

A Gunfire
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WILLIAM COLT MacDONALD



**THE
THREE
MESQUITEERS**

A Full Length Western Novel

THE THREE MESQUITEERS

by **WILLIAM COLT MacDONALD**

The Three Mesquiteers are in action again on the range. This time they come in on the side of Red Sherry, a completely broke young stranger in Wagon Springs. Red was kidnapped by three masked men and made to witness a bill of sale for a ranch he had never heard of. At first he was willing to play along to keep out of trouble, but when he saw Molly Norton, the ranch's lovely owner who was on the wrong end of this shady deal, he changed his mind.

Red's escape with the bill of sale in his pocket made him a marked man, and he soon found himself behind bars at the mercy of a shifty-eyed sheriff. Lucky for him he met three fast-shooting characters who saved his life and joined him in tracking a gang of rustlers to their ghost-town hideout.

The Three Mesquiteers were, of course, Tucson Smith, their lean and dangerous leader; Lullaby Johnson, who thought more of a meal than a gun fight; and Stony Brooke, the mischief-maker who stirred up trouble when he did not find it lying around. There were a good many corpses spread about by the time these three had convinced Santee Lombard and his gang that they meant business, but when they headed back to their own ranch, the Three-Bar-Nothing, they left law and order behind them.

William Colt MacDonald brings back the trio he made famous in this rousing story of how the Mesquiteers handled dirty legal doings and set a young cowboy on the trail to happiness.

NOVEL SELECTIONS, INC.

New York

THE THREE MESQUITEERS

by William Colt MacDonald

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This Cunfire Western Novel represents an abridgement of the original to speed the action.

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SKULDUGGERY

FIRST he heard the rustling in the brush back of him, then the sudden, sharp command. He tensed a trifle, gaze still intent on the dying embers of the campfire a couple of feet from his face, before throwing back the blanket and moving to a sitting position; his arms came slowly into the air. In this position he waited for the next move on the part of the men at his rear.

No further words were spoken at once. A twig snapped dully in the campfire ashes, flared an instant, then went out. The moon was high by this time, touching with silver light the rugged peaks of the San Mateo Mountains and throwing into bold relief the dust-laden leaves of the surrounding greasewood and prickly pear.

The man with the blanket about his hips waited a moment longer, then cleared his throat and asked softly, "Well, what's on your mind?"

A voice to his right broke in, "Take it easy, mister. Nobody's aiming to hurt you——"

"Not if you're sensible," a second voice interrupted.

A man had materialized from the brush at either side. One was tall, the other much shorter. They wore cow-country togs and som-breros. Both wore, in lieu of masks, blue bandannas across the lower portion of their faces. Each held a leveled six-shooter in his fist.

"Think he'll do, pard?" one of the men said after a short scrutiny.

"Do for what?" asked the man on the ground.

"Shut yore face, redhead," one of the masked men growled.

They stood looking down on their captive, seeing a likable-featured young fellow with brick-colored hair and wide shoulders, at present encased in a dark-colored woolen shirt.

The taller of the two masked men spoke. "What's your name, feller?"

"Sherry. My friends call me Red. Say, you ought to know that. Aren't you the two I played poker with today back in Blue Cloud? You and your pais cleaned me out. You should know I'm broke."

"Blue Cloud?" the shorter man replied after a moment. "What's that? Never heard of it."

"Poker?" from the tall one. "No, we never play poker. The parson told us it was wicked to play cards for money."

"I think," Red Sherry said easily, "you're a prime pair of liars."

"Keep your lip buttoned, feller," growled one of the men; then, again, to his companion, "Think he'll do, pard?"

"I got a hunch he might. Look, Sherry, how'd you like to make twenty bucks?"

"Twenty bucks," Sherry said enthusiastically, "sounds like a million to a man who hasn't had any supper. I'm broke, I tell you——" His face fell suddenly. "If you want somebody killed, twenty is too little. Any work I take will have to be honest and aboveboard."

"Hell's bells, Sherry," the short man grunted. "We wouldn't want you to do nothin' dishonest. What we want is simple——just witnessin' a signature to a legal paper."

"That's right, Sherry." The tall one nodded. "It's a cinch. The whole deal is straight as a die."

Red Sherry laughed softly. "It's so straight, in fact, that you two have to come sneaking up behind me, get the drop on me, and then——"

The shorter man raised his gun angrily. "Either you'll come along and——"

"Take it easy, pard," his companion intervened; then to Sherry, "Look, it's like this. There's a deal for some property going through. The owner doesn't want the deal made public for a spell, but we've got to have somebody witness his signature to make it legal. So we had to find somebody who was a stranger."

"And because I'm a stranger you're willing to pay me twenty dollars to witness this owner's signature?" Sherry snorted skeptically. "And there's nothing crooked about it? The owner is willing to sign?"

"Not only willin', but anxious," the short man growled.

"All right, Shorty," Sherry replied. "Lead me to it—and I'll take the twenty now." He started to rise.

"You'll take it after you've signed your name," the taller man said. "And keep your hand away from that gun. We'll take care of it for you. You can have it later. And where we're taking you, you'll have to be blindfolded."

"Aw, what difference will it make if he's blindfolded?" Shorty spat. "After it's over it won't make any——"

"Button your lip, pard!" the tall man snapped.

Shorty abruptly shut up. Sherry looked queerly at the two men. There was something fishy about this whole business, but his curiosity was aroused by this time. He shrugged his shoulders and rose to his feet after drawing on riding boots. "Okay, what have I got to lose?"

"Not a thing," Shorty said heartily. "Pard, I'll keep an eye on our readheaded friend"—stooping to retrieve Sherry's gun from the

earth—"while you catch up with his pony pegged out yonderly."

The bandanna tied across Sherry's eyes wasn't as tight as it might have been. Now and then from beneath the blindfold he caught a glimpse of the ground over which they were traveling; from the directions of the shadows cast by the moon light, Sherry judged they were traveling in a southerly direction. Later the course changed as the three headed due west. Once, quite near, Sherry's ears caught the sound of a train whistle. That meant, probably, they were paralleling the T. N. & A. S. R. R. right of way.

A moment later the ponies turned, went on a short distance, then drew to a halt. There came the sound of a door opening, then a new voice: "Get him?"

"Use your eyes and you'll see we did," Shorty's companion said briefly. Saddle leather creaked as the men dismounted. Footsteps scraped across a bare wooden floor, and a door slammed at Sherry's back.

A voice said, "Here's a witness for you, Miss Norton."

Then a girl's tones, clear, contemptuous, biting "One more vulture to feed on the Horseshoe-N, I suppose."

Sherry felt a warm flush slowly stealing up his features. Despite the girl's words, he liked her voice; its cool contralto quality did something to him. Shorty removed the blindfold from his eyes. For a moment Sherry just stood there blinking in the sudden light.

On each side of Sherry were his two masked captors. Across the table stood a third masked man, and at his side was the girl.

She was a rather tall girl, slim, with dark eyes and black hair gathered beneath a fawn-colored sombrero. Her eyes as she looked at Sherry were full of scorn.

"Look, miss——" Sherry commenced.

A gun in Shorty's fist bored into Sherry's spine. "We'll do the talking," Shorty growled.

Shorty's companion stepped forward and placed Sherry's gun and belt on the table. He spoke to the masked man at the girl's side. "You got the paper all made out?"

The man nodded. "All made out and legal. It reads, 'For the sum of one dollar and other valuable consideration, I hereby——'"

"Never mind reading it," the tall man cut in. "Just so it's a bill of sale for the Horseshoe-N, properly made out and witnessed, that's all I ask." He turned to the girl. "You ready to sign, Miss Norton?"

The girl hesitated. "You promise that my father will be returned home safe and unharmed if I sign over my outfit to you?"

"That's the deal. And you get five thousand dollars on top of that."

The girl said impatiently, "I'm not thinking about the money. When will Dad be home? You promised to have him here."

"Sorry, miss, he didn't get here as I expected. It was quite a way to come, you understand. But he'll be home tomorrow. On my word of honor, miss."

"Your word of honor!" the girl said in cutting accents.

The tall man said coldly, with a shrug, "Suit yourself. If you don't want to sign, nobody's making you. It says right in the bill of sale that you've signed of your own free will. Howsomever, if you don't want to sign, I can't be responsible for what happens to your old man." He spoke to the man at the girl's side. "You put that part in about 'her own free will,' didn't you?"

The fellow nodded. "It's all legal like I told you I could write it. You know who showed me how to do it."

They all stood looking at the girl, waiting for her to decide. Sherry glanced quickly at the three masked men. Their eyes were intent on the girl. Sherry considered the distance to the table where his gun had been placed. A sudden leap might carry him there. No, that would be too risky. It would be better to wait until they told him to come to the table to witness the girl's signature. Then he could seize his gun and—

Shorty's words interrupted Sherry's cogitations. "Well, how about it, miss?" the man demanded bluntly.

The girl's lips tightened. She glanced quickly, angrily, at the three masked men, apparently ignoring Sherry. Then, drawing a deep breath, "Bring on your paper," she snapped, the tones carrying a cold, helpless fury.

The man at her side said soothingly, "Now, don't you take it that-a-way, Miss Norton. You want your old man back and you're getting a good price besides. Here y'are." He drew out and unfolded a sheet of paper which he placed on the table before the girl. From someplace he produced a pen and bottle of ink.

The girl started to read the paper, then suddenly glanced up. She said, "You've neglected to write in the name of the buyer."

The tall man chuckled. "Yeah, we decided to leave that blank. We'll fill it in later. Sorry to disappoint you that-a-way, but we figured to leave you in the dark for a spell. That other blank space is where we'll fill in the legal description of your holdin's—"

The girl said swiftly, "I don't like it," and flung the pen to the table.

"You'd better like it, miss," said the man at her side. "Think of your old man."

Color faded from the girl's cheeks. She hesitated, then picked up the pen and wrote her signature on the paper.

"That's fine." The tall man nodded. "You showed sense, Miss Norton." He spoke to Sherry. "It's your turn, Red. Say, ain't you got a first name?"

Sherry crimsoned. "Red suits me," he said shortly, and started toward the table, eager to lay a hand on his .45.

The tall man picked Sherry's gun from the table and tossed it to a far corner, grinning at the sudden baffled expression that crossed Sherry's features. "Maybe Red doesn't suit us," he said.

"All right," Sherry confessed. "The name's Reginald."

There were a couple of guffaws at that. Shorty said cooly, "Be a nice boy now, Reggie. Sign yore name pretty-like."

Sherry swung swiftly around. "How would you like me to sign it with a bunch of knuckles on your ugly map?"

"Cut it!" the tall man snapped, his gun leveled on Sherry. "You step up here and write it down—Reginald Sherry, just like you said it. And no more monkey business—see?"

Sherry shrugged lean shoulders, stepped to the table, and took up the pen. He noticed the girl's name was Molly Norton, before quickly scribbling his own name as a witness to her signature. Then he straightened up. "All right, you apes, when do I get my twenty?" he asked.

A quick glance passed between Shorty and the tall man. After a moment the tall man drew a roll of bills from his pocket, peeled off a twenty, and dropped it onto the table.

Sherry drawled, "Much obliged," and the rest relaxed for an instant. Sherry's hand went toward the bill, suddenly darted farther, and swept the lamp from the table. The room was plunged into instant darkness. At the same moment Sherry's other hand swept the bill of sale from the table, and he spun toward the door.

The girl gave a startled cry of surprise, which was quickly drowned in the yells of rage that filled the room. Somebody yelled, "Stop him, Shorty!"

The men didn't dare fire for fear of hitting each other. Sherry felt an arm grasp at one sleeve. His bunched fist swung hard and fast and sank to the wrist in Shorty's middle. A loud, explosive grunt left Shorty's mouth as he crashed to the floor. Behind him Sherry heard the table hurtle to the floor. He credited the girl's quick thinking with that action. There was a loud curse as one of

the men tripped across the table legs and hit the floor hard.

By this time Sherry had flung open the door and was running swiftly toward his pony. Behind him a .45 roared savagely and a bullet's breeze fanned his cheek. Then he was in the saddle, plunging spurs to the pony's sides.

He rode low, urging the fleeing pony to greater efforts across the moon-bathed range. He had a fleeting glimpse of several scattered shacks, then the way became more open. Behind him a Colt gun spoke rapidly, but none of the shots came near. There came another quick pounding of horse's hoofs, though if they were gaining on Sherry, he couldn't be certain of that fact. It dawned on him suddenly the other horse was headed in the opposite direction.

The tall man's frantic tones reached him through the staccato drumming of his own pony's hoofs: "My Winchester's on my saddle. I'll get——"

The rest of the words were lost, but a moment later there came the quick, sharp report of a rifle. Sherry spurred harder, hands busy every minute. Ahead was a tall outcropping of granite. If he could only reach that and get behind it . . .

He felt his pony stagger in its stride at almost the instant he heard the rifleshot a second time. "Dam'd if that bustard didn't make a lucky shot," was the thought that flashed through Sherry's head, even as his horse went crashing to earth to send its rider flying through the air. Sherry's hands went out to brace himself against the fall, but they didn't help much.

As he struck the earth his head came into sharp contact with a chunk of protruding rock. A million colored lights exploded in his brain before everything went black. Sherry groaned once, then relaxed and lay quiet.

2

BLOOD ON THE TRAIL

THREE RIDERS traveled east on the old stagecoach road that ran toward the town of Blue Cloud. The Three Mesquiteers, they were called—who answered to the names of Tucson Smith, Lullaby Joslin and Stony Brooke. Men had referred to them by other names as well—the Incomparables, the Cactus Cavaliers, the Three Inseparables. Probably the Three Mesquiteers suited them best. Like the renowned musketeers of the immortal Dumas, these three were, indeed, "one for all and all for one." Their fame ran throughout the Southwest country like a wide glowing banner. Law busters

feared and hated them. Law-abiding men swore they were all wool and a yard wide.

Leader of the trio—if they could be said to have a leader—was Tucson Smith, his lean body moving easily to the motions of the sorrel gelding beneath his saddle. Smith was a rangy individual with bright auburn hair, slate-gray eyes, and a long, bony face. His mouth was wide, with tiny quirks at the corners. There was something stern, sardonic, about that face, though the small laugh wrinkles near his eyes proved that he had a well-developed sense of humor.

Tucson's companion on the right, riding a long-legged black pony, was Lullaby Joslin. Joslin was lanky, soft-spoken, with drowsy hazel eyes. His hair was as black and straight as an Apache's.

Stony Brooke, the third man of the trio, was shorter than his companions, but what he lacked in height he made up in breadth. He possessed a barrel-like torso and carried tremendous strength in his shoulders. He had a snub nose, innocent blue eyes, and a wide, gargoish, mischievous grin.

The three men wore pretty much the same type of range togs—faded denims cuffed widely at the ankles of their high-heeled, spurred riding boots, woolen shirts and neckerchiefs, weather-faded Stetson hats. All toted Colt six-shooters, and behind each saddle was a bedroll.

The horses moved on, hoofs kicking up dust. Tucson wiped perspiration from his forehead. Stony produced Durham and papers and commenced manufacturing a cigarette. Lullaby yawned, cast an indolent eye at Stony, and said, "Roll one for me, too, pard."

Stony cast an exasperated glance past Tucson at Lullaby. "Jeepers! You too lazy to roll your own smokes?"

Lullaby shook his head, drawling, "I'm just aiming to conserve my energy."

"What energy?" Stony snorted. "You left all your energy at that restaurant in Los Potros. I never saw anybody eat so much as you do—less'n it's an elephant."

Lullaby said wistfully, "I wish I had some peanuts."

"Stony," Tucson reproved, "you should know better than to remind him of food." Reaching over, he took from Stony's hand the now-completed cigarette and stuck it between his own lips. "Thanks, pard." Nonchalantly he struck a match.

Stony looked defeated. "Damned if I haven't fell among thieves—thieves and gluttons," he protested hopelessly and started rolling another cigarette. "Especially gluttons."

"Make it singular," Tucson suggested.

"Singular hell!" Stony burst out. "It's downright astounding the

way Lullaby stows away food. Look—we had breakfast before we left the ranch. On the way to Los Potros, Lullaby gnawed on two sandwiches. We'd no sooner reached Los Potros than we had to stop off and get a piece of pie and coffee——”

“I noted you ate yours.” Lullaby said defensively.

“Only because I jerked it out of your reach just in time,” Stony snapped. “As it was, you got half of Tucson’s pie and an order of ham and eggs besides. And then back there at Wagon Springs you had to stop again——”

“That was your suggestion,” Lullaby cut in. “You wanted a drink.”

