetings with Celestina were exchanged. Thereafter, for an hour, Johnny occupied himself with unrolling good packs and caring for the ponies which he had stabled in the brush-wood corral shed.

Satisfied, then, that Ewing's homecoming had been completed, he entered the hut and arranged his effects in the corner space allotted him.

Days that followed were days of relaxation for Johnny, during which he slept or helped Ewing with the task of repairing the hut, or rode about Taos as he had wandered in the time of his previous visit. Entire mornings and afternoons were whiled away on the plaza, on the north side where sunlight, striking porous adobe walls, stored up warmth in spite of windy, blustery weather. With Saguache dropping like a receding trail-point out of his mind, Johnny concentrated upon making the acquaintance of men from different Rocky Mountain regions and upon discovering certain familiar faces in the bright, rough, jostling crowd. Columbia and Snake river trappers, he found, were most talkative. Two had seen Gitt taking beaver up along Madison river, in the vicinity of the Three Tetons. Gitt would be long gone in the north, they predicted: there was no use waiting for Gitt. Other men—trappers out of the southern mountains and freighters who had shared times on the Santa Fe, Cherokee, and Texas trails—were less inclined to respond. None knew anything about a Cheyenne-Ute battle; none had seen a trapper named Epps or a crippled drifter named Weatherby; none knew a white-faced, immaculate cavalry officer called Mackey. After a week or more, Johnny gave up his efforts. Sensing the power of buckskin-clad Americans in Taos, and noting among Taos Mexicans the same kind of angry, flashing glance which he had noted in El Pueblo de los Angeles, Johnny turned to the one person who would know much and who, he felt, might be expected to talk freely: Ewing's wife, Celestina.

In times past, Johnny had paid but little attention to Celestina. Then she had appeared to be neither more nor less than the Mexican women he had encountered at Bent's Fort and at the dusty, primitive trappers' plaza in the Arkansas gap. Thin and flat-breasted, her body covered with a single coarse garment, her feet encased in old leather sandals, and her hair drawn tightly back and covered with a drab, black shawl, she had seemed hopelessly stupid and repressed, a strange partner indeed for a man like Block Ewing.

Now, however, Johnny began to be aware of qualities hidden not only by the simplicity of Celestina's dress but by her unobtrusive ways and plain obedience to the day-by-day demands of her husband. A woman of perhaps forty-five, slight of stature, she possessed nevertheless a wiry strength which to Johnny was a constant source of surprise. She was efficient. Ewing had only to make his wants known, and food was placed before him or clothing and equipment were laid out. In spite

of handicaps of every nature, she kept her hut, yard, and well-frame clean. She was a gardener. She knew the ways of woodsmen, handling the strange double-bitted ax with a dexterity that Johnny could scarcely match. But above and beyond all this, there were qualities in Celestina for which Johnny could find no expression, at least in the first days of his return, but which he could sense as surely as he had sensed others of a similar kind in Pepita, at Saguache. Celestina was not merely quiet, she was watchful. No movement in the hut escaped her; no word was spoken so low that it was not caught. Celestina's face was sunken and of greenish-olive hue; her hands were of translucent thinness, showing the whiteness of bone at their knuckles; and she carried herself with a queer, set, forward motion, as if some day she might fall naturally into the habit of using a stick. Had Johnny been more alert, Celestina, with her pallid, ascetic features and wasted but intense figure, would almost certainly have recalled to him the portraits of Spanish conquerors and religious zealots which he had seen, one time, in the church at Los Vientos.

After Ewing had drifted out one evening to a game of Spanish monte, Johnny straddled a chair, placed his chin in his hands, and said to Celestina:

"Quite a few changes in Taos, looks like, since Block and me left."

"Si, señor."

"Last time I come to see you, a couple of years ago, I said to myself some day I'd be back. I like it in Taos. And it sure looks like others do, too. There's lots of Americans here."

"Oh, si. Muchos americanos." Celestina had her back to Johnny and was working over the dishes. He did not see her eyes or the hard bitterness of her smile. "They come in all the time. There has been talk, in Santa Fe, about the americanos."

Johnny, apparently, saw nothing out of the way in this reference to the Spanish capital. "I been hangin' around the plaza the last few days," he went on, in his friendly manner. "Tryin' to spot some fellers I know. Old Tom Gitt, he's still on the Missouri, I expect. But there's others maybe you'd know something about. Trappers named Epps and Weatherby. Epps is little, pint-size. Weatherby's a big, black-haired, ugly feller, got a bad knee. And then there's a soldier-feller named Mackey."

"Soldados?" Celestina turned sharply. For an instant fire burned in her eyes, the light of alarm and hatred, her face became animated, and she drew breath rapidly. Then all signs of emotion died, and she said: "I have not seen los soldados. They are not supposed to come here, los soldados americanos."

Johnny continued to straddle his chair comfortably, only

the cooling of his own eyes showing that, in a flash, he had noted her alarm and had guessed, perhaps, the thoughts that lay deep in her mind.

"No, sure not," he said soothingly. "I ain't got any use for soldiers, myself. I had one of 'em steal my best horse. That was Mackey, back in '36. That's why I asked you. I'm goin' to give Mackey the same chance he give me. None a-tall. When I run into him, I'm goin' to kill him."

Johnny uttered his last sentence with such flat certainty that Celestina started, her eyes dilating slightly, and took a step toward him. Her cheeks were waxen in that moment, tight-stretched, reminding Johnny of the rawhide of an Indian drum.

"Los soldados," she said, in a strained whisper. "You think they will come?"

"I ain't said nothin' about that," Johnny replied, with a shrewd look. "Only, I notice there's more Mexican soldiers in Taos than there was."

Celestina accepted this. "Si," she said. "They are sending many more patrols to the northeast, along the trails. They come back to Taos and then go to Santa Fe by the del Norte." She washed the last of her dishes, carefully brushed her raised adobe hearth, and turned to Johnny once more. "If there are only the trappers," she told him, "it will be all right. Sometimes the trappers bring trouble. They get drunk and want to fight and then they hurt somebody. But that is no matter. Los mexicanos, they do the same thing. Everybody likes the trappers: they bring much money and they are easy to understand. But the soldiers . . ." She paused. "I do not know. You saw soldiers, Juanito, in California? Mexican soldiers?"

Johnny delayed his response. She was afraid, he told himself, scared out of her wits, but she would never admit it. She was thinking, grasping at the last hope that from that old, far Spanish country of California would come the Mexican force needed to protect the Rio del Norte. She was wiser than most, Johnny concluded, feeling more than seeing her way, but she had no idea of the rocks, so to speak, in her trail. How could she guess the dryness and heat and everlasting sun and dust of the desert? he asked himself. How could she know how easy it would be to cut off a force and destroy it, close to the del Norte, after it had been starved and burned down in the main cactus stretches?

"Yeah," he said finally, "I seen quite a few soldiers in Californy. Mexican soldiers."

"Ah!"

"I seen lots of other people there, too," Johnny added, deliberately. "British and Russians. And lots of Americans."

"British?" Celestina repeated. "Russians?"

"Sure. They're all up and down the coast. Sailin' around, lookin' to see what's goin' to happen. Except," Johnny smiled faintly, "they ain't goin' to get any place. Not even if they don't know it. There's others'll see about that."

A natural pause occurred. Celestina busied herself about the Indian corner fireplace, bending low so that the expression on her sharp, triangular face was once more concealed. Johnny, on the other hand, got up and moved about the hut freely, stretching his legs and paying little attention to his companion's activities. He was surprised, not to say astonished, at his own bluntness and at the manner in which his thoughts had seemed to leap ahead, inevitably, to a particular conclusion. After some minutes he began to regret certain statements and cursed himself secretly for having revealed too much. He reverted, then, to other days and other experiences. Remembering old Juan Gutierrez at Saguache, and realizing that he had been unable to trace the hobbling, friendly anciano in Taos, he said:

"Celestina, there's another feller I been lookin' for, in fact, two. I met 'em up at Saguache a few years ago. There was a big party come through from Taos, on the way to Little Medicine springs, and I got to talkin' to 'em. I've always wanted to see 'em since then, but I ain't had no luck. Do you know an old Mexican named Juan Gutierrez, and a ranchero named Felipe Montoya?"

Celestina confronted Johnny. Blood seemed to have drained absolutely from her cheeks. Her lips were parted and her eyes were remote, deeply sunken but gleaming with a steady light. She stood woodenly, flat, dried, angular, without the slightest pretense of feminine grace, appearing to Johnny at last like the carved images of the santos, lifeless and yet expressive of some secret, vibrant power, which he had seen on southern trails and in every Mexican hut.

"You have known Juan Gutierrez?" she said.

Johnny shivered. Her voice was strange, like a drifting, chill wind.

"Why, sure!" He spoke heartily, but clutched his chair. "I done told you, Celestina. I used to talk to him at Saguache. Every day, a long time."

"You have asked about him in Taos?"

"Sure. He told me lots of things about this country, about the Indians, and old Blanca peak, and such. I want to see him. I like him. I want him to tell me some more."

"And nobody has spoken to you about him? Not, perhaps," Celestina said slowly, "the priest?"

Johnny was beginning to show irritation. "That's what I'm

tryin' to get across to you," he reminded her. "Otherwise I wouldn't be askin' you, would I? And I don't know any priest."

A smile moved over Celestina's lips, and disappeared. She seemed passive now but triumphant, regarding Johnny with less concerned eyes.

"It was dangerous, muy peligroso," she said, "for you to ask about Juan Gutierrez. If you have not found him, it would be wise for you to forget him, señor. Already, they—certain people—may be watching you."

Johnny stared "What?"

"Si, señor. Juan Gutierrez is an old man. He is good. He lives in the desert, with his sheep. He does not come often to Taos, not once in many years. But people wait for him and he is much beloved."

"Ha! Not from what I seen at Saguache. Felipe Montoya don't love him too much."

It was as if Johnny had struck Celestina in the face. She staggered a little, and her body slumped. Then, with an abruptness that sent Johnny springing away frim his chair, she spat:

"Felipe! Que diablo es! He is the Devil himself, Felipe Montoya!"

"Are you tellin' me?" Johnny observed her coldly. "I seen what he done. He quirted old Juan. In the eyes. Right in the eyes. He called me Tejano. He was goin' to quirt me. Only . . . he didn't."

"Ah! Pobre mio. Pobre mio," Celestina whispered.

Johnny frowned. "Didn't you know?"

"I had heard. Si." She spoke hopelessly. "There were others. The priest, he came here one day. He was terribly angry. He said that God Himself would punish Felipe. There is no thing worse than jealousy, he said. I could not believe. But . . ." Celestina hesitated, then, stepping impulsively to Johnny's side, took his arm. "It is true, señor. Felipe would call you Tejano. He has killed many men—his own men. He would kill you. That is why it is dangerous for you, por todos los americanos, in Taos. You must not ask questions. You must not speak of Juan Gutierrez."

"I still don't see it." Johnny stood near the hut dor. "I told you, I like the old man. We had good talks."

Celestina shook her head. "I should not warn you. You, and many americanos like you, we do not know what you think. But believe me, señor. There are people here. You are alone: you have no one to help you. Only mi esposo, Block, and, quien sabe, he may not always be here. . . ."

"What you mean?" Johnny challenged.

"He may be trapping, señor. Or dead. One cannot tell. No," Celestina said. "You are young, Juanito. This is not your

country. You should go away. North to Tomas. Go far away, muy lejos, from Taos and the Rio del Norte."

Her words had a single effect upon Johnny. He became more deeply watchful.

"You ain't goin' to tell me where I can find Juan Gutierrez?" he reiterated. "Or Felipe Montoya?"

"It would be unwise, señor."

"Even if I just said hello? Far as old Juan's concerned, anyhow?" Celestina shrugged, and Johnny added: "What if I don't do like you say, Celestina? Clear out and get clean away?"

"That is your affair, señor." She spoke quietly and without great interest. "Already, perhaps, I have told you too much."

"From that," Johnny said, "you think they'll run us out one of these days."

Celestina made no reply, and Johnny looked at her and accepted her silence as proof of her thoughts. "Well," he remarked, with a final show of disgust. "I don't understand it. A feller comes down here, peaceable-like, and wants to locate a friend, and he hits a stone wall. If I'd ever done anything—raised a ruckus, or throwed lead at somebody—it would be different. But this way—I'll put it to you straight, Celestina. I ain't leavin' Taos. Not by a long shot. I've got a little stake now, out of this Californy deal, and it might be I'll even settle down here, get me some land and stock and go to ranchin'. Look at the Bents and them boys. There ain't any reason why I can't do the same. And there's just one other thing to remember." Johnny moved to the hut fireplace, in which fresh cedar knots were crackling. He talked very slowly and distinctly, certain that his words would find their way to others besides Celestina. "I'm not the one to ask trouble. I'm the last, in fact, to do that. But sure as hell, I ain't the one to back up."

Johnny wandered late that night, through Taos. Armed with his pistol and a knife resting loose in the sheath, he walked aimlessly down dark midnight lanes, circled the plaza, and ventured even into the open country toward the Pueblo. It was a cold January night, radiant with twinkling, friendly stars and clouds that shone translucently, like shell fragments, in moonlight cascading over the mountains. He passed hut after hut, crossed acequias and glanced into cedar-skirted corrals, and, once, came upon the straight, coffin-like form of a church, desert morada which stood without windows or entranceway except for a narrow, iron-belted door beneath its spire and stark cross. Often he stopped, remaining very still in the lanes and looking about him. His wanderings, in a sense, were a challenge. He thought again of California and of the long Spanish trails he had ridden; of American trappers and traders temporarily thronging Taos plaza; of Juan Gutierrez and

Felipe Montoya; of Taos itself; and of the intense, secretive, vaguely mocking Mexican woman with whom he had spoken. He seemed to be waiting, calmly, with a profound and unshatterable clarity of mind, for the answer that must come, some time, from the night and the Mexican town.

Johnny slept lightly, his weapons close at hand. Before dawn he became restless and began to dream, seeing first a line of Texas riflemen advancing across the eastern mesquite, then turning to see a great Pacific wave, such as he had watched on a California beach, sweeping in from the deserts of the west. As these lines converged, threatening, it appeared, to meet upon the Taos plateau, he grew panicky. He dreamed that he was caught, thrown down, that he was suffocating. His cry, breaking like a wild warning upon the hut, brought Block Ewing full up, a huge, redheaded, tousled, half-naked American ready for battle.

"What the hell's the matter, Johnny?" Block asked.

"Nothin'," Johnny answered. "I was just dreamin', I reckon."

The two men exchanged long stares, and, seeming to understand each other, said no more.

Time passed at Taos on eagles' wings. There were periods of quiet, like the deep, still-running stretches of a mountain river, and there were periods of noise and turbulence, like waters frothing through a mountain gorge.

As Johnny had found, it was in late spring that Taos was at its best. By then the white solemnity of Easter, with its bell clamorings, Penitente whisperings, flagellante columns and desert crucifixions, had been relieved; plateau snow had largely melted; winds were warm and trees were Spanish-sweet with blossoms. Upon the arrival of the first great wagons, Taos huts emptied. Missourians, Arkansawyers, Texans, men from Bent's, St. Vrain's, and 'Dobe Fort: all tossed down trunks, found clean shirts and shiny boots, and paired with señoritas. Red, white, and black, skirts swirled to plaza music. Taos lightning flowed. Full laughter mingled with night stars and dust, and times and trade were good—better, some would say, than autumn rendezvous.

Caught in the flow, Johnny forgot his plans to settle down. The rumble and creak of the wagons, the cracking of bullwhips on the clean, thin air, the long-gaited, hard-talking whackers and the out-riders who rode as well as mountain frontiersmen, all spoke of new trails. Johnny answered, throwing funds into trading ventures. Taos became for him not home but headquarters, a place which he saw as infrequently, almost, as did Tom Gitt. He took trails westward beyond the Jemez range, into Navajo canyons where he traded for blankets

and silver-work. He went south, down the great central trail through Santa Fe to El Paso del Norte, and on, sometimes alone, into the Chihuahua desert. He was a man set apart, in that southern country. He was nick-named Big John. His quiet ways, his strength and skill with weapons, his friendliness and knowledge of the Spanish language drew men to him there, and he passed, seemingly immune, among those who spoke with bitterness of Texas encroachment, border clashes along the lower del Norte, and of the open probability of war.

To eastward, Johnny, riding alone or in train with the persistent, hard-working Ewing, went almost as far, passing last ridges and following swirling rivers into caprock plains canyons. He saw old Mora, isolated, beautiful, in its high valley in the Sangre de Cristos. He visited Las Vegas plaza on the mountains' eastern edge, trail point, defense bastion, trading center on the deep-rutted road leading southwestward to Santa Fe and northeastward, beyond Cimarron butte-and-cone country, to Bent's and the Missouri posts. He went even farther out, on trading ventures close to old 'Dobe Fort on Canadian river. Often he entered Kiowa and slender, painted Comanche lodges, sitting watchfully among scalp-locked warriors, in dead stillness, while the Taos trader struck his bargains for buffalo robes. But it was a country, on the whole, that he did not like. Recollections of it were too fresh. He remembered too sharply a jornada ride, alkali dryness, thirst, and a red, shifting terror by day and night. He was glad, that particular spring, when Ewing gave the word to turn back, trailing swiftly toward the blue, watered, still less hostile mountains of the Mexicans.

Later, as another autumn season was fading into the chill grayness of winter, Johnny found himself at a Big Timbers camp on the Arkansas, some miles above Bent's. It was a small camp, composed of a few lodges of Cheyennes and Arapahoes, a party of Mexican teamsters who, for reasons of their own, preferred to winter on the southern prairie river, and of trappers who, as the coldest season deepened, would spend more and more of their time within the high, cactus-spiked walls of Bent's adobe post. Certainly, to Johnny, the Big Timbers camp was not a place in which to expect important news from any quarter. Yet, it was here that he picked up the first reliable hint of events on the northwest Missouri.

An old trapper, golden-tanned by a sun less harsh than that of the southwestern desert, had seen Tom Gitt. Not on the upper Missouri, the trapper said. In St. Louie—in a waterfront tavern, not many days after a big party had come in from the Mandan country and beyond. Gitt had been friendly, the trapper went on, tall and thin, yes, but in good health, not a Blackfoot arrow-scratch on him, and laughing and talking twin

streaks. Fur had been rich on Missouri headwaters: the party, forced to sell at low prices, had made a good thing even so. Gitt, hearing that the trapper would be heading out on the Santa Fe Trail, had asked about a young fellow named Johnny Christmas. Where he had got to; what he was doing. Whether he had ever found certain men he was looking for. And Gitt had sent a message—a message to Christmas or to a trader named Ewing, at Taos. One more long haul: there would be one more trip to the Three Forks country, one more full season of beaver. Then, south. Down the great plains river of the north; selling out on the fading St. Louis market; wagons and freighter parties; Bent's; and, at long last, Raton and Cimarron canyon, full southwest, the old trapper's eyes suddenly glinted, to the Rio del Norte—and trouble.

Johnny listened to the trapper's talk, and smiled. He could see Gitt in that waterfront tavern, slouching over the shiny wood, resting a moccasined foot on a brass rail, and having his whisky. He could hear his voice rambling along, that same dry voice, slow, diffident, a little bit humorous, spinning its stories. They would be good stories, too, Johnny thought, when they were told again, at some later date, on the Rio del Norte. Stories as rich in their way as northwestern fur, full of warmth, full of color, yet pine-tree tall, and as rank as ripe meat with Gitt's special lies. Leaving the Big Timbers camp soon afterwards, Johnny rode west along the main trail. He no longer felt restless, hurried, but kept a leisurely pace. He paid not the slightest attention to cold, or clouds threatening storm, or to the rumors, moving like buzzard-wing shadows across the big land, that carried in them always heavier, always darker warnings of crisis on the southern frontier. Johnny was happy, his heart feather-light. He went straight down the great Spanish and American track, in the open. And often he chuckled and laughed aloud, striking his saddlehorn hard with his palm, as he traveled.