“It wasn’t my suggestion you eat up all that barkeep’s crackers.”

“The crackers were better than the liquor, at that,” Lullaby said.

Tucson put in, “I agree with Lullaby on that score. I don’t see why that hombre stays on in Wagon Springs. There can’t be enough business there, since the stage stopped running, to make any profits. He was an ugly-looking customer. Somehow I gained an idea he was glad to see us leave.”

“Who wouldn’t be?” Stony demanded. “How would you feel if you were confronted with Lullaby’s capacious maw——?”

“There’s no need to bring my mother into this argument,” Lullaby grunted sleepily.

Stony paused. “Who said anything about your mother?”

“You did,” Lullaby replied.

“When did I?”

“My gosh,” Lullaby drawled, “don’t you even know what you’re saying any more?”

“Any more what?”

Lullaby said, “Huh?” and frowned.

Stony spoke to Tucson. “There! You see how it is, pard? He’s reached the point of stupidity. All he can do is sit and grunt. That’s what comes of everlastingly gorging himself with food.”

“What else would a man gorge himself with?” Lullaby wanted to know.

Stony grinned. “You’re asking me? Hell’s bells! If you don’t know, I give up——”

“Look, you two.” Tucson smiled. “Do you have to carry on this eternal squabbling all the time? I don’t know how many years I’ve listened to your wrangling. Always needling each other, and——”

“You wouldn’t have to listen to so much of it today,” Lullaby pointed out, “if you hadn’t insisted on us riding to Chancellor. Now that the steamcars are running, why couldn’t we have taken them?”

"I like horses," Tucson said placidly, "so long as we're not in a hurry."

"Ye Gods!" from Stony. "For two years now we've been forking our broncs all over this Western U.S. range, then we no sooner get back to the ranch than Tucson craves to hit the trail again. Why, I'm asking?"

Tucson said evasively, "The 3-Bar-o is getting along all right. You couldn't find a better rod than Jeff Ferguson."

Lullaby moaned, "It's no use, Stony. Tucson's got itching feet. If we stop at Chancellor I'll be surprised."

"I still don't know why we're headed for Chancellor." Stony looked curiously at Tucson.

"It's a duty," Tucson explained. "Chancellor is the county seat. There's been a new sheriff elected, I understand, since we've been away. I want to get acquainted."

"A new sheriff?" from Stony. "What was wrong with Sheriff Morgan? He was a right hombre."

"No doubt of it." Tucson nodded. "I don't know how this other man got the office—Rafe Quinn's his name, according to our deputy in Los Potros—but some mighty queer fellers get political jobs when folks neglect to vote."

Lullaby looked quizzically at Tucson. "Queer? You mean there's something wrong with this Quinn hombre?"

"That," Tucson answered, "is what I'd like to find out."

Stony grinned eagerly. "Tucson! Do you think we're on the trail of some *real* excitement?"

Tucson said, "Frankly I don't know. While you two were eating and sleeping around the ranch, after we got back, I did some questioning around. I rather got an idea that Quinn wasn't too popular now that he's in office."

"Gee, cripes!" Lullaby said. "Whyn't you tell us before?"

"Nothing definite to tell."

They rode in silence for a time. Abruptly Tucson drew rein and stepped down from his pony. The other two went on a few paces, then halted. Lullaby said, "What you stopping for?"

Tucson didn't reply at once. He was stooped down, examining a small rusty-red spot on the surface of a rock at the edge of the trail. "Blood," he replied finally.

The other two dismounted now. They moved carefully along, leading their ponies behind them. Other dried drops of blood were spotted at widely spaced intervals. After a time the Mesquiteers switched their attention to the trail, studying hoofprints. At one point there were footprints as well. Finally the three straightened from

their scrutiny of the trail. Stony said, "What do you make of it?"

Tucson's eyes narrowed. "Four horses. Three hombres riding. One hombre slung across his saddle, probably, with his head hanging down on one side, feet on the other. Wounded in the head, I'm guessing. Blood wouldn't run out of a boot—though a man could be shot through the leather of course. Being wounded means he was tied on the horse."

Lullaby nodded. "Right. That's the way I see it. Do you figure he was bad wounded, Tucson?"

Tucson shrugged muscular shoulders. "Offhand I'll say no. There isn't much blood. On the other hand, a bad wound might clot."

Stony offered, "Back a spell a spur scraped a prickly-pear pad that crowded out into the trail. It was quite low down. Long stirrup leathers. One tall man riding that horse."

"How do you know it was a spur?" Lullaby asked.

"I don't," Stony admitted. "I'm making a guess. The mark on the prickly pear was fresh enough to have been made in the last twenty-four hours—maybe it was made last night."

Lullaby nodded. "When it comes to reading sign, your guesses are generally good. All right, we've got one tall man—"

"I'm guessing again," Stony interrupted. "Say about six feet four."

Again Lullaby nodded. "There was a short man too. Back there a spell they all stopped once. I don't know what for, but I'm guessing they had to tighten the ropes that held the wounded hombre on the horse. This short man, his steps weren't very far apart. I checked his prints with mine. He's lighter than I am. Probably around one forty-five, I'd say."

Lullaby and Stony looked at Tucson. Tucson said slowly, "Your reading agrees with mine. We've got part of the picture: last night sometime three men brought a wounded hombre in this direction. One rider was unusually tall, another short."

Stony said, "What did the third man look like. You got any ideas, Tucson?"

Tucson's eyes narrowed. "One or two. The footprints tallied against hoofprints tell us a few things. For instance, the tall man rode to the right of the trail, leading behind him the horse that carried the wounded feller. Next to him, judging the way the horses stood when they stopped, came the short man. That left the third hombre on the left trail. This third man walks with a limp and has one front tooth missing. Also, due to that limp, in the right foot, the left boot is more worn than the right—"

Stony said, "Hey, wait a minute. You can get that stuff from the

prints, but I sure don't understand about that missing front tooth."

Tucson produced a short length of cigar butt. "I found this along the side of the trail where it had been tossed away." He held the blackened bit of tobacco out for their inspection. "You can see the mark of one tooth, but there's no similar mark next to it."

"You win," Lullaby conceded. "All right, we know this much. What we going to do about it?"

Tucson shrugged. "I don't know as we'll do anything, unless the information is needed." He tossed the cigar butt to one side. "It's just something to keep in mind, that's all. C'mon, pards, let's ride. Blue Cloud isn't far ahead now."

The horses speeded up. An hour later the three riders were passing the first shacks on the outskirts of Blue Cloud.

Stony said as they entered the town, "Gosh, Blue Cloud has grown some. 'Member when it was just a stage stop?"

Tucson nodded. "That's what the coming of a railroad will do for a town."

They drew rein a moment at the first cross street. To their right was a long low building with a sign over the door bearing the words: "Jail & Deputy Sheriff."

Stony glanced across the corner across Main Street. "There's a saloon."

Lullaby nodded. "I note a sign that says 'Chicago Restaurant' right next door."

The three wheeled their ponies beneath the shade of the cottonwood trees next to the jail. Stony and Lullaby lost no time climbing from saddles. "Hurry up, pard," Stony urged.

"You two run along," Tucson said as he stepped down. "I want to look at my pony's hoof. He walks like he'd picked up a stone."

Stony hurried across the street, followed at a more leisurely pace by Lullaby. Tucson picked up his horse's off hind hoof and examined it. Wedged against the frog of the foot was a small chunk of rock. Tucson quickly pried it out, then straightened up again. As he moved up to his horse's head to drop the reins over a low cottonwood limb something struck against his sombrero and dropped to the earth. He glanced quickly toward the barred cell window directly opposite him just in time to catch sight of a man's arm being quickly, rather violently, withdrawn from view between the bars.

Tucson paused, gazing at the cell window. No face appeared, but from within the building came the sound of voices raised in angry altercation. Tucson couldn't distinguish the words, however. After a moment he stopped to retrieve from the earth the object that had struck his sombrero. To his surprise it proved to be only a partly filled sack of Bull Durham cigarette tobacco.

A second later he had drawn from the small sack a tightly folded compact sheet of paper which, upon being unfolded, proved to have words written on it. His gray eyes swept swiftly down the page and instantly spotted three names. Two of those names didn't mean a thing to him. What he held was a bill of sale, signed and witnessed, for a property known as the Horseshoe-N Ranch. What was more important, as well as amazing, was the fact that his own name, Tucson Smith, had been written in as the purchaser of the ranch.

Tucson grunted perplexedly. "Dam'd if this isn't the craziest thing I've ever seen. I haven't bought any ranch——"

A voice suddenly intruded "I'll take that paper, mister, and I don't want any objections. Hand it over pronto—or else!"

3

"YOU'RE COVERED!"

Tucson slowly raised his gaze from the paper. Confronting him was a potbellied individual with mean red-rimmed eyes, dressed in corduroys, boots, and a dirty-looking woolen shirt that had pinned to the left breast a deputy sheriff's badge. In his right fist he clutched a Colt six-shooter with the barrel bearing directly on Tucson's middle.

Tucson's eyes raised from the paper to survey the blustering deputy sheriff. "Or else what?" Tucson asked mildly, his arms dropping to sides.

"Or else I'll blast you wide open and take it away from you! I'm the law here. What I say goes!"

Tucson laughed softly. "You certainly do make strangers feel welcome in your town, Deputy."

"That's whatever! No stranger is going to come to Blue Cloud and tell Ben Canfield his business. Gimme that paper."

"Just a minute, Deputy Canfield," Tucson said smoothly. "If this paper is yours you can have it and welcome. But what makes you think it is yours?"

"I know damn well it is," Canfield rasped. "One of my prisoners thrun it out his window. It was in that sack of Durham you're holding."

"You're sure of that?"

"Well, what the hell!" Then in a quieter tone: "Course I'm sure. Now hand it over, mister. I don't want to make trouble for you."

"No trouble for me at all." Tucson smiled thinly. "If this is your paper, tell me what it says."

"It says——" The deputy paused suddenly, grew wary. "How

do I know what it says? One of my prisoners just threw it——”

“You don’t know what it says.” Tucson laughed. “And yet you claim it.”

“Well, maybe it ain’t mine exactly,” Ben Canfield said lamely, “but I think it’s important evidence in a murder case.”

“You think? Don’t you know? Cripes! I’ll bet you don’t even know who’s been murdered.”

“I do too! Clem Norton’s his name.”

“Your sure of that?”

The deputy hesitated, then replied sullenly, “Norton’s missing, leastwise.” His anger suddenly got the better of him. Throwing discretion to the winds, he called Tucson a name, adding, “Now you hand over that paper or I’ll drill you——”

Tucson’s cold laughter cut short the words. Canfield stared at him, then grunted triumphantly. Tucson was extending the paper with one hand. Canfield lowered his gun slightly and started to take the paper. After that he wasn’t sure just what happened.

Tucson had moved toward the deputy with the speed of lightning. One hand had jerked the six-shooter from the deputy’s fist, then slammed the gun barrel against the side of Canfield’s head. Canfield grunted, staggered back, then sat down violently on the earth. He looked very dazed; his mouth hung open stupidly.

“You know, Deputy,” Tucson said quietly, “you should be careful what kind of names you call a man.”

From the jail window came a shout of glee “Give it to the fat slob, mister. And that ain’t his paper, either——”

The voice ended abruptly. Inside the cell someone cursed, and it sounded as though blows were being struck. Then silence. Tucson stood looking down on the fallen deputy, now gasping and struggling to arise. Reaching out one hand, Tucson seized the deputy’s shoulder. “Come on, get up,” he said contemptuously. “If you want to call some more names I’ll give you a start——”

He paused abruptly as a cold voice at his rear said, “Stick ’em up, hombre! You’re covered!”

Tucson felt something cold and hard and round boring into his spine. From down the street a man yelled. Several other men came running. A crowd commenced to collect. Tucson raised his arms in the air, wondering where in time Stony and Lullaby had disappeared.

The deputy was on his feet by this time. “Good work, Shorty,” he puffed. “You arrived just in time. We’ll run this bustard into a cell and——”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort.” This time it was Stony’s voice. “You, Shorty, drop that hawg-laig before I bore you——Hey! What the——!”

"Drop it your own self!" a snarling voice cut in. A tall, spare individual had Stony covered. Stony swore under his breath, jabbed his gun in holster, and raised his arms. He glanced at Tucson. "Looks like we're outnumbered, pard."

The undersized man Stony had called Shorty cackled derisively. "You out-of-town waddies got to think fast to get ahead of us Blue Cloud folks. Ain't that right, Frank?"

"Just as right as Gawd made little green apples," replied the tall man with the hard face. "Ben"—to the deputy—"what kind of buzzards are these you're having trouble with?"

"Ain't aiming to be troubled with 'em much longer," Canfield growled. "We'll shove 'em in cells and——"

At that moment Lullaby's drawling voice interrupted with: "Who mentioned apples? I could eat a couple."

The men swung around to see Lullaby standing there, a lazy grin on his face. In this right hand was his six-shooter, in his left a doughnut from which he was just taking a bite, while the leveled gun he held ably covered the deputy and the two cohorts. "You hombres," Lullaby advised, "had better drop those hawg-laigs. I don't like my eating interfered with."

"Lullaby!" Tucson and Stony greeted in unison. Tucson laughed and added, "I never saw such an on-again, off-again deal. One minute I'm covered; the next I'm not. Watch 'em, Lullaby!" By this time Tucson and Stony had their guns out. An ugly-visaged man with one front tooth missing and a slight limp came hurrying from the deputy's office, a shotgun cradled in one arm.

"Drop it, mister." Tucson spoke grimly. "You're too late to get in on this deal. Let loose of that scatter-gun pronto!"

Again there was a wild whoop from the barred cell window: "Give the scuts hell, cowboys!"

The man with the limp hesitated, cursed, then flung the shotgun angrily to the ground. "Look here, Ben," he protested hotly, "are you going to let these strangers hold us up? They can't get away with this if you stand firm on your legal rights——"

"Ben can't help himself," Tucson snapped.

"I—I guess that's right, Limpy," Canfield quavered. He looked appealingly at Tucson. "Look, can't we talk this over?"

"It's all right with me," Tucson consented. "I'm aiming to see just what sort of deputies they're appointing in Tresbarro County these days. As a taxpayer I've——"

"You a resident of this county?" Canfield asked.

Tucson nodded. "My name is Smith. My pards are called Lullaby Joslin and Stony Brooke."

Canfield gulped and turned a sort of greenish color. "You—you ain't Tucson Smith, are you?"

"That's my name."

Canfield swallowed hard. "But—but I heard you gentlemen were away in some other part of the country."

"We came back," Tucson said briefly.

Canfield heaved a deep sigh. "This here is all a mistake. I'd like you gentlemen to come into my office where we can be comfortable. I know my friends here will want to make amends for their hasty actions. I'll make you acquainted. Shake hands with Shorty Davitt, Frank Ettinger, and Limpy Fletcher."

"I don't reckon we're in the mood for shaking hands, Canfield," Tucson said coldly. "But I am aiming to learn just who you got in your cell in there. Somebody's going to talk and talk fast."

"Just as you say, Mr. Smith." Turning, Canfield vented his wrath on the gaping crowd. "Clear out, you hombres! Ain't you got nothing to do? Scatter!"

The crowd reluctantly broke up. Not so reluctant were the movements of Limpy Fletcher, Shorty Davitt, and Frank Ettinger: taking advantage of the confusion about them, they hastily departed for near-by hitch racks, climbed into saddles, and rode hurriedly out of town.

4

BAD MEDICINE

CANFIELD OFFERED chairs to his guests while he found a seat on top of his desk. His hands trembled as he rolled a cigarette while waiting for Tucson to start speaking; after two puffs the cigarette went out. "I suppose," Canfield said nervously, "I'd better apologize to you fellers for acting so——"

"We can forget the apologizing," Tucson cut in. "But I do want an explanation as to why you threw a gun on me—you and your pals. By the way, who are they? Yeah, I know you mentioned their names. Names don't mean much. What do they do?"

Perspiration dotted Canfield's forehead. "They ain't no pals of mine," he denied. "Just acquaintances——"

"One of 'em," Tucson pointed out, "came out of this office with your scatter-gun. I've a hunch he was in the cell where your prisoner is. What right had he in there? Sounded to me like he was beating up the prisoner."

"No, no! You must be mistaken. Those fellers—Fletcher, Davitt, and Ettinger—work for Lombard—Santee Lombard. He owns the Dollar-Sign-L outfit northwest of here. I don't figure they meant

any harm. When they saw me having trouble with strangers it was natural for 'em to take a hand and help out their deputy. Those hombres are all right. Honest as the day is long."