One December, then—it was in the final days of the year 1845—Johnny received the word for which he had waited. For several months he had been on the lower Spanish river, at the ancient ford and trail-crossing called El Paso del Norte. In that more southern country he had made observations which, bringing to mind days preceding the Texas outbreak and strange, meaningful phrases which he had heard from Los Vientos to the California mission, had strongly influenced his actions. Too many soldiers—Mexican soldiers, well-equipped, well-fed, and hard of face—were pouring northward out of the cactus deserts. Santa Fe, likewise, where he had remained for a time unobtrusively watching, had undergone immense change, as soldiers and supply trains arrived from more secure strong-

holds, couriers came and went in ever-increasing numbers at the old Governors' Palace, priests showed greater activity in their main church and smaller, outlying churches, and as the people themselves—the secretive, almost furtive peons of the streets—began to regard lone Americans with more than casual interest. By that December, Johnny, hoping to the last for continuing trade with the south, had seen all that he needed. In full night he had slipped a few articles into his blanket-roll, saddled his pony, and, quietly, had left the del Norte capital for remoter benchlands and mountains.

There was snow in the air, fine, driving, wet flakes that skittered on an uneasy wind, as Johnny rode into Taos some thirty hours afterwards. Opening her hut door, Celestina, a black, long-fringed shawl drawn tight across her bosom, stood in the lamp-glow which cast a square frame, deeply yellow and bright, about pony and rider. Although she recognized Johnny, as he knew by the abrupt toss of her head, she did not speak first. Nor did she invite him to come in.

"Block here?" Johnny asked, after a moment.

"No."

"Where is he?"

"He rode to the east. Him and that other one that came with you, the first time. The thin one."

Johnny tensed, and a shudder of repressed excitement ran through him.

"Tom Gitt?"

"Si. Tomas."

Johnny disliked her sullenness. He spoke almost harshly:

"When'd he come in, Celestina?"

"It was a week ago. Not more."

"I done asked you once. Where'd they go?"

"I think to the Middle Spring on the Cimarron. But I do not know, from there."

"Did they say when they'd be back?"

"Si." Her voice was edged, mocking him again. "At Easter. Maybe before. Maybe after. When they come back."

Johnny picked up his reins. He was remembering, thinking many things.

"Well. . . ." he said, cryptically. "Thanks, Celestina."

She had begun to look past him, into the night. At his words she turned, revealing the breadth and intricate, graceful designs of the shawl which swept down her back. Without speaking further, she withdrew, shutting the hut door in his face.

It was after this sometime—beyond New Year's 1846—that a certain incident took place, setting flint-sparks to other incidents in Taos and along the Rio del Norte. As day after day went by, leading up to that incident, Johnny had remained

quietly in Taos, waiting. Often he had ridden out over the plateau or into the nearby mountains, to hunt and pass the time away. On occasion, usually when they encountered each other in Taos plaza, he had talked again, guardedly, with Celestina, who seemed to watch his every movement with increasingly jealous and fanatical eyes. Once, too, at sunset, as he jogged aimlessly along the southern lanes of Taos, he was sure that he had seen a familiar figure, that of the old Mexican Juan Gutierrez, entering the windowless church, or morada, not far from Ewing's. Starting up, Johnny had hurried to the morada, called, and had sat his horse impatiently, only to be turned back by a hard and puzzling silence. Nor had there been a second opportunity, in that twilight hour, to speak to the anciano last met so many years before, at Saguache.

On the evening particularly in question—February 21st—arrangements for one of the Taos winter fandangoes were completed. Throughout the day a pleasurable tingle of excitement had been evident in the tiendas and larger ranch supply houses where the plateau people congregated. Even Johnny, stranger to such functions but bored with sitting and waiting, had indulged in certain preparations, exchanging buckskins for fresh St. Louis trousers and a blue muslin shirt, shining a pair of excellent Chihuahua boots, and, laughingly, trimming his sideburns and beard.

Drifting over to the baile about nine o'clock, Johnny found the hall, actually the living-room of one of the more extensive private dwellings in Taos, bright with candles set in beaten silver stands, the guitar players flushed with Taos liquor and already strumming away, and the dancers—Mexicans and a few scattered, wary Americans—mixing, so far, good-naturedly. Ignoring plainly eager señoritas in paint and powder, short skirts, and low-cut blouses beneath which they wore nothing, Johnny waited for the music to stop, then edged down the side-lane to a group of older, smiling Mexicans. The whispers and sly feminine laughter that followed him, in that instant, were of little conseqeunce to him. He had come armed with pistol and knife, and was not to be hurried. This, after all, he reminded himself, was Mexican doings. He knew few people there, and it was a trifle hard to predict how such affairs would turn out.

The older Mexicans were standing near a small, brass-bound cask of wine from which they seemed constantly to be refilling their glasses. One of them, the host, a short-barreled man of fifty, well dressed in black trousers, velvet waist-coat, and broad, sweeping red sash, greeted Johnny courteously but with a certain reserve.

"Buenas noches, señor."

"Buenas noches, señores," Johnny said, with equal gravity. "We are pleased to see you. Will you have wine?"

"Gracias," Johnny said. "I don't mind if I do."

They stood together for a time in silence, while the wine was being drawn. Johnny was thinking that, although he had never met and talked with his companions, he had seen each of them before. They were tradesmen of local rancheros, the host especially being prominent in the town.

"You have been staying the winter, señor?" the host asked.

"No, not exactly. I come in about a month ago. From Chihuahua."

"Ah! Chihuahua!" The Mexican tipped his head to one side, in a shrewd way. "There is much activity there, I suppose."

"Yeah, quite a bit. I been thinkin' about buyin' some horses and puttin' 'em on northern grass, maybe in the San Luis. Seems like there might be some good tradin' when the trains commence to come in."

"Sí!" The Mexican's answer was genuinely approving. "That is a very excellent idea. In fact, I have done that myself. You were perhaps in Texas, also, señor?"

Johnny smiled to himself. Remembering Celestina's cautious probing, he said: "No, I didn't get into Texas much. Didn't have any business there. Besides, I like Taos and the mountains. They can fight all they want to about that southern country." Johnny laughed pleasantly, looked innocent, and was more deeply amused to note his host's disconcerted expression.

The music had started again, fast, complicated, full of the wildness and strange, haunting harmonies of the Spanish desert country. The walls were obscured now by Mexicans who stood shoulder to shoulder, laughing, talking, and watching each other with eyes that sparkled with particular brightness in the candle glow. It was growing warm in the long, low-ceilinged room, heavy with women's perfume and the smell of wine and whisky, smoky, sensuous in half-dark corners, a room tight-closed and intimate, in whose atmosphere dancers soon would give themselves without thought to the hot and blood-thickening rhythms of the instruments.

"You are not dancing, señor?" Johnny's host asked.

"Well. . . ." Johnny swept the Mexican women with his glance. "I ain't an expert at Spanish-style. But I might as well try."

He picked a partner who was tall enough, led her out, and caught the flow of the music. She was quick and feather-light, whirling about him, pressing against him and then darting away, and always holding his hand in a possessive, meaningful grip. Through the smoke she smiled at him, showing

perfect teeth, and tossed her head. When a pomaded Mexican attempted to interfere, it was she, not Johnny, who spoke wrathfully, in sibilant Spanish, and sent the intruder back to the wall. High-rouged, loosely and suggestively clothed she looked at Johnny with eyes that challenged. She would go out with him, Johnny thought, anywhere, at a word, under the stars. But he was not ready. He liked the music and the crowd, and other women. He changed partners often, swinging each with rough good-nature and shaking the floor with his dancing.

Sometime after ten o'clock, there was an unexpected scraping of feet among the dance spectators, murmurs arose, and a commotion occurred at the room entrance. Into the candle glow stepped a hatchet-nosed woman of forty, obviously a trusted servant, who stared with practiced sharpness at the guests. After a moment, when all was judged to be well, a señorita of twenty appeared, partially hiding her oval, even-featured countenance behind a black mantilla and an ornate, finely wrought fan. At once the music ceased and the Mexican host, astonished, hurried to greet this newest arrival. Bowing low, he kissed the señorita's hand and spoke words which Johnny could not hear but which were plainly flattering, for the señorita smiled with hard brilliance, spoke in her turn, and looked about her with a kind of cool, aloof pleasure.

Standing back, thumbs hooked in belt and his right leg propped against the wall, Johnny studied the scene. Tamping his pipe, he turned it over a candle-flame and, lighting it, drew on it deeply. He was a little excited; his heart was beating fast. He had ridden every Taos lane, he was telling himself, passed by every adobe, spent hour after hour on Taos plaza—and yet, he had never encountered her. She was beautiful, not in the richly-colored, half-Indian way of Taos women, but it the clearer, pure-blooded way of women he had met in Chihuahua and in the far California pueblos. Quite tall, slender and firm of body, she moved with easy certainty, slowly, with the grace of the trained horsewoman. She was less garishly rouged. less heavily powdered than the Taos señoritas. Her clothes were of finer quality, her hair, parted and drawn back into comb and mantilla, more carefully tended. Johnny wondered what had brought her to Taos, to a fandango; where she had come from; and what place—surely, he thought, it must be Santa Fe, or Albuquerque, or El Paso del Norte—she habitually called home.

Letting smoke veil his eyes, Johnny turned his attention to the Mexican men in the room. Their attitude had changed. Many had stepped to the wall and were standing sullenly, as if in fear; on the faces of two or three, open hate was ex-

pressed. A few, however, seemed to feel increased excitement. The host clapped his hands and called out in a new, vicious tone, and the guitar players struck into a waltz. Again the host clapped his hands, staring in fury at those who appeared hesitant, and señoritas, taking partners, moved onto the floor. Mexicans who danced with the guest of honor, Johnny noted, were men of the greatest wealth and highest social position in Taos. Their manners, suddenly, had become stiff. Each bowed as low as his host and danced decorously, without the easy, free spirit of earlier hours. They were careful not to hold the señorita too close, most solicitous not to collide with her high-heeled, fragile shoes. They smiled, constantly and smugly; they strutted; they were by turns pompous, arrogant, and obsequious to a degree that left Johnny disgusted.

What occurred then did so with such quietness that dancers closest at hand were not disturbed. Acting on impulse alone, for reason would have warned him, Johnny sauntered over to the señorita and, in a manner too direct, addressed her and attempted to engage in conversation. At once the host—that same Mexican, Johnny thought vaguely, who had given him wine—appeared beside him. No word was spoken. Two other Mexicans appeared; his arms were pinioned, firmly but unobtrusively; and he was propelled through the door.

The Taos night, with its cold air and crystalline, cold-looking stars, cleared Johnny's mind of the wine fumes. Shaking off his companions, he said in anger:

"Look here, you, what the hell's the idea?"

The host replied flatly: "It would be wise for you to go away, señor. It is late. You should, I think, sleep."

"To hell with that," Johnny said. "Nobody's tellin' me what to do. I just wanted to talk to her."

"You will not go, señor?"

"Mister, that ain't the way you talked earlier."

The Mexican shrugged. "You may as well know it, señor. We do not like you. We do not like Americans. We want you to go."

"And if I don't?"

Johnny felt a sting in his back, like a thistle-sting. As he turned, the knife-point went deeper and a pistol-butt struck him. He staggered and was struck again, more squarely, fist-blows rained upon him, and he was kicked. They pushed him, then, half-holding him erect, away from the house to a place somewhere along an acequia. There still other Mexicans swarmed in at him, and Johnny fought them, raging. He caught a Mexican, cracked skulls, bit through an ear, gouged, smashed his teeth, and hugged him with such power that the man's ribs cracked and he fell away, shrieking. Johnny fought

in one spot, taking toll of all who came within reach, until they smothered him, silently, unmercifully, and he sank down and night blackness, covering the last of the star-gleams, closed in around him.

Before dawn it grew very cold on the Taos plateau. Although there was no snow, a heavy frost whitened the sage-miles. Cottonwoods cracked in it, grass curled brittle in it, and the ground hardened, resounding like metal under the hoofs of burro wood-trains that were making their early way to the cedar stands.

Johnny was unconscious for hours. When at last he stirred and opened his eyes, sun was on the eastern mountains. Colors of the Taos morning were those of the desert heart, clay-blues and chalk-whites, smoke-grays, sky-greens and sky-pinks, and, on the peak tips, the red of Indian paint.

The earth about Johnny seemed very steady. He continued to lie upon it, doubled up, drawing strength from it. Afar off, in some Taos pasture, he heard the hoarse, moody saw of a burro. He pictured the animal, gray, shaggy, big-eared, with Christ's everlasting cross on his back, greeting the sunlight and morning. Closer by, there was the noise of water running, slyly, as if in evasion of the night-chill and frost. Johnny remembered. It was acequia water: they had taken him to an acequia madre. He moved, and his body was like a dried stick. His tongue was furry, his mouth clogged and foul-tasting. Cursing the pains that shot through him, he crawled to the acequia, broke its ice-shield with one blow, laved his hands, carried the delicious coldness to his lips, and sucked deep. Slowly, then, lying on his stomach, he washed his face, washed away the blood and matted filth, softened his beard, and cleared his nose. After that, he sat up. He clenched and unclenched his fists, felt ribs, shoulders, and elbows, rubbed knees and shins, and worked the muscles at the back of his neck. The Mexicans had beaten him, terribly. He bore knife-cuts, scratches, and bruises from innumerable thrusts. Yet, he was all right, he whispered to himself: no bones had been crushed. When at last he stood up, brushing his clothes, he was once more alert, his face clean, his eyes bleak and murderous.

Johnny did not go to Ewing's through Taos. He went a mile south into the sage, circled west near the old adobe settlement of Ranchos, and came back to acequia willows two hundred yards from the hut. There he lay, watching, as he had lain at Los Vientos and on a ridge in the Grand river high country, above a Ute camp. He had no wish to be seen. Nor did he wish to talk. Ewing would still be at Middle Spring on the Cimarron, trading with Kiowas. Celestina—hut-smoke, Johnny

thought with cold enmity, told that Celestina was in. If he came to her, telling his story, she would mock him. She would smile, laugh behind his back, and wish in her heart that they had killed him. No. Times were too ripe. Even Block had been changing, noticing things about Celestina, Johnny waited until mid-morning, saw her go out toward the plaza, and only then entered the hut. His rifle, buckskins, pack outfit, ponies: all were as he had left them. All except his knife and cap-and-ball pistol. Those he had carried, and they had been taken, ripped off in the fight. Johnny thought with strange calmness of that. He mounted, took a Taos side-lane, struck the main San Luis trail beyond the adobes, and kept straight on in case he were being observed. It was an hour later—close to noon, seven to ten miles north of Taos—that he swung left on the plateau and dropped from sight, abruptly, in the gorge of the Rio del Norte.

There began for Johnny then, in that month of February, 1846, a life of almost complete solitude on the frontier. He did not object to it; in fact, he welcomed it. His visit to the baile, the quick, ruthless change in the very men who had offered him wine, and the night encounter had done more than clear Johnny's mind. Until that midnight he had never quite been able to believe Gitt's warnings, or Ewing's indirect comments, or what he had heard among trappers in the mountain country. But now he believed. Fandango in Taos had taught him what he should have learned in Texas, at Bent's, and later at Saguache and in California. It had taught him, beyond a shadow of doubt, that a country itself could be rich, watered, and pleasant to look at—and still be enemy country.

Enemy country. Johnny began to look at Taos in this way. It was not the plateau, the great valleys to south and north, or the mountains leading toward Cimarron river and the Plains. These things he liked, and would always like—and come back to. It was the Taos people who had tricked and betrayed him, he told himself. As he turned this fact over in his mind, his rage deepened. Striking into the del Norte gorge, he placed his camp among black lava rocks, high up, on a bench protected by a cliff bulge and by a long, clear drop to the river. There he hid out, waiting for friends. He was careful never to approach his camp from the same direction twice-running. He made small fires, tied his ponies close, used water sparingly, and was doubly cautious in hunting. Remembering other affairs of the night, he sank back into harsh mountain habits, living alone like a raider, and moving secretively through hostile terrain.

Johnny needed a knife. Mexicans having taken his, he went one night to a Mexican hut, a toll station at the east-bank

ramp of a del Norte ferry. Burro trains had stopped at the place that evening: there was easy talk in the hut, with laughter and the cat-wail of a fiddle. Johnny waited until a Mexican came, half-drunk, toward the corrals. A sudden blow, a knife thrust with the Mexican's own knife, a river-chuckle as the Mexican slid head-first into the currents, and there was no further disturbance. The fiddle continued its scratching, and laughter rose, as pleasant as ever, in the candlelit hut.

Johnny lay by for two weeks, then turned his attention to Taos. All winter Spanish-bred horses had grazed on the outskirts. Johnny was good with horses: he knew how to slip into a bunch, in the ghostliest moonlight, without causing a nicker. He knew how to come up close, stroke a sleek neck, grasp an ear, move an arm under the throat, and put a tie-rope over. Johnny's Ute ponies were scraggly, one in particular getting too old. He made excellent trades in Taos pastures.

There were other matters to occupy him. Johnny needed a Mexican hat, jacket, and buckskins with spangles. These he got from a Mexican whom he left in the road. In his quiet way, Johnny spent much time after that in Taos. He developed the habit of watching for Celestina and of listening, at her window, to talk between her and the priest who came regularly from the morada to see her. He learned things on such evenings: Ewing was mentioned; once or twice Gitt's return was discussed; and certain thoughts of Johnny's own, regarding the trend of business, were confirmed. One night, too, Johnny lingered not far from the house of an acquaintance, his former Mexican host. When the Mexican returned from Taos plaza, at midnight, he was stopped and thrown down, and a pice of buckskin was knotted over his mouth. There was a walk, then, to an acequia madre. The second encounter was satisfactory to Johnny. He recovered his knife and cap-and-ball pistol, and left his host, stabbed in the throat, in the acequia.

It was at approximately this time that Johnny noted two changes in Taos. The first had to do with out-lying pastures. Armed guards were set to watch the pony herds. These guards were uneasy, taking much to pulque, huddling together around enormous fires, and firing their Spanish pieces without provocation into the darkness. In Taos itself, fewer people seemed to venture abroad after full night. There were rumors of other corpses found way-laid and mutilated, Indian-fashion, on the lonely plateau trails. Johnny smiled as he heard accounts of such incidents, at Celestina's window. There was open talk now between Celestina and the priest who visited her so regularly in Ewing's absence. Talk of war, of bringing in the soldiers from Santa Fe, Chihuahua, California, of bringing them from anywhere, so long as every cursed americano—americans like that

stupid, big, slow Johnny Christmas—was driven out or killed where he stood. Johnny, dressed in his ill-fitting Mexican clothes, limping a little and keeping his hat low, attempted to talk with a Mexican not far from Taos. The Mexican, an old, harmless wood-driver, took one look and screamed into his beard, and there was nothing but phantom-like dust on the road.

The second change was more subtle and seemed to affect the Taos country more widely. As March passed, Mexican orchards budded, covering plateau and canyon with the sweetness of blossoms. Often, on night wanderings through this sweetness, Johnny heard a strange sighing or crying, as of wing-flights or the distant passage of columns. In Taos and old Ranchos, in settlements like Embudo, Arroyo Hondo, and the mountain bastion of Mora, bells tolled. There was concerted movement on the roads, as Mexican families made pilgrimages to Taos by horse or cart, the great cottonwood-slab wheels creaking on their axles. It was the Lenten season, when an isolated people seemed to close its ranks, when Mexicans looked in upon themselves, judged themselves in the light of Christ's own teachings, and disturbed, engaged in rites of penitence.