Tucson said, "Canfield, you've got a prisoner back there. Who is he? What's he in for? You mentioned murder once."

"His name's Sherry—Red Sherry," Canfield answered. "Mr. Smith, I reckon I'd better give you this story from the start. You see, back about two weeks ago, Clem Norton suddenly disappeared. Nobody knows just where he went. His daughter reported the man missing. I instituted a search. Goddlemighty! I raked this whole country, but nary a sign of Clem was to be found."

"Who's Clem Norton?" Tucson asked.

"He runs the Horseshoe-N outfit just north of Lombard's holding. Wife's dead. Just his daughter Molly and a couple of hands there. It's not a large spread, not near so large as Lombard's—that is, Norton didn't run near so many cows. Anyway, Norton disappeared, and we finally figured somebody had killed him."

"Why?" Tucson asked. "Did he have a lot of enemies?"

"I couldn't say as to that," Canfield replied. "Norton was all right, I reckon, but he wa'n't overly friendly. His daughter is inclined to be a mite uppity with folks too. But no matter. As I say, we give Norton up for dead, though we never did find his body. This morning early, while I was asleep here, I was awakened by a noise outside. I pulled on my boots and stepped out. There was a strange horse there, and laying on the ground beside it was this prisoner I mention—plumb unconscious."

"What made him unconscious?" Lullaby asked. "Had somebody shot him?"

Canfield shook his head. "He was drunk, that's what. He'd fallen off'n his bronc and cut his head open. I felt sorry for the poor feller, fetched him inside, and brought him to. In an effort to find out who he was I went through his pockets. The first thing I found was Clem Norton's wallet—empty——"

"How'd you know it was Norton's wallet if it was empty?" Stony queried sharply.

"I mean it was empty of money. There was a couple of letters addressed to Norton, though. So right then I knowed the feller I'd been feeling sorry for was a murderer. He'd robbed and murdered poor Clem Norton. I figured to take him to the sheriff in Chancellor just as soon as I could get to it, then you showed up and——"

"Wait a minute," Tucson said shrewdly. "It looks to me like you're judging a man on damn slim evidence. And you're getting ahead of your story. There was a sack of Durham thrown from Sherry's window. Inside that sack was a certain paper—which you claimed—"

though you couldn't tell me what it said. Canfield, you'd better do some damn fast thinking."

Canfield mopped his forehead. "I'm getting to it, if you'll give me time. It was like this. I'd asked Limpy Fletcher to help me take Sherry to Sheriff Quinn in Chancellor. Well, when Limpy got here he asked me if I'd searched Sherry for weapons and so on. Well, I'd taken his gun, but that was all. Limpy reminded me that sometimes prisoners carried poison to kill themselves when they found themselves in a tight spot. We decided poison could be carried in a Bull Durham sack. We went in to take Sherry's Durham away from him, and he put up a fight. We had to slug the——" Canfield paused, then said, "We were forced to use drastic efforts to subdue him——"

"I can imagine you did," Tucson said dryly. "Go on."

"Before we could stop him, though," Canfield continued, "Sherry threw his Durham through the cell window. I ran out to see what was in it——"

"And found me reading a paper," Tucson put in. "A paper you claimed."

"I wasn't claiming it for myself," the deputy said earnestly. "Just as evidence in a murder case. You'll have to turn it over to me, of course."

"I don't see it that way," Tucson said abruptly. "It happens to be my property—according to law."

"But it can't be yours," Canfield protested.

Tucson laughed shortly. "Maybe not, but my name's on the paper, a bill of sale, as buyer."

Canfield's eyes bugged out; his jaw dropped. "Why—why—that can't be possible," he insisted. "How could your name get on that paper?"

"You do know what that paper said then, don't you?" Lullaby growled. He and Stony were as puzzled as Canfield at learning Tucson's name appeared on the bill of sale.

"No, no," Canfield protested, tugging at his shirt collar. "I ain't the least idea. It just seems strange——" He stopped a moment. "Mr. Smith, are you acquainted with Sherry or the Nortons?"

"Never even heard of 'em before," Tucson replied.

"This is all mighty peculiar," Canfield said. "I'll have to ride out and talk to Molly Norton and see what she knows. You gentlemen won't want to stay in Blue Cloud until I've seen her. I tell you what—you ride on wherever you're going. When I learn something I'll get in touch with you."

Tucson rose to his feet. "No," he said sternly, "we're not going away again. We're staying here—for a long time. There's some

damn bad medicine brewing in Blue Cloud, and I'm aiming to get to the bottom of it, Canfield. I don't like your story——"

Canfield started toward the door. Stony seized the man's shoulders, spun him around, and sent him reeling back against the desk. "Don't force us to get tough with you." Stony grinned. "Canfield, we haven't covered all the ground yet."

"I can't see what else I can do," Canfield stammered.

"We haven't talked to your prisoner yet," Tucson pointed out. "Perhaps this Sherry hombre can give us a few points that have escaped your memory. Personally, I'm plumb curious to see what he looks like."

"You're wasting your time, Mr. Smith," Canfield protested. "He's just like any other drunken cow hand. Besides, he's a murderer. I can't allow you to see him. There's nothing he could tell you——"

"Canfield," Tucson said sternly, "either you produce Sherry right now or I'll take measures to make you produce him. Now it's up to you. Like Stony said, don't force us to get tough."

Canfield's shoulders slumped. Reluctantly he nodded and turned toward the cell corridor at the rear of his office.

5

DEATHTRAP

IT WAS a nine-mile ride from Blue Cloud to the edge of the Dollar-Sign-L holdings and another six miles to the ranch buildings after the main road running north had been left behind. Limpy Fletcher, Frank Ettinger, and Shorty Davitt made that fifteen-mile ride in something better than an hour and a half. By the time they'd dropped from their ponies near the corral, the poor beasts were foam-flecked, straddle-legged.

Although there was also a regular ranch house on the property, Santee Lombard, owner of the Dollar-Sign-L, preferred to live in the bunkhouse with his crew. In this way he could keep a tighter check on his men. It was the sort of crew that had to be controlled with a tight rein. At the present moment Lombard was seated at a small wooden desk just inside the bunkhouse entrance, talking to his foreman, Dave Politan.

Lombard glanced through a window at his right and frowned. "There's Limpy, with Shorty and Frank. Wonder what brought them in?"

Politan peered through the window. "I do hope nothing is wrong," he observed softly. Politan was a chubby, soft-looking individual with an ingratiating, prissy manner, eyes that never seemed to stay

still—and one of the blackest hearts in the cow country. Lombard never had felt quite sure of Politan, though he admitted the man's shrewdness and knowledge of cow business.

An instant later the three burst into the bunkhouse.

"Santee!" Limpy yelled. "There's hell to pay!"

"We'll pay it if we have to." Lombard shrugged.

"And calm down, boys," Politan added. "You seem awfully stirred up. Sometimes I wonder if——"

"Keep still, Dave; let 'em talk," Santee Lombard interrupted. "Now, you hombres, what's up?"

"We had a run-in with the Mesquiteers," Shorty exclaimed.

Limpy nodded. "In the first place, Santee, that Sherry hombre had the paper all right. It was just like Dave had guessed; he simply had to have it someplace on his body. So we put the matter up to Ben Canfield. I went in the cell with Ben and we started to search Sherry. He didn't make any objection until I reached for his Durham sack. Then he put up a fight. Before we could stop him he'd thrun it through the cell window. Ben ran out to get it, leaving me to tussle with Sherry. I had to bat him with my gun a couple of times . . ." From that point on, Limpy told in greater detail what had happened.

He concluded, "When we heard who the three hombres were, we decided we'd better beat it out of town and get back to you, so's you'd know what took place. And—and, here we are."

Lombard looked sharply at his henchmen. "So you tore out and left Ben holding a mess of trouble."

"What else could we do?" Shorty asked. "We couldn't help Ben any. Smith and his pards held all the high cards."

"The main point is," Politan put in quietly, "you didn't get that bill of sale. So we're up against it again."

"Dave," Lombard said, "your plans don't seem to work out well."

"I'm sorry, Santee," Politan flushed. "I still think it was a good idea if we could have got that paper. Maybe it is yet. There may be ways——"

"Of course," Lombard agreed. He considered the matter a few minutes. "Smith is bound to have Sherry brought out, I'm figuring. Sherry will tell his story. It won't jibe with Ben's. I figure Ben has sense enough not to talk too much and to deny all knowledge of anything Sherry may say. It will be Sherry's word against Ben's. There's not much can be proved right off. It'll take time for these Mesquiteer hombres to dig into things. By that time I hope to have 'em stopped."

"Your hopes are sure high," Limpy said discouragedly.

"Maybe not," Lombard replied. "Limpy, just how good are Smith and his two pards?"

"So damned good," Limpy returned fervently, "that I hope I never have to cross guns with any of 'em. They have the luck of the devil. I'd hate to tell you how many men have bucked 'em and failed to get away with it. There was that gang at Nemesis. Smith made them look foolish. Do you happen to remember that big robbery of government gold? It was Smith and his pals cleared up that mess. Over in Cougar County they sure made——"

"That's enough, Limpy," Lombard said dryly. "If you were a religious man I'd almost expect to find you worshipping Tucson Smith. You actually act afraid of him."

"I hate the bustard's guts!" Limpy spat vehemently.

"I figure you're overrating him," Lombard said.

"That's one time your figuring's wrong," Limpy growled. "Look, Santee, you and Dave aren't acquainted with this country down here. You've run all your games up around Wyoming and Montana. By the way, you never did say what brought you into this country."

Lombard smiled thinly. "Didn't I?"

"Now that's just too bad," Politan purred. "We'll have to tell you about it sometime, Limpy."

Limpy cuffed his hat over one ear and said, "Oh hell, it don't make any difference. The question is, what we going to do about Smith and his pals?"

Lombard studied the end of his cigar a moment. Finally, "Limpy, you're a good man with a gun. How do you feel about putting a slug through Smith?"

Limpy's face lost some of its color. "Santee, you can make out my time whenever you like. I'm through."

"Would you, Limpy," Lombard pursued, "be willing to take a shot at Smith if he didn't know you were shooting?"

Limpy hesitated. "Maybe, if I wasn't too close to Smith and there was money in it."

"How much money do you want?"

Limpy said, "Five hundred."

Lombard laughed scornfully. "You're going to do it for two hundred—you and Frank and Shorty. Now, wait"—as a chorus of protest went up—"this will be a cut-and-dried deal. You can't lose. You've already said that Smith is lucky. Luck is largely a matter of brains and planning. Well, I have brains, too, and I can plan."

Shorty said, "We're listening, but we're not committing ourselves to anything."

"Fair enough," Lombard agreed. "I want you three to go into town and see Ben Canfield. Keep out of sight as much as possible.

so Smith and his pals won't see you. I want Ben to swear out a warrant against Smith for resisting an officer of the law—the same being Ben himself. If Ben doesn't get rough, I figure that Smith will accept arrest, figuring to get out on bail right away."

"That's possible." Ettinger nodded.

"All right," Lombard continued. "We've got Smith arrested and on his way to jail. Naturally his two pals go along with Smith and Ben to see he gets a square deal. You three will be waiting at a certain spot where they pass—hidden between buildings someplace. You can arrange that part with Ben. Just as Smith and his pals, accompanied by Ben, pass, you three step out with your guns and shoot 'em in the back."

"It might work." Limpy said slowly, "only——"

"Wait"—Lombard smiled—"I know what you're going to say. You don't want to be accused of murder. But you see, Ben is going to claim that Smith tried to make an escape and that his pals pitched in to help. Ben will swear they fired on him. You three will swear you came to Ben's rescue. It'll all be over so quick that any bystanders won't know exactly what happened. And don't forget, we've got the sheriff at Chancellor to back us in any moves we make. Hell! We can't lose."

"I don't know," Limpy said dubiously. "It sounds all right, but——"

"You'd like to see Smith dead, wouldn't you?" Lombard demanded.

"Ain't nothing I'd like better. Him and his pals." Limpy concluded the words with a lurid curse.

6

SHERRY TELLS HIS STORY

TUCSON and his pards waited after Ben Canfield had departed through the doorway in the back wall of his office. There was a narrow corridor out there with four cells on each side. A cell door clanged shut after a time, then Tucson looked up to see Red Sherry entering the office. High on the right side of Sherry's forehead was a long, jagged cut, now black with dried blood. There was also an ugly bruise on one cheekbone.

Canfield ushered the young fellow into the room. "Here you are, gentlemen. Sherry will tell you he's been well treated."

"T'hell he will," Sherry laughed harshly. He bent his keen gaze on Tucson. "I was listening right close a spell back, when you and Canfield's skunk friends were having that little ruckus outside. Did I understand you to say your name is Tucson Smith?"

Tucson nodded. "These are my pals, Lullaby Joslin and Stony Brooke. We own the 3-Bar-o over near near Los Potros."

"This," Sherry said, "is plumb elegant." He grinned widely. "Maybe I'm just lucky—oh yeah, my name's Sherry. My friends call me Red."

"We're waiting for you to start talking," Stony hinted.

"Exactly." Sherry nodded. "Let me see, I reckon I'd better go back to yesterday noon. I was passing through here on my way farther west. I hoped to find a job with—Well, we'll let that pass for now. Enough to say I was nearly flat broke. I had three dollars and some odd change. I dropped off to get a bite to eat, then stepped into the Sunfisher Bar to get a drink.

"It's liquor is pretty raw." Sherry smiled. "Anyway, just as I was going out, a couple of hombres—they were named Shorty and Frank Something-or-other—asked if I didn't want to play a little poker. Well, I didn't have much to lose, and I thought I might pick up a few dollars. I was wrong. They cleaned me out in two hands."

Lullaby asked, "That the same two we had the ruckus with a spell ago?"

"I think so," Sherry said, "though I couldn't see very well from my cell window. Anyway, when my part in the game was finished I climbed back in my saddle and headed on. Last night I made a dry camp 'bout eighteen or twenty miles west of here. I was dang-nigh asleep when two masked hombres—and I could swear they were Shorty and Frank—snuck up and threw guns on me—"

"It couldn't have been Shorty Davitt and Frank Ettinger," Canfield interrupted. "They're not crooks. You're mistaken, Sherry."

"Look, Canfield"—Lullaby sounded annoyed—"will you keep your big gab out of this? We're listening to Sherry now. You had your say."

Canfield fell silent, though his eyes gleamed balefully at his prisoner.

Sherry continued, "The two masked hombres offered me twenty dollars to sign as a witness to a property deal. I wasn't keen on doing it, but their guns persuaded me otherwise. I was blindfolded and taken to a shack someplace—"

"You don't know exactly where?" Tucson asked.

Sherry shook his head. "I haven't the least idea, but I do know it was west and south from where I'd been camped."

Lullaby said, "It could be Wagon Springs."

Sherry said, "I'd know the place if I saw it again, I think. I had a short look when I was leaving."

"You haven't told us what led up to said departure," Tucson urged.

From that point on Sherry told what had happened to him the previous night, ending up, "I knew dang well that girl didn't want to sign that bill of sale. They'd taken my gun, or I might have acted differently. As it was, there was nothing for me to do but make a run for it, which same I did."

Canfield snorted. "I've never heard such a pack of lies. Why, he had his gun on when I found him."

Stony drew the six-shooter from his holster and said, "One more interruption out of you, Canfield, and I'll bend this barrell over your cranium! Go on, Sherry, what happened to the girl, this Molly Norton, you mentioned?"

"I don't know for sure." Sherry frowned. "I heard a horse going hard in the other direction. I think she made a getaway. Anyway, I hope so. But I coul.dn't waste time to see. All I wanted to do was make a getaway with that bill of sale. I figured I could return it to her later. Not having a gun put me in a fix. My pony had traveled a lot that day. I was afraid he'd tucker out and I'd be caught. I didn't have time to stop and hide that paper anyplace, so I did the next best thing. I folded it small and stuck it in my Durham sack, under the tobacco, hoping, if I was caught, it wouldn't be found."

Tucson smiled. "That must have been a job, riding the way you were. Managing a running bronc and fumbling with that paper."

"I made out"—Sherry grinned—"and just in time. Next thing I knew a bullet had hit my horse and I went flying over its head. My own head hit on something, and I went out cold."

Tucson said, "Go on, Sherry."

Sherry continued, "I don't know how long I was unconscious. When I came to I found myself tied across a horse's back. I was right groggy, but I felt my ropes being tightened. I tried to talk, but somebody hit me on the head and I passed out again. When next I came to I was in a cell out back. The deputy, here, and that other hombre named Limpy started accusing me of the murder of some man named Norton—whether he's a relative of Molly Norton, I don't know. Naturally I denied the charge. But Limpy and Canfield told me if I'd give up that bill of sale they'd drop the murder charge. Otherwise they were going to take me to the jail in Chancellor. I told 'em I knew no'ing about any bill of sale. They got pretty mad——"

"By the Almighty!" Canfield jumped from the desk, his face crimson. "This is the damnedest bunch of lies I've ever listened to in all my born——"

"You don't have to listen, you fat slug," Stony snapped, waving his gun barrel menacingly. Instantly Canfield closed his mouth and relaxed, the color swiftly vanishing from his features.

Sherry continued: "After a time they left me alone. I figured they'd bring me some dinner, but they didn't. Then in the afternoon Limpy and Canfield came back and announced they were going to search me. I didn't put up any argument until they started to take my sack of Durham. Then I broke loose from 'em and tossed it through the window."

Tucson looked at Canfield. "You've been raring to talk, Canfield. Now what you got to say for yourself?"

"Just what I've been trying to say all along," Canfield growled. "That yarn's made up out of whole cloth. It's the damndest passel of lies I ever heard. Limpy knows what happened here. Limpy will back me up——"

"He didn't seem in a hurry to back you when he pulled out of town in such a rush. Sure, he'd tell the same story as you. I'd expect that of a couple of crooks."

"It's one man's word against two," Canfield said boldly.

"Yeah, it is," Tucson conceded. "You say you're holding Sherry for murder. Have you made the proper charges to the justice of the peace here? Reported the matter to anybody?"

"We'll"—Canfield flushed—"I've been so busy I haven't had time yet."

Tucson swore softly and skeptically. "You claim to have the murderer of Clem Norton, yet you haven't had time to do anything about it. Either Sherry is guilty and should be brought before the J.P., bail set if necessary, and a time for his trial set, or he isn't guilty. Now which is-it, Canfield?"

"I tell you he's a suspect." Canfield hesitated a moment, then added, "I aim to take him to Chancellor."

"It's you who's the liar, Canfield," Tucson said sternly. "This whole thing is an attempt to frame Sherry. You knew he had that paper, but you couldn't find it. So you tried to make a deal with him: if he'd give the paper to you, you'd drop the murder charge. Isn't that right?"

"Now, look, Mr. Smith——" Canfield commenced.

"Don't try any more lies, Canfield," Tucson said sternly. "Either you're going through with this in a proper legal way and bring Sherry to trial, or you're going to let him go or——I'm going to get in touch with the governor and ask for an investigation down here."

"The governor!" Canfield gasped.

"I don't know of a better man to appeal to for help in this state," Tucson snapped.

"But—but—but look here, Mr. Smith," Canfield stammered, "that won't be necessary. No use bothering the governor with these petty matters."

"Do you call murder a petty matter?" Tucson asked sternly.

"No, but—but I might have been hasty in my suspicions. I don't want to make trouble for anybody needlessly. Suppose we just drop the matter for the time being?"

Tucson chuckled inwardly. "But certainly you had some right for your suspicions. Canfield. After all, you did find Norton's wallet in Sherry's pocket."

"Yeah, that—that's something that can't be overlooked, I suppose," Canfield gulped. He had a sudden idea. "Of course it wasn't really me that found that wallet. It was Limpy. I couldn't swear I found it."

"What? You couldn't?" Tucson looked amazed. "Well, Canfield, you have practically no evidence at all, have you? Do you suppose Limpy would swear to finding the wallet?"

Canfield squirmed. "I really couldn't say."

"Then you haven't one witness you can count on, have you?" Tucson pursued.

"I—I reckon not." Canfield confessed weakly.

"And yet"—Tucson's words cracked like rifleshots—"you've held Sherry in a cell for a number of hours. Not only that, you've refused to feed him and you've had him beaten. And you haven't any evidence against him whatever."

"He—he was drunk when I found him," Canfield said weakly. "Plumb passed out of the picture——"

"That's a lie," Sherry said quickly. "I haven't had a drink since yesterday noontime."

"Well, I took it for granted you were drunk," Canfield quavered. "I guess I was mistaken."

Tucson turned to the prisoner. "Sherry, it looks to me as though you had a mighty good case against the state. You can sue for false imprisonment and make yourself some money. I'll be glad to act as your witness and testify as to what Canfield's just admitted—that he didn't have a shred of evidence to hold you on."

"Cowboy, that sure sounds good to me." Sherry grinned.

"Of course," Lullaby said gravely, "Deputy Canfield will want to do this thing legal. He can make a statement before the J.P., then ask for proper release papers and——"

"Oh-h-h," Canfield groaned, as though in great pain. He had turned a sickly green color. "Can't we just——?"

"You don't want to hold Sherry any longer?" Tucson asked.

"No, no, get out. It's all a mistake. Just go away—outa my office. We can talk this over—'nother time when I feel better."

"Well, if you insist." Tucson smiled grimly. "I wouldn't want to interfere with the law, you know. But if you feel Sherry should be released, get his things together and we'll be on our way."

Half staggering, Canfield got Sherry's sombrero and gun. "Your horse and blankets are at the Otero Livery Stable," he choked. "Sorry this happened. All a mistake."

7

MOLLY NORTON

THE FOUR went first to the Otero Livery Stable to take a look at the horse which Canfield said belonged to Sherry. It turned out to be a rawboned dun animal with rather spiritless eyes. Tucson, seeing the look on Sherry's face, said, "Not yours, eh, Red?"

"Cripes, no! I had a horse. This crowbait——"

"You say this ain't your bronc?" asked Stan Ramsay, owner of the livery. Ramsay was a lantern-jawed man, partially bald. "If that's the case, you'd better talk to Deputy Canfield. That's the horse he brought here; said it belonged to Sherry. You're Sherry, eh?"

"I'm Sherry, but that's not my pony."

Ramsay frowned, considered his words. "Well, gents, I wouldn't want to be repeated, but I wouldn't trust Ben Canfield as far as I could throw a brick house."

"Everybody in Blue Cloud feel that way about Canfield?" Tucson asked.

"Just about nigh everybody," Ramsay admitted.

Stony said, "That being the case, I don't know how Canfield ever got elected."

"He wasn't," Ramsay said. "Canfield was appointed by Sheriff Rafe Quinn almost as soon as Quinn took office over to the county seat at Chancellor. It really looks to me like Canfield was run by Santee Lombard——"

"And Lombard and Quinn have some sort of tie-up, I suppose," Lullaby put in. "What kind of an hombre is Lombard?"

The livery man replied, "If you stick around you'll find out. Folks don't like him, but it ain't healthy to talk. Me, I'd just as soon not say anything more on the subject. I got a business to look out for. Wouldn't said as much as I have, only I heard that you fellers sort of took Canfield and three Dollar-Sign-L hombres down a peg today." He abruptly changed the subject. "Sherry, there's a bedroll was left with this horse. Maybe you'd better take a look at it and see if it's yours." He led the way into his office near the front entrance of the livery.

The bedroll proved to be Sherry's all right. "But it's not my horse," he insisted.

Tucson said, "You'd better accept him as yours until you can get

another one. I don't reckon there'll be any trouble about riding the wrong horse, so long as Ben Canfield swears this dun pony belongs to Sherry. Matter of fact, I don't think that dun would be a bad horse with proper care and feeding. Ramsay, you see he gets a good feed; curry him down; take a look at his hoofs too. Have any shoe work done that's needed. I hate to see a horse neglected——"

"Look here," Sherry protested. "I've told you I was broke."

"Can't let a horse go to rack and ruin just because you're broke." Tucson smiled. "Forget it, Red. I've got a hunch you'll get a job right soon."

Before they left the livery, Sherry washed the cut on his head. Ramsay, luckily, had a piece of court plaster which he gave Sherry. After Sherry had used the razor from his bedroll he commenced to look more presentable.

"Better bring that bedroll along," Tucson said. "We'll see what the local hotel has to offer in the way of rooms." Then to the livery man, "Ramsay, you'll find three more broncs standing on Holbrook Street right next to the jail. I'd appreciate it if you'll send somebody for 'em and see they're fed and watered."

"I'll take care of it, Mr. Smith."

The sun was low on the horizon by the time they left the livery. On the street once more, Tucson said to Sherry, "Red, how'd you like to take a job with us on the 3-Bar-o?"

"Cripes!" Sherry grinned with pleasure. "That suits me right down to the ground. To tell the truth," he confessed, "I was on the way to your place to ask for a job when I got into that scrape last night."

Lullaby said, "Don't consider yourself lucky, Red. We really work the hide off anybody that signs our pay roll. The bunks are like sleeping on rocks, and the food is terrible. Every chance I get at some decent food when we're away from the ranch, I pick up a little snack."

"You'd better not let Sourdough George hear you talk that way about 3-Bar-o fodder." Stony grinned. Then to Sherry, "George is our ranch cook. I rise to remark there isn't a better cook in the country."

"I'll take a chance on him." Sherry grinned. "Lullaby doesn't look like he'd suffered."

"I'm fair wasting away," Lullaby stated. "There's the hotel. Maybe we can get supper there."

"We've got to see about rooms anyway." Tucson nodded. He handed Sherry a bill. "Advance on wages, Red. You don't want to go around broke."

They entered the lobby of the Blue Cloud Hotel and arranged for

two rooms, then, learning that supper was being served, they entered the dining room through a door that opened off the lobby. The four men had scarcely seated themselves when a voice behind Sherry said calmly, "Mr. Sherry, I believe you have a paper belonging to me."

Sherry glanced around, then leaped to his feet. "Miss Norton!" he exclaimed. "This is luck! Sure, I've got that paper—or rather Tucson—Mr. Smith——" He broke off and introduced the girl to the three men. Already favorably impressed, when Molly Norton learned who the three were she immediately became friendly. "Why, I've heard my father speak of you men," she said, shaking hands. "No, I don't think he ever met you."

"Look here, Miss Norton," Tucson invited. "Why don't you eat with us? We've a lot to talk about. You're concerned in the business. There's a few things we'd like to get straightened out."

"First," Tucson asked, when the waitress had departed, "we'd like to know what happened to you last night."

"I just left in a hurry"—the girl smiled—"while they—those masked men—were busy running to catch Mr. Sherry. I thought I'd better get out as soon as possible and hope that paper would show up later. Oh, I suppose Mr. Sherry told you what happened last night?"

Tucson nodded. "A lot more has happened since." Briefly he sketched for the girl the train of circumstances that led down to the present moment. By the time he had concluded and Molly Norton had expressed her amazement at the turn events had taken, the waitress arrived with platters of steaming food. They ate in silence for the first few minutes, then Tucson asked, "If you'll give us a line on what's happening hereabouts, Miss Norton, perhaps we can find out what's going on. Red's a stranger here; my pards and I have been out of the country for quite a spell. Last time we came through Blue Cloud it was just a stage station. The town has grown fast."

"That's due to the coming of the railroad," Molly Norton said. "Things have picked up quite a bit. There was a mining boom on for a time, but the strike petered out. However, it's good cattle country, and business has kept up fairly well." A worried look entered the girl's dark eyes. "Now I'm not sure just what will happen."

"Suppose you tell us what you know. What about the ranches around here? Do you know all the owners well?"

Molly said, "Commencing to the west and moving clockwise, there's the O-Slash-P Ranch, the 21-Bar, the Dollar-Sign-L, the Horse-shoe-N—that's our place." She paused a moment before continuing: "Due north of Blue Cloud lies the Rafter-L, then to the east comes

the Coffee-Pot and Bell outfits. You see, the various ranches sort of radiate fanwise around Blue Cloud. To the south of town is the Mexican border. All the stock raisers are good friends of ours, excepting Santee Lombard. I feel sure he's back of our trouble—though I can't prove it."

"Rustling?" Stony asked.

"Some." the girl admitted, "but I don't think anybody has had serious losses yet. You see, it's something over a year ago that Lombard and his foreman, Dave Politan, arrived in Blue Cloud. The day after he arrived Lombard made an offer for the old Lewis outfit—the Dollar-Sign-L. Lewis was old and he was glad to sell. He got a good price for the place too. Lombard took possession and immediately commenced hiring a mean crew of hands—most of them suspected rustlers. One or two of the owners suggested to the sheriff, Quinn, at the county seat, that a sharp eye be kept on Lombard, but the sheriff didn't seem to pay much attention to the idea."

Molly Norton took a sip of coffee and went on, "About six months ago Lombard made us an offer for our place. It wasn't a particularly good offer. We didn't want to sell anyway. We said no. Since then he's made other offers. I always told Dad we didn't want to sell. You see, the ranch is in my name. Perhaps I'd better explain that. Dad is really my stepfather. When mother died she left the ranch to me. Dad had always insisted she do just that. He's been as good as a real father to me, and I've tried more than once to make him part owner, but he always insisted he was satisfied to get a living out of the Horseshoe-N and run it for me. However, everybody took it for granted he was the owner."

Tucson nodded and asked, "Why should Lombard want your place? Is it a better spread than the Dollar-Sign-L?"

Molly shook her head. "We have more acreage, but most of our land is semidesert stuff. It's not good grazing, except for the smallest third, near the mountains. All of Lombard's land is good grass. We've never been able to carry a herd the size of the Dollar-Sign-L's."

"What about water?" Red Sherry put in.

"We both have good water," Molly replied. "Cougar Creek heads up in Twin Sisters Peaks back of our place, flows across our property and across the Dollar-Sign-L. The 21-Bar and O-Slash-P water on Cougar Creek too. The stream runs on down past Blue Cloud and across the Mexican border."

Stony said, "I remember when we entered town we crossed a plank bridge just before we reached the first buildings. The water looked right muddy."

"It's clearer farther north," Molly said. "No, Mr. Smith, it's no

shortage of water that makes Lombard want our place. And it can't be grass he wants. As I said, we run just a small herd. Dad and three hands took care of things. I kept house and cooked. During branding of beef roundup we often hired extra hands, but that was all. The first trouble we had——" Molly paused. "To make a short story of it, it was about a week after we'd refused Lombard's offer the second time that one of our hands was found dead on the range. Lombard made a third offer. Again we refused. Another puncher was found shot. He's in the hospital at Chancellor now. They give him a fair chance of pulling through. He'd been shot in the back, like the first man. Didn't know who did it, of course. That left only Dad and our third puncher, Steve Maxwell——"

"Nice bunch of coyotes in this country," Lullaby growled through a mouthful of roast beef.

"Two weeks ago," Molly went on, "Dad failed to come in at the end of the day. He'd been out on the range. Steve Maxwell hadn't seen him. I reported the matter to Deputy Canfield, but we've heard nothing. I feel sure Dad isn't dead, or—or his body would have been found."

"I think you're right," Tucson said consolingly.

"Yesterday," Molly continued, tight-lipped, "Steve Maxwell failed to show up by sundown. No, don't ask me what happened to him. I don't know. I haven't heard a thing."

"That left you alone on the ranch," Tucson said.

Molly nodded. "Last night, shortly after sundown, a masked man showed up at the ranch and told me if I'd sign a bill of sale for the ranch my dad would be returned. I didn't feel right about it, but I was willing to try anything. The masked man insisted on blindfolding me when we left. I didn't know where I was being taken, but later I learned it was a place in Wagon Springs." She looked at Sherry. "That was when you made the getaway with that signed bill of sale. I left in a hurry and returned at once to the Horseshoe-N."

"You didn't recognize the masked man?" Tucson asked.

Molly shook her head. "He took me to that shack in Wagon Springs and turned me over to a second masked man, then left immediately. Later two more masked men brought in Mr. Sherry and——well, you know the rest of that story."

Tucson asked, "What brings you to town?"

Molly explained: "I stayed at the ranch most of the day, trying to decide what to do. I don't want to be there alone. I finally decided to come to Blue Cloud and live at the hotel until I could hire a woman to go back and live on the ranch with me. At the same time I intended to report to Deputy Canfield what had taken place last night."

"Did you?" Lullaby asked.

Molly shook her head. "Just before I arrived at the deputy's office I saw Canfield riding out of town. It's my guess he's going to see Lombard for further orders."

"You think he's in Lombard's pay?" Tucson asked.

"I feel sure of it." Molly's eyes flashed angrily. "But I can't prove it."

Tucson took from his pocket the bill of sale and laid it before the girl. "I reckon this is your property yet. You never received anything for your ranch, I take it."

"Not a cent. And I'm certainly glad to get this back——" Molly stopped and looked at Tucson. "Why, this has your name filled in as buyer. I don't understand."

"Neither do I." Tucson smiled. "I've been wondering if Reginald—I mean Red—can throw any light on the subject."