Johnny was impressed by this change. The clear, measured calling of the bells, the constant traffic on roads, and the way in which the moradas stood, small, graceful, simply lined in blue or in the yellow of a desert moon, brought to Johnny remembrances of Texas days. There, before war had broken out, he had seen many processions winding through mesquite to the walled, gardened missions; there, he remembered, all had been silent, as if every man, instructed in the inevitable, were at peace. But here—here on the wild, gray, shaggy tableland of Taos—were people of a different nature. Their moaning at night, broken by the treble of wooden and turkey-bone flutes, swelled steadily with the time-flow toward Easter. Prowling the countryside, again like a stranger from some faraway land, coming closer as his curiosity increased, Johnny, more than once, heard the sighing and crying shift to shrill screams. At such times Johnny would stop, fascinated, his face showing wonder. He could feel the exaltation of these people, their heart-stirrings, their instinctive reaching out, in faith and need, for the answer forever withheld from all men. He could feel, too, the turbulence caused by a mixing of streams, the old, dark savagery of red man and white, the superstition and ignorance, the hope, fear, and hate, and the keen nearness to blood.

One late twilight—it was the Thursday before Easter Sunday—another flint-spark was set off in Taos. The hour could

not have been more quiet. Brightest flares of the sunset had faded, leaving only gray traces of sky, like a camp-smoke's last traces, over the del Norte gorge and peaks westward. Johnny, taking chances, had made his early way through the sage. He lay in acequia alders, between Ewing's hut and the cross-tipped morada.

Mexicans were coming to the little windowless church. They came slowly, in groups, drab-clothed, like sheep on the road. Their walk was a curious shuffle, trance-like, as if enjoined by some hidden power. They were like the Utes of the north, deep-buried in dreams, endlessly walking. Flat-bodied, wooden, dead-faced, they were as ascetic and rudely carved as the santos they worshiped.

After a time Johnny noticed a figure among them. There was a gesture, a flick of skirts, a sudden giving way of men at the morada door. He recognized the señorita with whom he had attempted to talk at the Taos baile; recognized the imperious carriage, her aloofness in the midst of others, and the obsequious, frightened reaction that had so disgusted him before. Johnny watched proceedings, after that, with renewed and cynical interest. He had by no means forgotten the señorita. On solitary plateau ramblings, and at his camp in the del Norte gorge, he had often recalled her first startled look, her hard, brilliant, questioning eyes, and the quick smile of contempt, mixed with amusement, with which she had seen him escorted away. He wondered whether she knew what had happened later that night. And he found himself pondering once more who she could be, where she lived, and why she, too, had come to this strange pre-Easter ceremony at the morada.

The señorita entered. Slowly, by twos and threes, Mexicans followed her. Johnny could see the light of candles within, playing upon straight walls. Once the priest—the black-robe, Utes would have called him, Johnny thought—came out and, standing straight, peered toward the thickest cluster of huts. Then he went back, and it was as if Taos with its lanes, cottonwood lines, and acequias had been left by itself on the plateau.

Hours passed. As Johnny had seen it so often before, the moon lifted over the black eastern ridge of mountains, drawing a soft, half-silvery glow from the hut-sides. After midnight sometime, the morada door was thrown open. Figures emerged, many making their way toward Taos huts, a few remaining close to the church. Presently, there was a tinkling of bridle bit-rings. Horses framed themselves against the candle-light. Amid low, murmuring talk, the señorita mounted with others, there was a single cry, "paz!" from the priest, and the travel party formed and moved out.

Johnny waited, listening to the steady, unhurried clop of

hoofs. His own pony was nearby, quiet at the acequia edge. When the party had become obscured in plateau dust, Johnny mounted and, keeping alders between Taos and himself, set the same slow-jogging, mile-eating pace.

The course was generally south, into the lower reach of the del Norte gorge. Except for the trail leading out to Santa Fe malpais, it was a region unknown to Johnny, filled with the thunder of inner canyon rapids, rock-jumbled, cactus-grown, and overshadowed by lava cliffs a thousand feet high. As he followed dust and then the uneven tracks of the party, Johnny grew wary, half-expecting ambush. Somewhere in the gorge depths a break occurred, showing blunt-faced mesas under the Sangre de Cristos, the trail swung southeastward, and Johnny again picked up the delicate feather of dust.

Well toward dawn—it was four o'clock, from the low-riding moon—Johnny saw a desert pocket ahead. Mesas stood like sentinel-points about it. Clay cones, scrub cedar patches, prairie dog colonies, and a stream tangled with wild grape broke its flat aspect. On approach ground there were old skulls, chips, and countless cow-tracks, indicating good range. Buildings of the rancho itself sprawled extensively at the upper edge of the pocket, their adobe walls, gardens, and out-lying sheds blending with chameleon-like perfection into the yellow-stone background.

From the shelter of cedars, Johnny saw the Mexican caval-cade arrive at the rancho's arched adobe gate, dismount, and gradually disperse. Common-sense told him then to leave the place, to back-trail to water in the main gorge, find a spot among rocks, hole up, and to ride north when another night came. But something held him there. It was not the rancho itself, hidden away, set like an old Spanish fort against un-scalable walls. Johnny had seen better ones many times in the south. It was rather a belief that he had, a feeling unspoken, deep-founded, that here he might find things for which he had sought. Like a Ute, with the intensity of a war-scout or a medicine man, Johnny studied details of the rancho and pocket, made certain that his horse was concealed and well-tied, and went forward on foot.

Johnny was afraid of dogs. Before barking had ceased at the patio, he had crossed the most dangerous space to a shed, a jacal of upright cottonwood logs and adobe, on a knoll. Slip-ping in through a door that sagged on its great Spanish-wrought hinges, Johnny went to the south wall, overlooking corrals and main buildings, sank down on old grass, and cut a hole in the chinking. He was out of breath from his run, hurried, engrossed in forcing the cut. Not for a quarter-hour did he realize that someone was with him in the jacal.

A cough made Johnny whirl, leveling his weapon. For an instant he stood, panicky, expecting the shock of a ball. Then the coughing began again, there was a movement in a hut corner, and Johnny saw a prone figure. A final moment passed, as Johnny decided. Swiftly crossing the floor, he knelt beside the figure, examined the face, and felt his fear vanish. In dawn-light from the door, blood-streaks, bruises, and quirt-welts were plain. Johnny sat back, numbly, his heart like a rock. There was no possible danger. The man was sick, feverish, limp from many beatings. More that that, he was a friend, a friend met at Saguache years before, named Juan Gutierrez.

Johnny did what he could. Taking off his jacket, he placed it under the old Mexican's head, straightened him, and tucked sack and hide remnants against him for support. It was these grain-sacks and heavy, half-cured sheepskins, Johnny understood, that had hidden Juan Gutierrez from view. They were stiff and rank-smelling, but warm, and Johnny shook out others that he found there and laid them on thickly, covering his friend from sandals to chin.

Juan Gutierrez was conscious but disturbed, unable to identify his companion. His eyes, burning darkly in an emaciated, seamed face, followed Johnny's slightest movement. At times his lips opened, revealing blood, a black, swollen tongue, and great chap-cracks, and he appeared on the point of speaking. But no words came. Always the lips closed, slowly, as though asking for water, and the old man lay resignedly, waiting for Johnny.

Johnny squatted beside the anciano and looked at him intently.

"You remember me, amigo?"

The Mexican's face was still, strained and richly dark.

"Eight years ago," Johnny said. "Remember Saguache? You and Felipe Montoya and me? Johnny Christmas?"

Light showed in Juan Gutierrez's eyes. "Ah, sí!" He struggled to a sitting position, and moved his head gravely in welcome. "Señor Christmas! Yo te recuerdo. I did not know you, señor. You are big, and it has been a long time. But I have thought of you, si, many days. I could not forget Johnny Christmas. But why . . . How did you come here, señor?"

"I've been in Taos off and on. I thought I might see you. I asked, but nobody would tell me."

The old Mexican nodded, breathing heavily through his mouth. "No. They would not tell you, señor. It was useless to ask."

"Then, one night," Johnny explained, "I went to a baile. There was a señorita there. I wanted to talk to her, find out who she was. She was nice-lookin'. And there was some

trouble. I had to hole up. Then, tonight, I thought I seen her at the morada, with other people. I follered 'em here. Maybe you know her, amigo?"

"Si." Suddenly the anciano's voice was bitter and full of hatred. "So she has come back? I know her, señor. You were a fool to come here. She is Dionicia, the sister of Felipe Montoya."

Again, Johnny felt no surprise. It was as if he could have answered that question himself. The señorita, he thought cynically, fitted Montoya ways. Perhaps she had been even farther north than Taos, to Saguache or the San Luis lakes, on one of those fancy-dress hunting trips Tom Gitt had mentioned. Staring now at Juan Gutierrez, neglected, half-starved, like an old cast-off burro there, in the shed, Johnny found new significance in the face-welts and blood. Quirt-popping, spur-jangling Felipe, he said to himself, was still up to his tricks. Recalling that certan San Luis morning, Johnny wondered how Juan Gutierrez could have lived eight years, or fifty, without doing some killing.

"What the hell are you doin' here?" he asked the anciano, in abrupt anger. "Why ain't you down at the ranch where they can take care of you?"

"I do not wish to be there, señor. I wish to be here."

"Felipe beat you, did he? And then kick you out?"

"Felipe, si. But others, too. It is all right. We go toward Easter, señor."

Johnny spoke somewhat impatiently: "Well?"

Juan Gutierrez made a sign of protest. As he talked, he seemed to be drifting farther and farther away into his thoughts.

"Los americanos," he said. "You are strangers here. You do not understand. You will never believe as we believe. But we—especially at this time, señor, we are in need of Christ. We are evil. I am evil. We know that we must suffer, as El Cristo did, at the time of Crucifixion."

"That's why you're here?" Johnny said.

"Si. It has been many weeks. It has been hard, but I am strong. Christ gives me strength."

"There ain't any food or water here. There ain't nothin'. You need to wash them cuts. If you ain't afraid, you better go down to the ranch and fix up."

"No. I am resting now. I have been resting for some days. There is a harder time. On Good Friday, I will go."

"It's Good Friday now," Johnny said.

Juan Gutierrez sat quite still. He was so thin, white-bearded and twisted, and yet so dignified, like some old desert cedar that has seen too many years of sun and storm, that Johnny

felt a stab of pity and admiration. Johnny knew, however, that it was useless to protest. He could not agree, perhaps, but he could understand. Presently the old Mexican drew aside the sacks and sheepskins, dragged himself to his feet, and, disregarding his blood-caked face, brushed his homespun suit and trousers.