Sherry flushed crimson. "Now don't you start kidding me about the name signed to that paper. Miss Norton will tell you that was forced out of me."

"Did you fill in my name as buyer?" Tucson asked flatly.

Sherry nodded. "I had a stub of a pencil in my pocket. I wrote the name in hard, so it couldn't be easily erased."

"I think you're sort of smart." Stony grinned.

"Not me," Red denied. "I just get an idea now and then."

"We're pretty sure," Lullaby said slowly, "that Lombard must be at the bottom of this. Do you suppose it was intended to fill in his name as buyer?"

Tucson said thoughtfully, "I doubt it. Any name could be filled in. Red, as witness, was a stranger here. I think they must have decided to get rid of him if he didn't leave the country. For instance, the name of John Doe could have been filled in as buyer. Later other bills of sale could have been made out, always transferring the property. Eventually Lombard's name would have gone on a bill. He could have sworn he didn't know who the seller was, but by that time he'd have all the bills, and the transactions could be traced back to the one bearing Miss Norton's signature."

"But would all this stand up in court if I protested it?" Molly Norton asked.

"It probably would, if you had accepted money, as you were ready to last night," Tucson said.

"Even if I explained that the bill of sale was practically forced out of me?" Molly frowned. "I was just going to do it to insure Dad's return."

"I'm afraid," Tucson said, "the court might not consider why you signed the paper—only that you had signed it. That would depend

largely on the judge, the sort of attorney you had, and the sort Lombard hired. At best the affair would be tied up in litigation. To avoid expense you'd probably have to settle out of court. I think, Molly Norton, you owe thanks to Red, here, for saving your bacon— or your ranch."

"Aw, forget it," Sherry said, confused.

"I don't intend to forget it," Molly said.

"Look, Molly," Tucson broke in, "suppose you let me keep this paper so I can show it around a mite."

"Why"—Molly looked surprised—"of course, but what are you planning to do?"

"We'll let Lombard think I've really taken over your ranch. Then he'll have to come to me. I'm aiming to get at the bottom of this trouble and learn what's what. You can have the paper, of course, any time you like."

"I think Tucson has a right idea," Sherry broke in.

"Golly," the girl said, "I don't want to load my troubles on you, Tucson Smith, but I've got to admit the idea sounds mighty good to me——"

"Miss Norton," a new voice broke in.

They looked around to find the owner of the hotel standing near Molly's chair, "Miss Norton," he said awkwardly, "I'm afraid I have some bad news for you. No, it's not about your father——"

"You might as well tell it, Mr. Jameson," Molly said, white-faced. "I promise I won't faint or do anything silly."

"Steve Maxwell worked for you, didn't he?" the hotel man asked.

Molly nodded. "What about Steve?" she demanded.

"He was just brought in by an old prospector. Maxwell was found out on the range, shot in the back. He's been dead a day or more."

8

ARREST

THE FOLLOWING MORNING Deputy Ben Canfield, accompanied by Limpy Fletcher, Shorty Davitt and Frank Ettinger, were loping their ponies toward Blue Cloud. It wasn't more than eight o'clock.

Canfield was riding next to Limpy, his heavy features streaked with dirt and perspiration from the dusty ride. He mopped at his face with a soiled bandanna. "Whew! It's going to be hot today."

Limpy turned his unshaven face toward the deputy and grinned. "You mean we're going to make it hot for Smith and his pals. Jeez, Ben! It's a good thing you rode out to the ranch last evening. From the way you acted when Santee told you what we'd planned, I guess

it was lucky the boss was able to give you your orders direct. You didn't act like you thought much of the idea."

"I still don't," Canfield said heavily. "Only that Santee made it an order, I wouldn't go through with it."

"Cripes A'mighty! You act like you was afraid of Smith."

Canfield shook his head. "I ain't afraid of him. I just don't like to tangle with him, that's all."

Limpy said sharply, "You ain't figuring to back out on us, Ben?"

Canfield said, "No, I'll go through with it. But it's up to you hombres to do your part."

"We'll do that." Limpy nodded. "I got it all planned out. While you're arresting him, us three will be waiting in that passageway between the Blue Cloud Saloon and Tiernan's Photograph Gallery. You just see that you get the warrant, arrest Smith, and walk him past where we're waiting."

"I was just thinking." Canfield frowned. "Now that Sherry's out of jail, he's liable to accompany Smith and his pards to the jail——"

Limpy swore impatiently. "In the first place, they won't get as far as the jail. In the second, what difference does one more make? After all, there'll be us three and you, Ben."

"I ain't going to do no shooting," Canfield stated.

"It won't be necessary," Ettinger growled. "We can take care of those hombres. All you got to do is swear to the warrant for resisting an officer and walk Smith past us."

Canfield nodded glumly. He still didn't like it.

When the four arrived in town the three cowboys repaired at once to the Sunfisher Bar to wait until Canfield notified them he'd made the proper arrangements for the arrest.

Meanwhile, Tucson and his friends had had breakfast at the hotel. He said to Molly Norton as they rose from the dining table, "You just run along, Molly, and see about that woman you're aiming to hire. I'll go along to the undertaker's and make the arrangements for Steve Maxwell's funeral. You'd better leave that to me. I know you were fond of Steve, but you can't help things any by causing yourself more pain. We'll meet you back here and have dinner together."

"I really appreciate this an awful lot, Mr. Smith."

"Look here, Molly Norton," Tucson said with assumed sternness, "I told you last night to forget that 'mister' stuff."

"Yes, Tucson." The girl smiled faintly.

"All right, run along then."

The others said good-bye, and Molly departed, Red Sherry looking after her. "Gosh, she's a pretty girl," he sighed.

"You're not telling us anything new," Tucson said. "Well, let's drift down to that undertaker's."

The four men sauntered along the shady side of the street, crossing over to reach the undertaking establishment which was located between Lamy and Austin streets. Tucson entered the building. The other three waited out in front.

When Tucson emerged from the undertaking parlors, Stony asked, "Learn anything new?"

"Not much," Tucson replied. "Maxwell's body was stripped. I had a look at the wound. The bullet entered under the right shoulder blade and ranged left through the heart. The doctor probed it out last night. It had hit bone and was pretty much battered, but I'm guessing it was a .45."

Lullaby said slowly, "Not a rifle slug, then. Probably the killer was up fairly close. It must have been somebody Maxwell knew—that it, he wasn't expecting trouble from whoever did it. That's a guess, of course; the killer could have been hidden close in some brush."

Tucson shook his head. "You've forgotten that prospector who brought Maxwell in said he found the body on open range. His hawg-leg was in holster when he was found. Well, we'll have a job of running down to do. Meanwhile, funeral at Boot Hill tomorrow, in the morning. Just to sort of impress Lombard and his crowd, I think we ought to have a good attendance at the burial. We need somebody close to Maxwell, like the crew of the Horseshoe-N."

"Which same there ain't none," Stony pointed out.

"There's going to be one," Tucson said.

Red Sherry put in: "There's us four and Miss Norton."

"Look, pards," Tucson said, "to make it look like we've really bought the Horseshoe-N, we've got to hire a crew."

Stony chuckled. "I know—and the best crew you know of——"

"—is the crew of the 3-Bar-o," Lullaby finished. "I think that's a damn good idea. Who do you think we'd better bring over, Tucson?"

Tucson said, "I've been thinking of that. Right now there really isn't much doing on our outfit. Jeff and Caroline can see to the rodding—as they've been doing for some time, anyway."

Stony said, "Jeff is sure going to be sore if you leave him out of a ruckus."

"Serves him right for getting married and becoming a foreman." Tucson smiled. "Besides, I don't like to get married men into fights if it can be avoided. For one, we'll use Ananias Jones. That old coot is always good in a scrap, and he's plenty cow-country wise. Then, Rube Phelps, Tex Malcolm, and Bat Wing. I wonder just

exactly how big a crew Santee Lombard carries on his pay roll?"

"Feller in the Blue Cloud Salon last night was telling me Lombard has a right sizable gang," Lullaby said.

Tucson considered, "There'll be us four and the four men I named."

"How about Bud Taggart?" Stony suggested.

"Bud might be more use to Jeff than to us," Tucson said. "Bud's right handy with tools should anything get broke or the horses need attention. He himself admits he's a lousy shot—and we're going to need good lead slingers. Anyway, eight of us should be enough."

"Hey, Tucson!" Lullaby sounded alarmed. "Aren't you going to send for Sourdough George? We'll need a good cook. Every outfit has to have a cook. My stomach's delicate. Besides, Sourdough would be hurt if he wasn't invited."

"For the sake of your delicate stomach," Tucson said gravely, "we'll send for Sourdough. That settles things then. Now let's head for the Blue Cloud Saloon. That looks like the best place in town to spread the news that I bought the Horseshoe-N."

They strolled along Main Street until they reached the Blue Cloud, run by Titus Shaw, a middle-aged genial, individual with a freckled face and an extremely neat appearance. They had made Shaw's acquaintance the previous evening and liked him.

"What'll it be, gentlemen?" Titus asked from behind the bar as they pushed through the swinging doors.

Tucson took a cigar; the other three, bottles of beer. The saloon was a long narrow room, with swinging doors at the entrance and a door and one window at the rear. To the left stretched the long hardwood bar, with its customary brass rail. The rest of the room was given over to some straight-backed chairs and round tables for those who liked to play cards or sit down with their drinks.

"Ben Canfield was in here about fifteen minutes ago, asking for you," Titus Shaw said to Tucson.

"That so? What did he want?"

"He didn't say. Just asked if you'd been in. I told him I hadn't seen you since last night. I understand you and your friends sort of took Ben down a peg yesterday."

"We tried," Tucson smiled.

"I wonder what the potbellied slob wants of you, Tucson?" Lullaby pondered.

"Maybe," Stony surmised, "it has suddenly occurred to him he should arrest you, pard."

"That," Tucson chuckled, "would certainly break my heart. No, he probably heard I was going to raise cattle in his district and wanted to make friends."

Titus Shaw pricked up his ears. "You buying a ranch hereabouts, Mr. Smith?"

Tucson took from his pocket the bill of sale. "This tells the story, Titus."

Shaw rapidly glanced through the writing on the paper. "Horse-shoe-N, eh? I'll be sorry to see Miss Norton leave. She's a darn nice girl. Her dad was all right too."

"I don't figure Molly will leave at once," Tucson explained. "She wants to stay around until something more definite is settled about her father's disappearance. We've arranged it so she could stay at the ranch house after she finds a woman to stay with her."

The others had finished their beer. Tucson said, "Let's drift over to the railroad depot. I'll send a telegram to Jeff Ferguson, telling him what hands we want sent on."

"The sooner the better." Lullaby nodded. "We can't raise beef without a crew——"

"Here comes Canfield," Red Sherry put in.

They turned. Deputy Canfield was just entering through the swinging doors. He stiffened a little as he saw Tucson, then came on, his features endeavoring to assume a grim expression.

"I've been looking for you, Mr.—er—Smith."

Tucson swung around to face the man. "What's on your mind, Canfield?"

"I got a painful duty to perform." Perspiration commenced to form on Canfield's forehead.

"Duties are always painful." Tucson smiled thinly. "This something to do with our conversation of yesterday?"

The deputy nodded. "The fact is——" He paused, clearing his throat. "The fact is, I'm aiming to put you under arrest. You coming peaceful or not?"

9

TO THE HOOSEGOW

Tucson didn't reply at once. Then he laughed softly while Canfield squirmed under his penetrating gaze. Tucson said finally, "What's the charge, Canfield?"

"Resisting an officer," Canfield said. "You remember, yesterday—— hopefully——you and I had a little misunderstanding?"

"Seems like I do, now that you mention it." Tucson's eyes twinkled. "You got a warrant, I suppose?"

"I sure have." Canfield tapped a paper that protruded from one hip pocket of his pants. "Look here, I'm not trying to be disagreeable

about this. If you'd only listen a minute you'd see. But I've the law to uphold. Several people who witnessed our trouble yesterday have insisted I make an arrest."

"Meaning Santee Lombard, I suppose," Tucson put in.

Canfield tried to look surprised. "Lombard? What's he got to do with this? Anyhow, this is just something we've got to go through with if the law is to be upheld. This is a law-abiding community. I'm making it as easy as possible, Mr. Smith. I not only got the warrant, but I've arranged the amount of bail—you'll want to give bail, of course. I know you won't want to stay in my jail. Day after tomorrow you'll have your hearing before the justice of the peace. There won't be anything to it. Small fine, maybe, Frankly, I didn't want to do this, but some civic-minded folks insisted. After all, I'm a servant of the people."

"Of course you are," Tucson said heartily. "I appreciate the fine way you've handled this."

"Well," Canfield said uncertainly, "any time you're ready, then."

"If you're not in a hurry, Canfield," Tucson proposed, "I'm going to have a drink. I'd like to have you join me."

"Well, thanks," Canfield nodded, regaining some of his confidence. "Just so we don't waste too much time."

Tucson spoke to his companions. "What you boys having?"

"I'll take another bottle of beer," Sherry said.

"Nothing for me," Stony replied. "I think I'll drift over to the railroad depot and send that telegram we were talking about."

"That's a right idea," Tucson nodded. "Just tell the 3-Bar-o we've bought a ranch here and won't be back for a spell."

"Wait a minute, Stony," Lullaby said. "I'll go with you. Sometimes they have sandwiches at depots. Tucson, we'll see you in a little while, when you've finished your business with the deputy sheriff. So long, Canfield."

"So long," Canfield echoed.

Stony and Lullaby sauntered lazily toward the rear door of the saloon, in the direction of the depot which was almost directly back of the drinking establishment. They passed through; the door slammed behind them.

Titus Shaw served drinks. With a glass of whisky before him, Canfield commenced to feel more sure of himself. The departure of Lullaby Joslin and Stony Brooke would make things far easier for Limpy and his companions. Those two could be taken care of another day. As for Red Sherry—well, he wouldn't amount to much, probably.

Tucson set down his beer glass. "Well, let's be getting along. Our deputy is probably anxious to get this detail settled, so he can get

to his other duties. Red, do you want to walk along to the jail with us?"

"Damn right I do," Red exclaimed so emphatically that Canfield's eyes suddenly narrowed in concern; this damn redhead would have to be watched closely. If he wasn't stopped quickly he might kick up a lot of resistance. Involuntarily Canfield's fingers twitched toward his gun butt.

Tucson didn't miss that movement; he said quietly, "I don't suppose you're going to insist on taking my gun, Canfield?"

Canfield had planned to do just that, but something in Tucson's eyes warned him he'd better not push the point. "Hell, no," he growled. "I reckon that won't be necessary. Come on, we'll get started if you're ready."

Taking Tucson by the arm, he headed toward the swinging doors, followed by Sherry. As they were leaving, Titus Shaw said, "Come in again, gentlemen. You too, Canfield."

Canfield didn't miss the insinuation; that was something to be stored up for future reference when he'd take Shaw down a peg or two.

"Thanks, Titus." Tucson spoke over his shoulder. "I will be in again."

Inwardly Canfield laughed. Like hell you will, he thought. You'll be dead as a doornail within the next few minutes. He tightened his grip on Tucson's arm. The three men passed through the entrance . . .

The instant Stony and Lullaby had stepped through the rear door of the Blue Cloud Saloon all appearance of indifference had vanished. Lullaby was swearing softly under his breath. They paused but a brief moment when the door had slammed at their backs. Stony whispered swiftly, "They'll be someplace between here and the saloon. Walk easy."

The expected assailants were far closer than they realized: peering cautiously around the corner of the saloon building, Stony and Lullaby saw Limpy, Shorty, and Ettinger standing, guns in hand, in the narrow passageway that ran between the Blue Cloud Saloon and a photograph gallery that stood next door. The three men were tense, their faces toward the street along which Tucson and the deputy were due to pass any minute.

Lullaby was about to start toward them, when Stony's hand clamped down on Lullaby's gun arm and drew him back.

"Wait." Stony's lips barely formed the one warning word.

They backed a few paces. Stony glanced up the rear wall of the saloon. A couple of empty beer kegs stood there; there was also a stack of empty beer-bottle cases. Stony whispered: "We can get up on that flat roof."

"C'mon, steady those cases."

Stony stood on one of the beer kegs, placed a restraining hand on the stack of wood cases. The bottles in the cases rattled, but so intent were the men waiting in the passageway around the corner, they failed to hear the noise. The next instant Lullaby's muscular fingers had gripped the edge of the roof and drawn his lean body to the top. "Hurry up," he whispered.

Stony eyed dubiously the beer cases. With no one to steady them, his weight might bring them toppling down. But he was agile and quick. He took a chance, climbed up, gripped the edge of the roof—and made it. Then he sprinted back to the building where Lullaby waited.

Both men slipped off their boots and tiptoed in sock feet near the edge of the building, so those in the saloon below wouldn't hear them on the roof. Reaching the side, they threw themselves face down and peered over the edge.

There, below in the passageway, waited Limpy, Ettinger, and Shorty Davitt, six-shooters clutched in fists, eyes glued to the street. Limpy stood in the middle; the other two stood slightly behind at either shoulder. Their whispers ascended to the waiting pair on the roof above:

Limpy growled cautiously, "Why in hell don't Ben hurry? Somebody'll be seeing us here."

"I'll tell him a few things later," Shorty rasped.

"If Ben doesn't hurry up——" Limpy commenced.

At that moment Canfield's voice was heard at the saloon entrance: "This ain't going to take but a minute, Smith. I aim to hurry things up and get this finished."

It was the expected signal Limpy and his friends had been waiting for.

"Here they come," Limpy hissed. "Shoot the minute you see the bastards!"

The guns of Lullaby and Stony were already out of holsters, and aimed downwards.

"You mean us?" Stony spoke clearly to the men below.

"One move and we'll do the drilling, you lousy two-bit snakes!" Lullaby snapped.

Limpy and his companions tensed, then, their guns still held before them, turned their heads, jaws slack, in the direction of the voices. A lurid curse was ripped from Limpy's throat.

"Talk all you like, but don't pull triggers," Stony laughed. "And don't make a move. We're fair hopin' to let daylight through your ruddy carcasses!"

By this time Tucson, Sherry, and Ben Canfield had drawn abreast

of the men. Instantly Tucson's gun was out. Sherry wasn't far behind in the draw he put on Deputy Canfield.

"It's a trap, Tucson!" Sherry exclaimed.

"It was a trap." Tucson laughed. "Canfield, you got a nerve trying to pull an old trick like this on us."

"I swear I don't know what you're talking about," Canfield quavered. "Limpy! What you hombres doing there?"

Limpy and his companions stood rigid, not daring to move.

"Pretty sight, aren't they?" Stony grinned. "Just like statues. Hey, you hombres, what you posing for, Custer's last stand?" He raised his voice. "Come one, come all, see the living statues in famous poses. Their heads are carved from pure granite, folks; their spines are made of jelly. Don't miss this thrilling tableau. And now you c'yotes down there, drop your guns—pronto—all except Canfield. One wrong move—and it's the last one!"

The hired gunmen followed orders. Their "hardware" clattered to the ground.

"And now—march!" came the command from the roof. "One behind the other—Indian file. March!"

The gunmen marched. There was nothing else to do. With their enemies routed, and the gathering crowd hooting and jeering at the discomfited gunsels, Stony and Lullaby eased themselves down from the roof and lined up beside Tucson, who right now was asking Canfield, "By the way, where's that warrant you had for my arrest?"

Canfield produced it with trembling fingers.

"You really don't want to serve it now, do you?" Tucson asked.

"I—I reckon not. This has been a bad mistake, I guess."

"You guess right," Tucson said grimly. "So you planned to shoot me from behind, you and your friends."

"No—no, you're mistaken," Canfield protested. "I was only doing my duty. I don't know what Limpy and his pards were doing there. I didn't even know—"

"Liar!" Tucson's single word cracked like a whip. Canfield fell silent. An angry muttering ran through the crowd as Tucson's words were passed on. Canfield slunk away like a whipped dog, and Tucson turned to his pards. "I figure it's time we headed over to that railroad depot and sent the telegram to the boys. After this we're going to need a fighting crew or I miss my guess." He turned, spoke to the crowd at large. "If Canfield should come sneaking back with the idea of rounding up his killer friends, please tell him I said it wouldn't be advisable."

Nodding to his companions, Tucson led the way along the passage-way in the direction of the depot.

10

INDIAN SIGN

AFTER SENDING THE TELEGRAM to the 3-Bar-o, Tucson and his friends walked from the depot to Lamy Street and thence to their hotel on Main. Glancing along Main, Stony chuckled. "Still a crowd down there next to the Blue Cloud Saloon."

They were standing on the porch that fronted the hotel. At that moment Tucson sighted Molly Norton just ascending the steps to the porch. The girl looked puzzled as she spoke to the men and added, "Did you boys have anything to do with that business?"

Red chuckled explosively. Molly glanced suspiciously at the others. She said, "Well, now I know you did."

"Yes, Molly, we did," Tucson confessed. He told the girl briefly what had taken place.

Molly commenced to laugh, then turned serious. "This may not seem so funny when Lombard hears about it," she warned. "And I don't see how you can accept all this so calmly. After all, Tucson, those men might have killed you—and Red—I mean Mr. Sherry."

"Red suits me." Sherry grinned with pleasure.

"Look, Molly," Tucson said. "We're giving this as much serious thought as it requires. We're not overlooking any bets. I'm not sure, but I think those are the three men who held you and Red in that shack night before last. You see, we read some sign along the road on our way here. Do you think you could identify them?"

Molly hesitated. Red put in, "I feel right sure they are. One was quite tall, one quite short. Of course they were masked and had on different clothing."

"Did one walk with a limp?" Lullaby asked.

Red said, "I don't know. He was standing by Molly all the time. I didn't see him walk."

"I didn't either," Molly said. "The voices I heard didn't sound quite natural, either. Still, I feel almost sure they're the same men."

"Would you be willing to swear to it in court?" Tucson asked.

Molly shook her head. "I'm not certain enough for that."

"I feel pretty much the same way," Red admitted.

Tucson pondered. "Voices could be disguised, of course—probably were. I reckon, for the time being, there's no use bringing charges against those three. We'll let things ride for a spell until we get more proof."

Molly frowned. "I feel there's going to be a great deal more trouble before we get further proof. And I don't like the idea of just you four against the Dollar-Sign-L. Lombard has always pretty

much bullied this town. He's not going to like being opposed. And with his whole crew——"

"Don't worry about us being outnumbered," Tucson cut in. "I've sent a telegram to the 3-Bar-o for some of our own hands. They should be here tomorrow morning on the train; it gets in around eight, I'm told."

"Can they get here so soon?" Molly asked.

Tucson nodded. "After all, Los Potros is only fifty or sixty miles from Blue Cloud. My telegram should reach the ranch this afternoon. The men can catch the early-morning train. They won't have horses, of course."

"There are plenty mounts—good mounts—out to the Horse-shoe-N," Molly said. "We always kept more horses than we needed, but Dad just couldn't bear to part with a good pony."

"That's fine," Tucson said. "We can hire enough broncs at the livery to get the boys out there. Oh, by the way, Steve Maxwell is to be buried tomorrow morning. Our crew will be here by then. It's all fixed up, Molly."

"Molly's eyes misted suddenly. "Tucson, I don't know how to thank you—and you others——"

Tucson cut in quickly, "By the way, Molly, did you ride to town or drive a wagon?"

"I rode my horse in. Why?"

"We'll need a wagon to take supplies out to your place. We can hire that at the livery, too, I suppose. I think, Molly, we'd better go eat dinner now. After dinner you and Red can see about getting a wagon and buying supplies."

"That's a right idea." Red smiled broadly.

"How about that woman you were going to hire?" Tucson asked the girl.

"I couldn't get the woman I wanted, but I've hired a young Mexican girl. I think she'll be all right. She'll be ready to leave tomorrow, too."

Red Sherry said, "Here comes Deputy Ben Canfield."

Canfield approached rather meekly. "Could I speak to you a minute, Mr. Smith?" he said humbly from the foot of the porch steps.

Tucson nodded. "I don't know why not. What's on your mind?"

"Well, you see," Canfield commenced hesitantly, "It's like this. Limpy and Shorty and Frank Ettinger are aiming to leave town, but it'll take some little time for 'em to get around and collect their extra duds and such. So since they're vamosing out of town——"

"You want us to lay off 'em while they're getting their things?" Tucson cut in.

Canfield nodded. "That's just it. You see——"

"I see, all right," Tucson cut in again. "Okay, we'll give 'em two hours from right now. After that they're fair game. Now, another thing, Canfield—you said something yesterday about finding Clem Norton's wallet on Red."

"I explained that it was really Limpy that found it. Matter of fact"—Canfield stalled for time by clearing his throat—"I talked to Limpy later and learned that he didn't really find the wallet in Sherry's pocket. It was laying in the road near where we picked up Sherry, so you see we were mistaken about that too."

Tucson said dryly, "You certainly are willing to please all of a sudden. We want that wallet, Canfield."

"Yes sir," Canfield said. He produced a worn leather wallet from a hip pocket and extended it to Tucson, moving up a few steps to do so.

Tucson accepted the wallet and turned it over to Molly. "That your dad's?"

The girl nodded after an instant's examination, then opened it to extract a couple of cards and three old letters. "Yes, this is Dad's all right."

"You wouldn't know how much money was missing?" Tucson asked.

Molly shook her head. "It couldn't be very much though."

Tucson turned back to Canfield. "That's all, Canfield. You can return to your office."

Red Sherry laughed. "You've certainly got the Indian sign on that windbag, Tucson."

Tucson nodded grimly. "I aim to put the Indian sign—and a lot more—on Lombard's whole gang before we get through with 'em. I just can't abide a crook. And, Molly, quit worrying about your dad. We've got his wallet. I feel sure he isn't dead. We'll be finding him one of these days soon."

11

"GET OUT YOUR IRON!"

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, shortly after eight o'clock, a group of eager-eyed 3-Bar-o hands alighted from the train at the Blue Cloud depot. On hand to meet them were Tucson, Lullaby, Stony, Red, and Molly. The men came piling out of the caboose of the train, carrying burlap sacks and saddles. Wild yells of greeting filled the air. There was considerable kidding back and forth. Most important among the newcomers, in Lullaby's mind, was Sourdough George Jenkins.

Jenkins was lanky and dour-looking, with a long red nose, and was forever complaining of his trouble with corns.

And there was Ananias Jones, who said: "Tucson, Jeff Ferguson is plumb put out at having to stay behind."

Ananias was spare, grizzled, with sweeping white mustaches, sharp blue eyes with shaggy eyebrows, and a leathery frame that reminded folks of a length of rawhide. He was the typical old-time cowman and possessed a fund of amusing yarns, the facts of which were considerably exaggerated.

The other three arrivals were Tex Malcolm, Rube Phelps, and Bat Wing. Phelps and Malcolm were lean, sinewy-jawed sons of the range, with steady eyes and confident manner. Phelps was dark-complexioned; Malcolm, sandy-haired. Bat Wing was younger than these two, blond, slim-hipped, with an infectious grin. One thing Tucson had noticed when his men alighted from the train; every one of them had already buckled on his six-shooter. In addition, Sourdough George carried a short-barreled shotgun. Plainly, the 3-Bar-o men were ready for action.

Red was accepted wholeheartedly by the crew: anyone hired by Tucson was certain to be all right. Tucson explained briefly what had happened; Molly added a few words here and there. If the seriousness of the situation impressed the newcomers it failed to show on their faces. They told the girl confidently that they'd see to it, if possible, that her father would be restored to her and Lombard's nefarious activities stopped.

Within a short time they strolled over to the livery, where horses were hired for the 3-Bar-o hands. By this time it was after nine o'clock. The funeral of Steve Maxwell was set for ten. Molly went back to the hotel to change to riding clothes, as she had decided to accompany "her crew" on horseback.

The funeral was held at Boot Hill, Blue Cloud's cemetery, located at the end of Sanfrisco Street (the residential thoroughfare), northeast of the town. Though there was no sign of Limpy, Shorty, and Ettinger, Lombard and a large number of Dollar-Sign-L hands were there and were pointed out by Molly to Tucson, together with many citizens of the town, friends of Maxwell's.

Riding back to the center of town later, Molly said to Tucson: "Well, Santee Lombard must realize by this time that I'm not entirely without friends."

"Exactly the impression I wanted to leave," Tucson said grimly.

"Why do you suppose," Red said, "that Lombard and his gang attended the funeral?"

"That's simple," Tucson replied. "We feel certain that Lombard is responsible for Maxwell's murder, though we can't prove it."

Lombard knows we feel that way, so he and his gang attended the funeral to pretend to show deference to a dead neighbor, thus hoping to throw us off the track. Lombard acted exactly as I suspected he would."

They arrived back at the hotel in time for dinner. When the meal was concluded Tucson ordered the men to accompany Red and Molly out to the Horseshoe-N and get settled. Sourdough George drove the wagon with the young Mexican girl whom Molly had hired beside him on the seat. The girl's name was Maria Lopez; she was pleasant-featured and looked capable. Behind Maria and Sourdough, in the bed of the wagon, were the supplies Molly and Red had purchased the previous afternoon. Lullaby, Stony, and Tucson had decided to stay in Blue Cloud a few days to see if anything further developed from Lombard's direction.

They went over to the Blue Cloud Saloon and ordered bottles of beer. Titus Shaw said, "Santee Lombard was asking for you a while back, Tucson."

"That right, Titus?" Tucson asked. "What did he want?"

Titus shrugged his shoulders. "He didn't say. Him and his gang hang out down to the Sunfisher Bar if you want to see him." There was no others in the bar to hear the conversation.

"If he wants to see me he can look me up," Tucson said.

"That would be my idea," Titus replied. "No, he didn't hang around long. Nick Armitage was with him."

"Who's Nick Armitage?"

"Works for Lombard. Some say he's Lombard's trigger man—does all his dirty work—but nobody says it out loud. But if I was you I'd keep an eye on Armitage—just in case."

"Thanks, Titus. I'll remember what you said."

Two minutes later Lombard pushed through the swinging doors, followed by a medium-sized wiry individual with an unshaven jaw and mean eyes. The man had a six-shooter slung at either hip and an eagle feather, dyed crimson, stuck in the hatband of his battered Stetson.

Lombard came directly to Tucson. "You Tucson Smith?"

"That's correct," Tucson replied quietly.

"I'm Santee Lombard. This"—jerking one thumb toward his companion—"is Nick Armitage." He stuck out one hand, which Tucson failed to see as he turned toward Lullaby and Stony.

"My pard," Tucson introduced, "Brooke and Joslin."

The men nodded. There was no clasping of hands.

Tucson went on, "Titus said you wanted to see me. What's on your mind?"

"Nothing in particular," Lombard said smoothly. He paused to

touch match flame to a long thin black cigar. "I heard you bought the Horseshoe-N. That makes us neighbors: I thought we should get acquainted."

"Yeah," Armitage said meaningly, "it's always wise to get started right with new neighbors. Sometimes it means trouble when a new outfit gets off to a bad start."

"Trouble?" Stony said innocently. "Trouble for who?"

"You'll plenty soon understand," Armitage said harshly, "if you get off on the wrong foot with the Dollar-Sign-L."

"Hush it, Nick." Lombard frowned. "Nobody's starting any argument." He turned to Tucson. "Nick's got a perpetual grouch. You have to overlook what he says."

"I don't know as I do," Tucson said calmly.

Lombard laughed shortly. "Nick don't mean anything. You see, he feels sort of put out——"

"You might say it's a premonition, eh?" Stony chuckled.

Lombard looked seriously at Stony. "You don't understand. I don't mean 'put out' of this saloon. Nick just feels sort of resentful. It's natural to feel that way, I suppose——"

"About what?" Tucson asked.

"It's like this," Lombard explained. "For a long time now we've been trying to buy the Horseshoe-N outfit. Then suddenly, with no warning at all, Miss Norton sells to you. It did seem like she'd give her old neighbors first chance at the ranch. Would you mind telling me how she come to sell to you?"

"You don't already know what led up to the transaction, eh?" Tucson said quietly.

"How should I?"

"All right, skip it," Tucson replied. "No, I don't see any reason right now, Lombard, for going into that phase of the deal."

Lombard shrugged his shoulders. "Just as you like, of course. Will you have a drink?"

"I was going to suggest it." Tucson smiled thinly. He placed a dollar on the bar. "Name your sluice water."

Drinks were set out. For a few moments nobody said anything. Then Lullaby said to Armitage, "I note you pack two smoke wagons, Armitage."

"It don't need to worry you, so long as they stay in holsters," Armitage growled.

"It wouldn't worry me either way," Lullaby drawled.

The man's eyes narrowed angrily, but before he could speak Stony said with mock awe, "Gee whizz! Did you notice the notches in Armitage's gun butts pard?"

"There's a reason for 'em being there too," Armitage said in

ugly tones. He cast a contemptuous glance at the guns in the Mesquiteers' holsters. "I don't see nary a notch in your weapons."