He looked at Johnny directly. "You are not lying, señor?"

"Why should I lie to you, amigo?" Johnny asked.

"Then, I must go. It is later than I thought. I am expected. But you, my friend . . ." Juan Gutierrez gripped Johnny's arm and gazed with dark seriousness into his eyes. "You have seen Felipe Montoya. He is at the rancho. If he finds that you are here, he will come with his vaqueros and hunt you down and kill you. You must go—as soon as it is night. I shall not come to this jacal again. And so I warn you."

"I'll take care of myself, Juan." Johnny stood hesitantly, anxious, feeling the mystery in the old man. "What about you?"

"I shall be all right."

"I'd like to see you," Johnny persisted. "Talk to you. I've thought about you all the time, seems like, since that day at Saguache. Maybe, after Easter, you'll be comin' north to the San Luis."

Juan Gutierrez smiled. "I am old, señor. The San Luis is very far. But, si!" Noting Johnny's expression, he bowed suddenly, in a simple and charming way, as if he were accepting an invitation to which he had long looked forward. "It has been many years. I, too, have thought of you, mi amigo. Shall we say the San Luis sometime? After Easter?"

Dawn was blood-red on the mesas. Juan Gutierrez was black in it, a hunched, pain-wracked figure walking down the slope to the rancho. Johnny watched him until he passed out of sight. There was something tender, trustingly expectant in that bent figure, something final, almost terrifying in that disappearance among the ranch buildings.

Johnny had made no promises. He remained in the jacal throughout the day, waiting. He made no plan. At the right moment, as night came on, he would know what course to take.

Johnny did much thinking. Again and again he found his mind reverting to Saguache, where he had met Juan Gutierrez. Then the old Mexican had still been active, chopping camp-wood, kneading, rolling flat and baking tortillas, even laughing once in a while, and telling his wonderful stories. He had been deep into that country, along Conejos, up Blanca

peak and Mosca pass, and among the fringe-streams of the San Luis dunes. He had known the trails—those timber-barred mountain tracks, leading to the legendary Spanish mines, which Johnny would have given much to know. But now, Johnny felt with a sting of regret, time was too hard, eight years were too long. Juan Gutierrez, truly, was el viejo, wasted, dried by the winds, burning out like an ember.

In mid-afternoon, Johnny began to notice activity at the rancho. It was like the night before, at the Taos morada. Horsemen raised dust in twos and threes along the main trail, shouted greetings which even Johnny could hear, and dismounted at the arched gate. Johnny worried then about his pony. It had been tied short, there had been no grass or water for it all day, and a few early flies were buzzing. Johnny was afraid that a horseman might ride too close to the cedars, spotting the pony or raising a nicker. But nothing occurred. As more visitors arrived, sounds of activity increased at the rancho, and jacal and cedar-patch were left undisturbed.

Sunset came. Once Johnny fancied that he saw Felipe Montoya, riding a fine buckskin stallion among his peones. The thought caused a resurgence of anger, during which Johnny, remembering not only Juan Gutierrez' bloody face but those screams of long ago, *"Tejano! Tejano!"* leveled his rifle, speculatively, at the thick-set Mexican. It was this incident, above all, that brought Johnny to his decision. For him, that night, there would be no long ride to the west, no retreat into the rocky fastnesses of the del Norte gorge. The sunset was as red as the dawn, still, edged, it seemed, with prophecy. Johnny meant to watch its every change, to see the death of its last color-flame, and then to find what lay beyond.

As twilight cupped its gray, soft feathers over the pocket, Johnny heard a sound which had become familiar in the Taos spring. It was a sound that had no place but that seemed to well out of the desert itself, like wind passing pinnacles or eddying in the sand-holes of some tufa cliff: it was the flutter, the high-borne, gibbering, thin-drifting wail of turkey-bone flutes. With it, in this twilight, came a lift in Spanish voices, shouts that were harsh and challenging, or ecstatic, echoing far among the great yellowstone walls of the mesas. A burro sawed suddenly, bringing wild laughter. Wheels, the wheels of ancient cottonwood carts, creaked. Men gathered in the open, pitch-flares were lighted, cries all but drowned the experimental wailing of the flutes, and then, like the movement of a heavy body through dust, there was the shuffle of numberless feet.

In shaggy dark, Johnny left the jacal and went to his pony.

Pressing the patient animal's nostrils to prevent a whinny, he led it up and down for five minutes, quieting it and loosening its muscles. Mounting, he rode with greater caution than he had ever used in his life. He was like a ghost among those hills, moving silently from cedar to cedar, circling to surprise anyone on his trail, and keeping always within hearing of the turkey-bone flutes.

What Johnny witnessed, that midnight, made him sweat cold with horror.

Under a half-concealed moon, for clouds gave promise of the first spring rain, he saw men singled out and whipped, scourged to their knees, then brought to the ground, with cactus whips cut from the desert. He heard cries that seemed without substance, like the cries of perdidos, thin, strained, vibrant, like those of black-robes or of the old conquistadores doomed by the desert. He saw the flares dip and rise swiftly; heard the harsher swish and crack of rawhide lashes; felt the rattling desiccated terror, the heart-beatings, the dread, and the unspeakable, primitive, hot flow of blood-lust.

In the half-moonlight, he saw men with crosses. They were three, those men, two of them young and capable of bearing their burdens, the third an anciano bent almost double, struggling with symbolic intensity to maintain himself. As the men moved, the swish of cactus whips beating upon them came in faster rhythms. Soon, then, the procession drew to a halt. The crosses were raised: men pressed in from all sides, eagerly bracing them. A wilder, more secret moaning arose. Johnny saw the crosses standing bare in the pitch-gleam, rough crosses, hand-hewn, made of the wood of the desert. He saw the three figures lifted. Men climbed with them. The wailing increased, like that of some fugitive and solitary creature known to those hills, and a sound of hammering came. Spikes, hand-heated, hand-pounded in the fashion of an earlier time, struck through the palms of the young men. Heavier spikes, driven doubly hard with devotion, cut more weathered flesh, bit deep into wood, and held secure the central figure, that of the anciano, Juan Gutierrez.

Johnny trembled. He wanted to cry out, to cry out to those dark and bloody faces, the horror of it. He wanted to shout his own rage and defiance of those moaning, shuffling figures. But again, as on many a night before, caution lay like a cool, hard-polished pebble in the bottom of his mind. He did not cry out. He did not move. He watched, and presently the figures seemed to melt into the cedar hills. The moaning died away like the sighs of desert storms, there was only darkness then, darkness and the moon, earth-blackness and a

yellow-silver, fading, filtered sky-streak with a sliver in it, and the three that hung so still, alone, upon their lonely crosses.

An hour passed.

Johnny's mind was a piece of crystalline quartz, faceted, vibrating to the slightest sound.

Another hour passed.

Johnny began to look about him. There was too much silence. Clouds flowed too fast across the sky; it was too dark; the desert was too still. Johnny moved a little, coming clear of the cedars. As he did so, screaming burst upon the night.

It was not ordinary screaming. Sustained to the end of breath, repeated, it seemed instead a constant, babbling, incoherent shriek. Johnny listened to it, his heart choking him, and saw Juan Gutierrez straining on the central cross.

There was something not far away, in the valley. A shadow where no shadow should have been. A blot—a figure, thick-set, moving toward the screaming. Johnny watched it. With cynical sureness he recognized it. Felipe. It was Felipe Montoya, armed with rifle, pistol and knife, fanatical, advancing alone upon Juan Gutierrez.

Johnny got on his pony and rode, hard, raising dust among the cedars. Deep in his mind lay thoughts, abruptly thoughts of the north, beyond Pagosa, Saguache, and the Bayou Salade. He was riding as he had ridden that night across the bloody meadows of Old Park, through terror-stricken Cheyennes, in absolute silence after the silently fleeing Epps and Wax Weatherby. Under him, now, his mount's action was smooth, quick, wonderfully alert and powerful on the short slope. He balanced in the same light way between horn and cantle, knees pressed, moccasins out, his long rifle held clear, in both hands, above flat-laid ears and a streaming forelock.

Felipe was caught. As the Ute pony rushed upon him he glanced over his shoulder, turned to the front, brought his Spanish carbine to bear, and fired. High on the cross, Juan Gutierrez ceased his strange crying. Again, as swiftly, Felipe whirled, drawing his pistol. The flash was bright and close, the crack of the weapon like a lightning crack among rocks. Johnny felt air brush his cheek, flicking him, and heard the ball whistle past.

Stare-eyed, the Ute pony ran straight on. Johnny saw Felipe, arms out-thrust, under the bobbing, foam-streaked head. He heard the shout, rage-filled, unafraid, and took the shock of collision. Then he was over, his pony stumbling, going down heavily, rooting its muzzle in the fine dust.

Johnny pulled. Desperately, with all the strength he possessed, he levered the bit and forced the pony up. Felipe

was coming over flat ground, a knife in his hand. He was breathing hoarsely, grinning in a set way, laboring to reach and cut down the rider in time. Johnny flipped his reins, bringing the Ute pony broadside, and dropped his rifle into position. Felipe was at his left stirrup, snatching, when the weapon went off. The Mexican seemed to be struck by the powder-blast, strongly borne up, and blown backwards into the night. He fell with a soft sound, twisting face to earth, the brim of his high-crowned, yellow sombrero crushed under one cheek.

Johnny wiped his mouth, staring down. His own eyes were wild, his heartbeat wing-fast. Suddenly, in the darkness, figures began to rise up around him, crying, moving about like black, flapping crows. Johnny leveled his pistol at them, saw that they were women converging upon the central cross, and slid his sidearm back into his belt. Sitting straight and ready in his saddle, he reloaded his rifle. He looked long at Felipe Montoya, at the younger Mexicans dazed and terrified on their crosses, and, in sorrow, at the silent, santos-like form of Juan Gutierrez.