"You wouldn't," Lullaby drawled carelessly. "We give up notching a long spell back. You know how it is. A feller's stocks get so filled with notches there isn't room for more. So then you have to buy new stocks. That costs money. When we reached the point of buying 'em by the gross we just quit notching. Of course you've never had that trouble. How many stocks was it we ordered last time, Stony?"

"I wrote it down," Stony said, grave-faced, "but I don't remember offhand. It was quite a stock of stocks."

Armitage's eyes had started to widen. His jaw dropped. Suddenly he realized these two cowboys were poking fun at him. "Now, look here, you two——" he commenced angrily.

"Hush it, Nick," Lombard said again. He darted a stern glance at his trigger man. Armitage subsided, glowering. Lombard turned back to Tucson. "I'll get down to business. How much do you want for the Horseshoe-N?"

Tucson said placidly, "One hundred thousand dollars."

Lombard's eyes bulged. "You're crazy!"

"I probably am," Tucson admitted calmly, "in view of the fact I haven't yet seen the ranch. But that price stands, for the present at least."

"In other words," Lombard said, "you don't want to sell."

"I haven't said that," Tucson countered. "After a few months when I learn the value I might——"

"Hell! I can't wait a few months," Lombard commenced, then paused suddenly. He finished lamely, "Well, think it over."

"Why can't you wait a few months?" Tucson asked shrewdly. "Why you in such a hurry to get the Horseshoe-N, Lombard?"

"Hell!" Lombard growled. "I'm in no hurry to get the place. You just don't understand."

"Any more than I understand why you had three of your men try to ambush me yesterday—with Deputy Canfield's help," Tucson said sharply.

"Look here, Smith," Lombard said placatingly, "if you're referring to that little fuss you had with Limpy Fletcher and——"

"You know the three I mean," Tucson cut in.

"Look here, I didn't have a thing to do with that. Those three were sore because of the brush you had with 'em the previous day at the jail. They didn't really mean to shoot you, of course; just figured to throw a scare into you. I've already given 'em hell and told them they got just what they deserved."

"And you know, probably," Tucson pursued, "what led up to that fuss at the jail. Sure, I expect you to deny it, but I know damned

well that Canfield has given you the whole story, anyway. You tried to frame Red Sherry, after your men had kidnapped him, as a witness to a forced bill of sale."

"By God, Smith!" Lombard exclaimed. "You are crazy. I don't know what you're talking about. What do you mean, kidnapped Sherry?"

"And shot his bronc from under him when he was making a getaway," Tucson pursued.

"This is all a mystery to me." Lombard shook his head in pretended amazement.

"It may be a mystery to you," Tucson said, "but I note you sent men over to Wagon Springs to bury that dead horse so it wouldn't be found as evidence. Next time tell 'em not to leave a hoof sticking out of the earth——"

"Well, by God!" Lombard spun angrily on Armitage. "Nick, I thought you——" He caught himself just in time and finished, "I thought you said this Tucson Smith was a reasonable hombre."

Tucson laughed softly. "It don't go down, Lombard. I ran a bluff and got away with it, but I know now you did send somebody over to bury that horse. It was the natural thing to do if you wanted to hide evidence."

"Look here, Smith," Lombard rasped. "I don't know what you're talking about. You seem bent on making trouble. You keep on along that line and you and your pals will find it. I come here to talk peaceful to you, but if you don't want peace that's all right with me. You and your gang will find you're up against somebody that doesn't back down at the first threat."

"That goes for me too," Armitage snarled. "Any time they want trouble we'll accommodate them."

Lullaby said, "Armitage, I'll pluck that red feather out of your hat and stick it down your throat if you don't shut up."

"I wonder who plucked all his other feathers?" Stony laughed.

Before Armitage could speak Lombard thrust out one silencing hand. "I'll do the talking, Nick." He turned to Tucson. "You're making war talk, Smith. I don't take that from any man."

"You know what to do about it," Tucson said coldly. "We're ready any time you are, Lombard. Are you game to draw against me and finish this business right now?"

Lombard shook his head. "You don't work me into that sort of trap, Smith. I wasn't born yesterday. There's three of you against only Nick and me. We're too smart for that game."

Tucson sighed. "I hadn't counted on Stony and Lullaby coming in. I figured this was between you and me, Lombard." He faced his partners. "Stony—Lullaby! Turn your guns over to Titus to

hold for a spell. I want to see just how much nerve Lombard has."

Tucson turned back to face Lombard, totally ignoring Nick Armitage. "Now, Lombard," Tucson said coldly, "you can get out your iron and go to work any time it suits you. I'm ready!"

12

LOMBARD'S CHANCE

BEHIND THE BAR Titus Shaw moved rapidly to one end, ready to duck if lead started flying. Tucson was backed carelessly against the long counter, one boot heel hooked over the bar rail, his thumbs stuck nonchalantly into gunbelt. His eyes were steady, icy cold, on Santee Lombard's face. Lombard took one backward step. His right hand quivered a trifle, but he kept it well away from his .45 butt. He didn't speak, just slowly shook his head.

Beyond Tucson were Lullaby and Stony, their forms tense, ready instantly to jump into the fray if Nick Armitage cut in to help his boss. Armitage had already gone into a half crouch, with clawlike hands poised above holsters for a swift draw. His eyes glittered with a sharp, venomous look as they darted from Tucson to Lombard and back to Tucson again.

A deathly silence hung over the Blue Cloud.

Tucson broke the silence at last: "It's your chance, Lombard. You can put me out of your path—if you're good enough. Come on, make up your mind."

Lombard took another step back. He wanted to draw; every instinct in the man's being urged him to draw, but something in Tucson's steely gaze warned him against such a move. In the end his mind triumphed over his more rash impulse. He spoke harshly, as though something made speech difficult. "I'm not taking that chance, Smith—not now. I'm too smart to be drawn into a fight with you."

"Hell, Santee!" Armitage cursed. "Let me take on for you. I can——"

"You close your trap, Nick," Lombard rasped. "I'm seeing this thing clearer than you. It's still three against two—maybe four against two. No, wait"—as Armitage started a protest—"I know what I'm doing. Sure, Brooke and Joslin turned their guns over to Titus, but you note they're still laying on the bar—and Titus has slipped down to the far end. Brooke and Joslin could grab 'em easy——"

"You talk like a fool, Lombard," Tucson said disgustedly.

Titus Shaw came somewhat sheepishly back. "I was just looking to watch out for my own hide," he said. "I'll take these guns——"

"And probably take a shot at me or Nick, eh?" Lombard snarled. "I don't fall for that, Titus, either. You and me are going to have an account to square."

"Oh hell, Tucson said. "Don't take this out on Titus, Lombard. This is between you and me. Suppose we take our guns outside and settle it, where there won't be any chance of anyone interfering."

"I don't trust you, Smith," Lombard refused. "You're too anxious to fight. You've got some trick in mind. But I'll get you another time—when the score stands even all around and no odds in your favor. Come on, Nick, let's get out of here."

Armitage looked queerly at his boss. "You backing down, Santee?" "Not backing down. Just showing good sense."

"Look"—Armitage sounded eager—"let me take this on for you."

"You cut that talk, Nick," Lombard snapped. "I'm not letting you in for a cold-deck play either. You keep those guns in holsters and come with me."

Tucson laughed softly. "You wouldn't be showing a streak of yellow, would you, Lombard?"

Lombard forced a laugh. "You know damn well I'm not afraid of you, Smith. I'm just wiser, that's all—too wise to take a hand in a stacked game. Come on, Nick!"

He started toward the door. Armitage turned reluctantly and, with a look of hate at Lullaby and Stony, started to follow. As he swung around he spat a curse in their direction.

Stony leaped forward. "Just a minute, Armitage."

Armitage turned, facing him, waiting. Stony walked up to the man, a broad grin on his face, hands held well out from sides. "See—no gun," Stony said.

Armitage looked at Stony's empty holster and nodded.

Stony went on, "You're packing two guns."

Again Armitage nodded. "What about it?" he growled.

"You seem to have a mite more nerve than your boss," Stony said. "I wonder how much more." His grin widened. "I always did crave to get me a red feather."

Like a flash one hand went out and plucked the crimson eagle feather from Armitage's hatband. An instant later Stony had stuck it in the band of his own Stetson. "How's it look, tough guy?" he asked insultingly.

No man with any fighting spirit at all could stand the taunt in Stony's voice. For just a brief moment Armitage stood motionless, overcome by this cowboy's brash effrontery. His jaw dropped; his eyes bulged. Then a reddish-purple flush swept across his unshaven features. His right hand darted down, closed about the butt of one .45. An obscene curse ripped from his throat.

Stony laughed joyously, closed in with the speed of lightning. "So you would crawl, eh?" he yelled. His right hand closed on Armitage's fist just drawing the gun from holster. There was a brief sharp struggle. Stony laughed again as he exerted a little pressure, bending back the gun in Armitage's closed fist.

For an instant Armitage resisted the pressure. Then beads of perspiration popped on his forehead; he gave an anguished yell: "My wrist!" His grip on the gun relaxed, and he staggered back, leaving the long-barreled .45 in Stony's possession.

For just an instant the two men stood facing each other. Stony was still grinning. Armitage's features were contorted with mingled rage and pain. Rattler-swift, his left hand flashed to his other gun. Again Stony moved. Before Armitage could draw his second weapon, the long barrel of his gun in Stony's hand had cracked against the side of Armitage's head.

Armitage's arms dropped loosely to his sides. A silly, half-dazed expression passed over his face as he reeled back and crashed against the wall. He didn't fall; just stood there, glassy eyes trying to focus on Stony.

Stony crossed the floor in swift strides, jammed Armitage's gun back in its holster. "You'd better take your little boy out of here, Mr. Lombard," he chuckled. "I don't think he wants to play with us bad boys any more today. And tell him, when he recovers his senses—if any—that he can have his red feather any time by just coming after it."

Lombard himself seemed half dazed at what had taken place. "By God!" He found his tongue at last. "I believe you hombres want trouble."

Lullaby drawled, "We sure didn't come to Blue Cloud to attend any pink teas or church socials, if that's what you mean."

Tucson didn't say anything as his eyes followed Armitage and Lombard. The two pushed out through the swinging doors, Armitage being supported by his boss and staggering like a drunken man. Slowly the swinging doors came to a stop as their steps scraped out toward the sidewalk.

Then Tucson turned to Stony. "You dang fool!" he said resentfully. "You want to scare hell out of us? That was a fool stunt to pull, if I ever saw one. Armitage could have plugged you!"

"Could've, but didn't," Stony replied calmly. "I knew he'd be too surprised to move fast."

"He looked pretty danged fast to me." Tucson frowned. "You were just lucky, that's all."

"Anyway," Stony chuckled, looking at himself in the bar mirror, "I got me a nice red feather for my hat."

"You'd better get a few dozen more," Lullaby advised, "and get ready to do some fast flying. Armitage's going to be after that feather—and he won't care how he gets it."

"What did you think I took it for?" Stony demanded. "Things been too quiet around here. I'd like to see some *real* excitement."

"We'll probably see some all right." Tucson nodded. "Anyway, you ran a bluff and got away with it. So long as it turned out that way, maybe it's a good thing. It'll show Lombard and his crowd we're not waiting to be pushed around—in fact, we're eager to do a little pushing ourselves. We learned a couple of things from that little brush, anyway."

"The same being?" Lullaby asked through a mouthful of sardines and pretzels.

"For some reason," Tucson continued, "Lombard is in an almighty hurry to close a deal for the Horseshoe-N. Why, we don't know, of course. And we can feel pretty certain that he sent someone over to Wagon Springs to bury Red Sherry's horse. Lombard gave himself away on that point before he thought."

Titus looked queerly at the three. "Say, you aren't detectives, are you?"

Tucson shook his head. "We just stumbled into something here in Blue Cloud, and we aim to stay and see what it is. Lombard's back of some crooked move. I aim to stop him."

"Amen to that," Titus said fervently.

"I had an idea that you didn't like him," Tucson said dryly.

"If there's anything I can do to help," Titus said earnestly, "just let me know."

"Maybe you can help." Tucson nodded. "Just keep your mouth shut regarding any conversations we might have in here."

The three men sipped their beer in silence for a time. Tucson said finally, "Certain things have happened at Wagon Springs. We're pretty sure of that now. It looked plumb deserted, that day we came through, remember? There was just that barkeep with the ugly mug there. We wondered then where he'd get the business to keep going. It's not a regular train stop."

Titus put in: "The train stops at Wagon Springs for water, that's all. It'll take on passengers if anybody is there, of course. But it's practically a ghost town."

"Maybe somebody should haunt it for a spell," Stony put in. "It could be a sort of headquarters for Lombard's gang."

"Why?" Lullaby asked.

Stony shook his head. "I haven't the least idea. I'd like a chance to find out, though."

"Maybe you'll get it," Tucson said.

"Now that you mention Wagon Springs," Titus said, "I remember hearing various members of Lombard's gang say they were going over there from time to time. I never did give it a thought until now. But what would take 'em over there?"

Tucson pondered. "A wandering Mexican might happen to drop into Wagon Springs and do a mite of spying around."

"I'll take the job," Stony said eagerly.

"I was figuring you for it." Tucson smiled. He turned to the barkeep. "Titus, if we go around asking or buying things, folks might notice us. Do you suppose you could dig up some togs someplace—you know, serape, sandals, etc.?"

"Can do." Titus nodded.

Tucson gazed at Stony. "We'll have to do something about that blond head of yours. It's too bad it didn't stay black."

Lullaby started to laugh. He explained to Titus "Stony used to have dark hair. He was always putting some kind of tonic on it that made him smell like a parlor house. For a joke one time, Jeff Ferguson—he's our rod on the 3-Bar-o—put some peroxide in Stony's tonic bottle. First thing we knew, Stony was a blond."

"Aw, why bother Titus with that old story?" Stony said sheepishly.

"Then"—Lullaby grinned—"to get rid of the blond hair, Stony started going without his hat, figuring the sun would make his hair grow faster. What happened? The sun bleached his hair worse than ever. His hair never did turn dark again. Sometime when you got a few minutes I'll give you all the details. They're really funny."

"Aw, forget it," Stony growled. "Titus ain't interested." To Tucson, "I can fix up my hair all right. If worst comes to worst I can mix my powder grime with vaseline. Cripes! We'll need some stain too."

"Maybe I can help out," Titus suggested. "A few months back my little boy was in a Sunday-school pageant over in Chancellor. It had something to do with the 'Life of the Indian'—I think it was called. Anyway, my kid was fixed up like a young 'Pache. I think there's still some of the stain and such that we used on him around the place. I'll look it up when I get home."

"Thanks a lot, Titus. That'll help." Tucson nodded.

"Now that we got that settled," Lullaby said, "I'll take care of this red feather for you." He removed it from Stony's hatband and thrust it into his own.

"Hey," Stony protested. "That's mine."

"Sure, I'm just taking care of it for you," Lullaby explained. "Don't you think I might want some fun if Armitage got a sudden yen for the return of his feather? Cripes! You can't wear it where you're going. It'd give you dead away."

"Well, maybe you're right." Stony looked disappointed.

Lullaby glanced at himself in the bar mirror. "Eagle feather," he stated. "Funny thing, when I see a feather I never think of eagles. It's always chickens or turkeys or ducks that comes to mind."

"Your mind—so-called—wouldn't be running to food, would it?" Stony asked sarcastically.

"His mind doesn't run," Tucson said gravely. "It walks."

Lullaby looked reproachfully at Tucson. "You too?" he murmured. "Let's get out of here. It must be nearly time for supper, now that Stony's reminded me of food."

"Supper's quite some spell off yet," Stony said.

Nevertheless, they left Titus Shaw's Blue Cloud and strolled around town. Eventually they dropped into the Sunfisher Bar, where the barkeep looked questioningly at the crimson feather in Lullaby's Stetson. He didn't say anything, though. And there was no sign of Lombard or any of his crew. Upon questioning, the barkeep admitted they had left for the Dollar-Sign-L some time before.

"They all looked right mad," the barkeep offered. "Santee was uglier than hell. Couldn't get a civil word out of him."

"Probably something he ate," Tucson suggested.

"Yeah, his own words," Stony added.

The barkeep looked puzzled. "You fellers didn't have any trouble with Lombard, did you?"

"It wasn't what I'd call trouble," Lullaby drawled, "though there isn't any telling how Lombard will view it. Fact is, we did have a slight disagreement about guns. We had an idea that the lead in Lombard's gun would emerge from the barrel, but Lombard proved us wrong. It didn't."

"I don't get you." The barkeep frowned.