Fresh moans, then, began to lift from the women. Harsher sounds, the outcries of surprised hermanos and the rumble of hard-running horses, came from the lower valley flats. Johnny tested his weapons. For a last moment he stared at Felipe. Even tonight, he was thinking, Felipe had hated; even tonight Felipe had wanted red flow, the full, old flow of blood on the Cross. With the cries from the valley ringing clearer, Johnny put his mount into cedars, up the hill slopes. He took a long and lonely trail away, circling to east and north, slipping past Taos adobes in night, and, once more a solitary watcher, awaiting friends at his shelf-camp above the Rio del Norte.

Conquest

THREE horsemen kept to high ground a mile from Bent's Fort. They were Block Ewing, Tom Gitt, and Johnny Christmas. Gitt had brought prime fur from the Missouri, getting five dollars straight for it at Bent's. With that money the three had done good buying among Arapahoes at Big Timbers, outfitting with new squaw-made buckskins, fresh Plains ponies, and a string of pack animals.

The men were fully armed that afternoon, sitting their mounts idly within sight of flats along the north bank of the Arkansas.

On those flats was a mass of uniformed figures, bright-blue against the prairie brown. Troops of Doniphan and Kearny, the American Army of the West, had pitched camp at Bent's that August 1, 1846, and were repairing gear, cleaning weapons, and making last personal preparations for conquest along the Rio del Norte.

Earlier in the afternoon, on their way out from the fort, the frontiersmen had ridden through the military camp. They had seen the immense quantities of materiel and transport—the fifteen hundred wagons, fifteen thousand oxen, four thousand mules, artillery pieces, and seemingly countless piles of ammunition—with which the force had been equipped. More particularly, they were shrewdly interested in the soldiers they had seen, in the army regulars and volunteer infantrymen who had just completed their dry, dusty march from Fort Leavenworth, six hundred miles to the east.

Ewing was speaking:

"I always knowed the army was a bunch of fools, but I never thought they'd send men a-foot into this country. That looks like murder to me."

"It is murder." Gitt spoke curtly. "Remember them Missouri boys? Cussin' a blue streak. Wantin' to know why the regulars was gettin' all the good stuff—rations, transport, everything—and the volunteers wasn't gettin' nothin'. Them boys was ready to fight—and I ain't talkin' about Mexicans."

"Some wasn't," said Ewing. "By God, if some soft-ridin' bastard was to tell me to walk all the way from Leavenworth to Bent's, under pack, I'd jerk his meat for him. And this ain't the worst. There's mountains and desert ahead, or maybe the army don't know that. Mark what I tell you, there's a lot of these infantry won't ever come through, not if they never run into Armijo."

Gitt nodded. "I got a hunch it'll be on Timpa creek or the Purgatory. There, or Raton pass."

"I ain't bettin'," Ewing responded. "If I know Armijo, he'll never show up. But they better get some ponies under these boys. If they ever do run into Mex, and probably Comanches right with 'em, there'll be the sweetest little massacre you ever saw."

Johnny said nothing. He had been in the fort that morning. He had seen the hospitalized infantry there, the men down sick with dysentery and heat-stroke, lying on the fort compound, waiting, interminably, for wagon or mule transport back over the long trail they had come. He had seen, too,

the hunters and traders, the Mexican women, the Cheyenne and Arapaho squaws, the corral, the tower, the room where Fraser had lived, the room where he himself had slept—all of the places and people that he had remembered. Almost ten years, it had been. Changes had come about at Bent's. It was not like the old, the lazier and more colorful fort. Yet, for Johnny, it had been full of ghosts. He had spent hours in the corral, in the patio, and among dragoons of the Army of the West, remembering quietly and quietly looking.

On the following day, August 2, the Army of the West took up its march. Time pressed. Men unable to travel were left at Bent's.

Timpa creek and the Purgatory were passed without incident. Comanches, if there were any, prowled well to the south of the Arkansas, Armijo, leader of the Mexican forces, remained no more than a rumor, a story, like the legends of the old Spanish country.

Huajatolla, the Spanish Peaks, lifted in the southwest against the green-gray, cloudy wall of the Sangre de Cristos. Johnny's eyes grew smoke-hazy, veiled, as he scrutinized those peaks and thought of all the vast and wonderful country—the San Luis, San Juan and Uncompahgre, and the great salt-and-sage spaces of Timpanogos—that lay still farther on. The trail of American conquest was the old trail of conquistador, black-robe, and trapper, down beyond the pines of Raton to the Cimarron gap. The frontiersmen, Gitt, Ewing, and Johnny Christmas, kept well on the flank of the infantry. Their camps were separate camps. They scouted far to the side, killed their own meat, and chose their own hours for travel. Neither soldier nor mounted officer found welcome at their fires. They would fight, if a time came for that. But they would fight free, in their own mountain way, and under the command of no man.

At one of these camps, on Raton heights flanking the broad, beautiful gap country of the upper Cimarron, Gitt began to regard Johnny with a particularly humorous eye. More than once, since their meeting early in the previous May, the two men had been on the verge of a talk like that which they had had, in the beginning, in the deep, red canyon of the Arkansas. But since May, it seemed, long absence from each other had lain like a mountain ridge between them. Additional weeks had been needed to surmount it, to pierce the reserve which both men, the younger as fully as the older, had acquired during the years of almost constant wandering through the vast Western country.

It was the mountain heights, perhaps, or the cedar-knot fire so redolent of southern desert, or moonlight spreading like an

unrippled lake over the Cimarron valley, that softened Gitt's mood and loosened his tongue. At any rate, Gitt said, a little slyly:

"Remember that mornin' at Pagosa, Johnny? When you lit out in a huff, and went down to Taos?"

Beneath his long-tailed cap, Johnny flushed. "I expect I do," he said. "Why?"

"Oh, I was just a-thinkin'. I kind of thought if you met up with Block here, you'd be headin' west. But you didn't know I might go to the Missouri, did you, Johnny?"

"You didn't say nothin' about it," Johnny, nettled, snapped his words. "You just said Yampa river. God damn it, if you'd said the Missouri—but, no—" Johnny glanced at the frankly listening Ewing, and grinned. "I wouldn't give nothin' for that Gila trip, would you, Block? You ain't been right to Californy, now, have you. Tom? I mean, you've heard about it," Johnny said, with all the smugness and superiority of tone he could muster, "but you ain't never been there."

Gitt began to laugh, delighted at the reaction he had stirred up. California or not, Johnny was thinking, the Missouri country had been good for old Tom. He had fleshed up, lost that stringy, rawhide, burned Texas look, the jornada look that he had only commenced to lose in those seasons spent near the Big Medicine. His face was fuller, less strained, golden-tanned like that of the old northwestern trapper at Big Timbers, as if the northern winds and sun and waters, and northern game, had had a special favor for him and a special strength.

"You recollect that other time, Johnny?" Gitt went on, with irritating good-nature. "When you and me got to talkin' about rivers. In that Arkansas canyon camp?"

Johnny recollected. As if he had sat beside it only yesterday evening, he saw the leaping, bright Ute fire on the rock-bar, the curving river, the straight, red cliffs reaching to sky above the left bank. He had never forgotten that camp. Nor would he forget how he had squatted on his white boulder, listening, listening hard to the sounds of the river itself—to the cold swirl of mountain water, the scrapings of timber being carried along, and, deep beneath all, to the chonging ghost-sounds of boulders being rolled, unseen and over and over, toward the broad Plains.

Gitt continued:

"The Green, and that Grand river like we talked about. There ain't any wilder, in their way. Fast, and deep-cut, and full of bad places. But God damn, it's them northern rivers," he shook his head. "Gallatin Fork, Madison, all that Missouri and Columbia and Snake river country. Clear—white water—

pretty grass valleys—and the biggest, prettiest falls you ever set eyes on. You boys," he said, "I almost didn't come back. Up there, they got rivers that really look like they're rivers."

Ewing nodded. As Johnny knew, Ewing had trailed along the Snake and Columbia past the northwestern mountains, to a place called Disappointment—a headland far to the north of California's Francisco Bay, at the Columbia mouth. Ewing said:

"You was mostly on the Gallatin Fork, was you, Tom?"

"Mostly. But I hit south some. Spent a winter at Hall Fort, and got into the Pierre's Hole country. Big Bear—Snake headwaters—and northeast into mountains." Again Gitt shook his head, as though blinded by the brilliance of his recollections. He sat close to the Cimarron cedar-wood fire, speaking slowly, drawing in the sweet and dry-wisped smoke. "That Snake," he said. "She's like the Green, in one way. Rises somewhere beyond the Bad Mountains—the Tetons, they call 'em. You'll hear Shoshones and whites—Rocky Mountain Fur men—talk about 'em. They're scared to death of 'em. They'll tell you there's valleys in 'em full of smoke and poison creeks. Places where if you fall through you'll get cooked like meat in a kettle. Trees all turned to stone. Red and white and gray, like you see agate. Big hot springs—bigger than the Big Medicine—and steam spouts comin' out of the ground. The Thousand-Smoke country, the Shoshones call it. And they ain't lyin'." Gitt spoke even more slowly, in wonderment. "I know," he said, "because, now, I've done been there."

A moment's silence came. Johnny looked at Gitt, pursed his lips, grinned, and said cryptically:

"Them Shoshones wasn't lyin', eh, Tom? And I suppose you wasn't, either?"

"It's the God's truth, Johnny. That country lays in somewhere at Bear headwaters. Southeast of Gallatin Fork. If you don't believe me—you and Block both—maybe we ought to go up in there. There's beaver. And why? Because, like I said, it's a queer country. Ain't never been trapped. Even the Indians are afraid to go in."

"Like that Rio Buenaventura country?" Johnny asked. "Away off beyond Grand river?"

"It could be." Gitt did not change expression. "It's pretty far west, though, and I ain't never been there. Heard about it enough. But it might be different."

"Yeah, it sure might," Johnny, shifting his glance to Ewing, chuckled deep in his throat. "But that's just the point."

"What you mean, that's the point?"

"You should've come to Californy with us. El Camino Real. Rio Sacramento. Over east of the Sierra Nevadas, into that

desert." Johnny smirked, and drew up his legs. "You'd've saw straighter, Tom. There ain't no Rio Buenaventura."

It was later, far toward the Cimarron dawn, when Johnny awoke from restless sleep, filled with dreams. Although the time was mid-August, autumnal air had settled upon the Raton heights during the night, coming, Johnny knew, from the Sangre de Cristo peak country to westward. It kept him deep in his blankets, knotted up, his knees almost pressing his chin in his efforts to find warmth and comfort for his long frame.

Looking out, Johnny saw that all ponies were quiet and that the fire had died out completely. Nor was he surprised, somehow, to discover that Block Ewing was sitting nearby, in solitude, his back to one of the old camp cedars. Since the departure from Bent's, Johnny recalled, Ewing had been strangely unlike himself, too reserved, too thoughtful as they had come up the long northern slope of Raton.

Johnny waited some moments. From Gitt he had had the story of Ewing's return to Taos from Cimarron Middle Spring, during the previous May. Coming in to his hut, late at night and worn out, Ewing had found his wife Celestina lying with the morada priest. There had been trouble. The priest had flushed out the door like a wing-cripple. Celestina had landed in a hut corner, her mouth cut by a back-handed blow, and Ewing, speaking few words to Gitt, had packed his things and cleared out. Thinking of this, Johnny said from the depths of his bedroll:

"Up so early, Block? I feel like I just turned in."

Ewing was gazing down over ridge-slopes at the Cimarron valley, darker now in the moonless time of night, but still luminous enough to show stream-cuts and flat grass ranges under the white mountain stars. His legs, too, were drawn up for warmth, his great hands, cupped on his knees, outspread and quiet. At Johnny's words, the massive frontiersman did not shift position.

"It is pretty early," he said. "Seems like I couldn't sleep, somehow. I'll rustle around pretty soon, and build that fire up."

Bracing himself on his elbows, but keeping the blankets close under his chin, Johnny followed his friend's gaze down the southern reach of Raton. They were to westward of the old Spanish trail. Somewhere not far away, Johnny knew, perhaps a mile or two, lay the main body of American infantry, facing their final marches to the Rio del Norte.

"Them soldiers must be sleepin' hard," he commented. "You can't blame 'em none, either—not after all the places they've walked. I don't see any fires."

"No." Ewing stirred for the first time. "Maybe they're

afraid," he said. "Don't want any fires. Afraid Armijo'll come get 'em, with all the Indians this and the other side of the mountains." He laughed softly, seeming to mock himself. "It's a funny thing, Johnny. I mind the night when you and old Tom come to see me from Pagosa. I said then that I didn't care who was in it, one of Armijo's throat-cutters or a U. S. dragoon—if a uniform showed up in the Taos country I was goin' to start shootin'. But I don't feel about it that way any more. There's been too many changes. I don't like to say it, considerin' all the people I used to know around Taos. But there ain't any stoppin' this thing. And maybe, after all, it's goin' to be better this way."

Johnny felt that he knew what Ewing meant. Ewing was thinking not so much of a new, invading army as of the great ranchos on the Spanish land grants, of things like the Governors' Palace and richly furnished churches in Santa Fe, Albuquerque and El Paso del Norte, and of the ragged, thin sheepherders, wonderful men like Juan Gutierrez, living out their solitary lives among the red mesas.

"What you bet now, Block?" he asked. "You reckon they'll fight? Say in Cimarron canyon, or between here and Santa Fe, on the main trail?"

"There's always a few," Ewing replied, "and they'll maybe try something. I still ain't sayin'. But I've got a hunch, no. If you look back far enough, you'll see there was hard feelin' and talk but not a lot more. There's soldiers in Santa Fe. We know that, Johnny; we seen 'em. But it'll take more than them. A full uprisin'—every rancher, every trader, every sheepherder along the del Norte. And I don't think they'll do it."

"Say they don't," Johnny went on, pleased. "Say everybody but the big augers quits and goes home. Everything quiets down, and there's a little beaver trappin' again, and lots of this freightin'. Old Tom talked plenty last night about that northwestern country. If we was to go—me and him, Block—would you trail along with us?"

Ewing got up before answering. He was stiff with cold. He caught a dead branch of the cedar behind him, tore it off, snapped it across his thigh, and crunched a fistful of twigs for fire shavings. Then he came slowly over to Johnny and squatted down, grinning.

"Me leave Taos, Johnny?" he said. "Don't you believe it. The northern country's nice. Clear water, no dry camps, and tall grass and timber. But it's the desert for me. I'll be on the del Norte when there ain't no more tradin', no more freightin' —when there ain't no more nothin'. And who knows, Johnny?" Ewing, abruptly, gave a broad wink. "After the

storm's kind of blowed over, maybe I'll tie in again with that locoed wife of mine, Celestina."

At Raton itself, ragged Mexican settlement reached sometime during the succeeding forenoon, a major alarm was raised. In Taos, the rumors flew, Mexicans, Utes, Navajos, and the stocky, full-blanketed Indians of Taos Pueblo had confederated and were moving, an army of ten thousand men well-armed and well-mounted, to intercept the invaders. Throughout that day panic held American infantrymen marching now on half-rations, far behind their dragoon force. But Johnny listened and smiled. He remembered Ewing's prediction. Bad blood, too, was bad blood. Navajos of the western desert, he reassured himself, and Utes of Saguache, under Tabby, would never confederate with the richer and more arrogant dwellers of Taos plateau.

Dragoons under Kearny entered Las Vegas, a larger adobe town in the shadow of the Turkey cordillera. There the American flag was formally raised and a proclamation was read. Las Vegas rumors placed a Mexican force in the canyons flanking Rio Pecos. The advance beyond Las Vegas was made with great caution, in battle formation. And again Armijo, El Gobernador, proved no more than a story, an oft-repeated legend of the yellow-red Spanish country.

It was evident, by that time, that no Mexican force would stand east of the Rio del Norte. During the third week of August the Army of the West crossed Pecos river, passed over Glorieta and through Apache canyon, and rounded the terminal peaks of the Sangre de Cristos. It was cooler in that country, with much rich color in the earth beneath clouds that moved shining and white-clean on the turquoise streams of an Indian sky. Nowhere, during that last advance, was there firing; nowhere, in those old, sleepy canyons of los conquistadores, was there the blood-spurt of death that marks war. On August 18, 1846, the march from Leavenworth to the Rio del Norte came to its end. For the first time Americans of an organized Federal force had crossed the mountains and jornadas of their southwestern frontier, striking far beyond, planting their flag, and proclaiming sovereignty over an alien land.

Santa Fe, fallen capital, could not have been more quiet. As Americans entered, raw-faced, alkali-smothered, ready for skirmishing, the last doors and shutters were closed. Lanes—so like the Taos lanes, Johnny said to himself—and the main church, the walled gardens, and the plaza lay at peace. On an eastern hill overlooking the capital, the Americans camped where Johnny one day had stopped for a long

view of the valley. Guard dispositions were made; the palacio, official residence, was occupied. In dusk, Mexicans of the capital began to appear. They were the same as before, whispering, furtive, but peaceful, curious after the subsidence of their unreasoning fear. Later, fires of dragoons and infantry grew bright, like signal flares or the gleams of white-yellow stars on a darkening sea. Singing, strange in that Spanish and Indian valley, intensely clear above the rumble of the American camp, winged far toward the del Norte and Jemez. Johnny listened, and thought of a longer trail west. Santa Fe fires were like the fires on white beaches, the singing of Missourians like the sigh and slip of deep waters. Johnny remembered, then, nights on golden-grass hills above the Pacific. He knew, at last, that from east and west the long force-lines were meeting.

On August 19, the Army of the West was assembled in its ragged condition before the Palace of the Governors. In the presence of that army, and also in the presence of townsmen, priests, and capital officials, the American general, Kearny, read his proclamation terminating Mexican rule. Property and personal rights were to be respected. Power, both civil and military, henceforth was to vest exclusively in representatives of the United States.

It was after this ceremony, toward evening, that Johnny rode his pony down a lane on the south side of the plaza. As he approached a cantina, he saw an American military officer emerge, walk across the open, and mount a black horse. The American, by his insignia a captain of dragoons, was in the uniform of full dress, crisp, gloved, well-brushed, armed with saber and pistol, and untouched, apparently, by the dust and sweat of the march. Slender, erect, of perhaps less than average height, he made a brave appearance on the black. He rode stiffly, a little too stiffly, it seemed, with the caution of one upon whom wine has had its effect.

Johnny felt the initial shock, then became calm. He followed the captain. At a corner he noted the profile—the straight nose, the severely pressed lips, and sharp but delicate chin—and the soft, unburned clearness of the cheeks. When quite certain, Johnny's eased the Hawken rifle on his arm and called:

"Mackey!"

The officer turned. There was an expression of irritation on his face, of contempt for the slouching, buckskin-clad figure confronting him. After a moment, as he recognized Johnny, he grew deathly pale. His efforts to draw his pistol and fire

were awkward, those of a man benumbed, completely unnerved.

Johnny shot Mackey between the eyes. He saw the uniform crumple, heard the pistol clatter in the lane, saw the black horse—not a roan—jump and race away riderless. An uncanny stillness settled over the lane. Mexicans were staring; dragoons, Missouri volunteers on their way to cantinas, had stopped, open-mouthed. Presently, all about him, there seemed to be shouting. It was like Bent's. He was alone, suddenly, alone in the open, and blue and brown figures, square, faceless figures, were running.

Johnny did not go to his camp. He rode out of Santa Fe to the north, into malpais. Somehow, Gitt was there behind him, crying out, urging his pony at speed. The gaunt frontiersman drew alongside. His eyes were fierce: he was laughing, whirling his rifle in triumph. Together they rode as they had ridden in Texas, past Embudo, up the del Norte, swiftly past Taos. Lobo-like, then, they swerved west. Canyons beyond Abiquiu saw them. Peaks of the Navajos beckoned. Pine timber thinned out the dust and they lost themselves beyond the San Juan, in Uncompahgre, Timpanogos, and from the wilds of Timpanogas north.

THE FIERCE YOUNG HELLION OF THE WILD FRONTIER! JOHNNY CHRISTMAS

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