"Neither did Lombard," Stony chuckled. "Though he tried awful hard—at first."

Finishing their beer, they strolled out of the Sunfisher Bar, leaving behind them a much-perplexed bartender.

13

WAGON SPRINGS

AS TITUS SHAW HAD SAID, Wagon Springs, to all appearances, was a ghost town. There wasn't much to the place. Originally it had existed solely as a stage stop on the road between Los Potros and Chancellor. With the coming of the railroad the stage line had passed out of being, and the few buildings that comprised the settlement were eventually deserted.

Facing the railroad right of way, and beyond the ancient wheel-rutted trail, stood the old stage station, which in former days had acted as a hotel when the Apaches were "out," and the Wagon Springs Saloon. These were long, narrow buildings with high false fronts and wooden-awnined porches. The painted signs on both fronts were sun-faded and cracked. An individual named Bull Jackson still operated the saloon, though very few people knew whence came his trade or why he stayed on. The stage station was, to all appearances, unoccupied. To the rear of the stage station was the old corral, though a close observer might have noticed that one end of the corral had been considerably enlarged through the use of barbed wire. This wire, however, was effectually camouflaged by the vast thicket of mesquite and prickly pear that surrounded Wagon Springs and, day by day, seemed to creep closer to engulf the buildings.

To the rear of the saloon was a scattering of old frame shacks. One had no door; another's door hung listlessly from a single hinge and banged monotonously in the night winds. Other buildings, though they lacked glass in the windows, had blankets over the openings. These buildings, though, were too far back from the road to be noticed by any passing traveler. Travelers riding through rarely paused at the saloon; if they did stop, Bull Jackson's lack of cordiality soon drove them on their way. And if a horse was heard neighing in the stables back of the stage station, Jackson could always explain it as his own mount, though it was many years since Jackson had forked a pony.

So on the surface of things there was little to Wagon Springs: a helter-skelter array of old parched wooden buildings, a great deal of mesquite, cactus, and sagebrush; to top that off, wind and sand and flies, not to mention many lizards that darted here and there and an occasional rattlesnake and horned toad.

In the Wagon Springs Saloon, Bull Jackson swabbed a dirty bar rag along his scarred wooden counter. He was a big-bellied man with ponderous shoulders, piglike eyes, and a week's growth of beard. A few wisps of muddy-colored hair stood in disarray on his bald head. The apron tied about his waist might have been clear once, but that was long ago. Bull cursed discontentedly to himself. He wished one of the boys would come in and talk to him; this was damned lonesome. He cast a sullen eye about the rough board interior of the room; there were spittoons that should be emptied and cleaned; the floor needed sweeping too. Oh well, that could be left until tomorrow. He'd been telling himself that same thing for the past two weeks.

Bull helped himself to a drink from a bottle of his stock. He shuddered as the fiery liquor scorched its way down his throat and resumed his aimless swabbing on the bar. "What I should have," he

told himself, "is a Mex to redd up for me around here. Then I could catch me a nap durin' the day, too, with him to watch if anybody shows up."

He took another drink from the bottle. "I ain't a-goin' to stay on here more'n another year. By that time I'll have enough saved to buy me a decent bar someplace. Workin' for Santee Lombard is playin' with dynamite."

He paused suddenly, one hand cupped to a listening ear. There were sounds of an arriving horse outside. It wasn't moving fast. Probably that was how it had got so close before Bull heard it. Bull reached to a point below his bar and found a length of cord which he jerked. From somewhere in the vicinity of the stage-station stable a bell clanged a couple of times.

Bull growled, "They'll probably give me hell for wakin' 'em up. Probably ain't nobody comin' that matters. Anyway, those hombres have got their warnin' to lay low." Moving as speedily as his bulk would allow, Bull headed for his open doorway, muttering, "Whoever it is, I figure he won't stay long."

Reaching the porch of the saloon, he gave a sudden exclamation of disgust. Hell! Just a lousy Mex!

Crawling down from a gaunt sway-back horse of indeterminate age was a solid-bodied Mexican clad in ragged white cotton pants, a cholla jacket from which most of the embroidery had disappeared, and wide-brimmed straw sombrero, from beneath which hung strands of black hair half covering the man's eyes. A worn pair of leather sandals covered the dirtiest feet Bull Jackson had seen in many a day—not excluding his own. The Mexican wore no shirt beneath the jacket. One hand continually scratched at the dark skin over his ribs.

A half shudder ran down Jackson's spine. "Lousy as hell!" Jackson exclaimed, the words leaving his lips almost before he was aware of them.

"You also, eh?" The Mexican showed white teeth in a wide grin. "Theese animal life—she is itch like the hell—no?"

Jackson growled disgustedly under his breath but didn't deign to answer. The Mexican paused to secure a very soiled gray-and-white serape from his saddle—and what a saddle! It lacked one stirrup; what leather there was was dry and cracked; the remainder had long since peeled from the tree. The cantle was entirely devoid of covering, and a chunk of it had been broken off sometime in the distant past. It was a fitting rig, however, for the horse on whose back it rested.

"That animal," Jackson mused, "is a flea-bitten nag if I ever saw one."

He stood his ground as the Mexican crossed the porch, carelessly tossing the serape over one shoulder. "Hi, *amigo!*" He grinned,

following the words with an explosive burst of fluent Spanish.

"Talk American," Jackson growled. "I don't want none of that spiggoty language around here." He still barred the entrance. "What you want?"

"I want of the drink—what else?" the Mexican replied.

"You got money?"

"Een my own country, I am ver' reech hombre."

"You're not in your own country now, oiler. Have you got money?"

"Seguro—why not?"

Grudgingly Bull Jackson left the door and went back to his bar. The Mexican followed. Jackson rested his hands on the counter. "What'll it be?"

"Tequila—with the orange and the salt——"

"Don't get hifalutin ideas, Mex. You'll take prime bourbon—or nothin'."

"The wheesky weel do, senior."

Jackson poured a whisky glass half full from a bottle and slid it before his customer. The Mexican downed the drink, shivered slightly. He looked curiously into the bottom of the glass, opened his mouth to inhale fresh air. "Senior," he commenced, "have you ever seen of the volcano?"

"No, I ain't, and, what's more, you haven't paid——"

"I'm remind of the boiling-hot lava that flows——"

"Shell out with the cash, Mex."

"First I weel have the rest of my dreenk. You fill but half full the glass."

"Your money, goddammit!"

The Mexican shrugged apologetically. "Een my own country I am ver' reech hombre, but now——"

A lurid oath burst from Bull Jackson's lips. For a full minute his profanity was awesome, while the Mexican listened with something akin to admiration. When Bull had ceased for sheer lack of breath, the Mexican said calmly, "Again I am remind of the flow of hot lava——"

"Damn it, Mex, you cheated me! You ain't got any money."

"Alas"—the Mexican was downcast—"eet is as you say. Eet is to be regret, no?"

"You'll regret it all right," Bull raged, rolling up his sleeves. "By Gawd! I'm going to mop the floor with your oily carcass." He paused suddenly as a new thought dawned. This was exactly what he'd been wishing for—a Mexican to keep the place clean. "Look here, Mex, I'm a reasonable man. What's your name?"

"The name?" Again that flash of white teeth. "The name ees Miguel Puerto de la Davalos y Cervantes——"

"Whoah! That's enough. You know you're lyin'. I'll call you Mike."

"Is good." The Mexican nodded. "And you?"

"I'm Bull Jackson."

"Ah, the Bool! Once in the bool reeng I am the famous mator—"

"Douse it, Mike. I ain't interested in anythin' but my money for that drink. Two bits, see?"

Mike shook his head. "Eet is impossible to see what I don' have. Am ver' sorry. Soch a small amount. Only the two beets. Is nozeeng for us to make the quarrel—no? One more dreenk an' we call hecu square."

Jackson cursed. "No more to drink until I'm paid."

"But I have not of the money, amigo Bool."

"Look"—Bull's voice was coaxing—"how'd you like to work for me?"

"Work? You mean the labor?" A pained expression crept over the Mexican's face and he shied away.

"It wouldn't be much," Jackson explained. "This place needs reddin' up—and my spitoons need emptyin'. You take care of that and we'll call your drinks square. I might give you another drink if you stay on. Three meals a day and——"

"We make the deal," Mike said suddenly. "I owe you the two beets—no?"

"That's correct."

"Is good. I geev you my so-fine *caballo* that stand out in front of these so-elegant saloon."

"That crowbait!" Jackson howled. "You'd trade that horse for a drink? Look"—earnestly—"I'll *give* you a drink if you promise not to leave that nag behind when you go."

"You don' like?"

"Absolutely not."

"I am regret," Mike said sadly. "We cannot make the deal. The cleaning of these cantina ees work I do not care for."

Jackson started to speak, paused, then brought up from beneath the bar a sawed-off shotgun which he placed on top of the counter. "You wouldn't care to reconsider, would you?" he demanded meanly.

Mike eyed the shotgun, then looked at Jackson. He forced a sickly grin. "Maybe I am see the point of your argument." He surrendered. "Geeve me of your broom."

Jackson heaved a long sigh and a scraggly broom in Mike's direction. "Get to work," he ordered.

Mike emptied first the cuspidors scattered about the floor. He came in to ask for water to wash them out.

"You'll find water over back of the stage station," Jackson commenced, then stopped. "No—never mind goin' over there. Just forget the water and star' sweepin'."

"*Si, senor.*"

Mike started to sweep. Dirt and cigar and cigarette butts thickly carpeted the floor of the barroom. Mike plied vigorously the broom. Dust rose in clouds. Jackson commenced sneezing and coughing. Finally he could stand it no longer and called a halt.

"That's enough, dammit!" he growled. "You can finish up to-morrow."

"I have the steady job—no?" Mike asked.

"So long as you behave yourself," Jackson admitted grudgingly. Inwardly he was congratulating himself. He should have thought of this sort of thing long ago. With a little training Mike would be able to do all the work.

"I'm thenk I'm take the siesta now," Mike stated, dropping the broom where he stood and starting toward the entrance.

Five minutes later when Jackson moved out to see what had become of his new assistant he found Mike huddled on a shady section of the porch, serape high around his ears, sound asleep. The saddle had been removed from the gray horse, and the beast itself had been tethered in the shade of a mesquite tree.

"These damn Mexes is certainly lazy," Jackson growled.

14

THE GUARDED DOOR

TOWARD EVENING, when the sun was striking low on the San Mateo Mountains, a thin wisp of blue mesquite smoke rose from the chimney in the stage station. A man in cow togs emerged from the building, yawning widely and rubbing his eyes. He stretched a moment, then scuffed through the sand toward the Wagon Springs Saloon. A minute later he entered the doorway and rapped on the bar. Bull Jackson, dozing on a high stool at the far end, awoke with a start, took one look at his customer, and reached for a bottle back of the bar. This and a glass he placed before the man. "How's it goin', Hertz?" he said.

Hertz, a hard-jawed individual with shifty eyes, said, "Who's that Mex sleeping out on the porch?"

Bull grinned. "I call him Mike. He's got a lot more names, but he answers to Mike."

Sharply, "Who is he?"

Bull shrugged. "Just another wanderin' oiler, I reckon, on his way

to see a cousin someplace. These Mexes are always takin' trips to visit cousins. He mooched a drink and I made him work for it. I figure to keep him on. I work too hard as it is."

"T'hell you do!" Hertz said scornfully. "How do you think Santee will take it—you havin' a stranger here?"

"Jeez! That oiler's not like a white man who might go snoopin' around. Feed a Mex and give him a drink now and then, and that's all he cares about."

"I hope for your sake Santee feels that way about it."

"Santee don't need to know it—unless some big mouth talks out of turn."

Hertz shrugged. "You know me, Bull. I won't say anything. If you think it's all right, that's good enough for me."

"Certain it's all right."

"You haven't forgotten there's a bunch of stuff coming through tonight?"

"How could I with all you hombres here?"

"What's the Mex going to think?"

"Mexes don't think. He's a stranger in this country, anyway. We'll tell him this is the Wagon Springs Rancho, if he asks. Ten to one he won't bother to ask." Bull scratched a match and lighted two oil lamps that hung, suspended in brackets over the bar. "When you go back, tell Cooky to fetch me two suppers tonight: I'll have to feed the Mex, I suppose."

Hertz departed, but other men continued to come up to the saloon for a before-supper drink. The Mexican on the porch continued to sleep until one of the men, on Bull's orders, went out and awakened him. "Come on in and get your chow, Mex."

"The suppair?" Mike scrambled eagerly to his feet and followed the man inside. By this time night had fallen. Mike finished his meal, placed the tin plate back on the bar with a "*Gracias, senor,*" and departed for open air.

He sauntered lazily to his horse, took the reins, and led the scrawny beast to a watering trough in the rear of the stage station. A shadowy figure loomed before him. "Who's that?"

"Eet is only me, senor—Miguel."

"Oh, it's you, eh, Mex? What you want here?"

"The watair for my caballo."

"Who sent you here?"

"The Senor Bool, he's tell me the watair ees here."

"Well"—hesitatingly—"it's all right, I reckon."

"Gracias. And the oats I weel find down in the stable—no?"

"No!" The single word had an explosive sound. "You keep away from that stable—you hear?"

"Si, senior. But a caballo mus' make the eat——"

"Not that bag of bones." The man guffawed. "Picket him out and let him forage for hisself."

After following instructions Mike returned to the saloon. There was quite a large number of men there now. Mike made himself generally useful, serving drinks and washing glasses. Now and then he cadged a drink for himself. Bull Jackson swore furiously when he caught the Mexican stealing a drink. Mike blandly laughed off the theft and promised to do it no more. And though Bull watched him closely the remainder of the evening, somehow the Mexican must have evaded the scrutiny, for he grew drunker and drunker as the night progressed.

Finally, in a fit of rage, Jackson seized his assistant and rushed him off the porch. Mike hiccuped once as he went sprawling into the dust, laughed rather foolishly, then curled up where he'd landed and commenced to snore. Shaking his head disgustedly, Jackson returned to the saloon.

Shortly after midnight the bawling of cows awakened Mike from his position in the dust. He listened intently as the animals were brought to a stop someplace out in the rear of the saloon. The creaking of saddles sounded occasionally through the night. "About two hundred head, I reckon," he muttered to himself. Rolling over, he gained his feet and, in a crouching position, went scurrying through the mesquite that surrounded the cattle. It was bright moonlight now, not too difficult to see a brand occasionally.

A rider loomed up near by. Mike shrank back in the brush. The rider sat on his horse, waiting. Other riders were moving toward the saloon. Then a man on foot approached the rider near Mike.

"That you, Hertz?" the rider asked.

"It's me, Mitch. Want some of the boys to help you put these cows into the corral."

"No, they don't go in the corral tonight. Santee said to push 'em right through. The way's clear. You can reach Branch City by tomorrow night. You'd better tell your boys to saddle up and get started. Here's the papers."

Sheets of paper rustled between the two men. The man called Mitch went on: "This will be the last bunch for a spell, so return to the ranch when you get the money for these cows."

"How come?"

"Santee's orders. There's something else come up, and he wants all the crew to stick close to the home ranch for a spell."

"Trouble?"

"Maybe. Nothing to do with cows, though. I haven't been in on

any of it; and Santee hasn't said much. He's done a hell of a lot of cursing, though."

"But what sort of trouble?" Hertz persisted.

"There's three strangers in Blue Cloud. They're plumb snoopy."

"I get it. We've got to go easy for a spell."

"That's about the size of it."

Hertz departed in the direction of the saloon. Within a short time a group of riders came loping out to take over the cattle. The man known as Mitch said, "Better wet these cows down before you start, boys. Tanner Creek was commencing to dry up last time we trailed through to Branch City."

"We'll take care of it."

Horses started into action; the cattle bawled; dust rose. When there was enough dust so that Mike couldn't see the stars overhead he worked his way back to the saloon porch and sat down near the doorway, with one leg stretched out where the first man to enter would stumble over it. A puncher came striding up on the porch, slapping dust from his sombrero, and promptly tripped over Mike's extended leg. Mike crawled to his feet, apologizing volubly. The puncher cursed him bitterly and went into the saloon. Mike heard him ask:

"Bull, who's that Mex out there?"

"Feller I hired to work for me. He's all right."

The answer seemed to satisfy the puncher. Mike dozed off again. When next he awakened the saloon was dark and the cattle were gone. Mike rubbed his eyes, stretched, and got quickly to his feet. It was still dark. The moon had gone down. Along the eastern horizon ran a faint pencil line of silvery gray.

"Dawn in another hour," Mike mused. He stepped carefully down from the porch and made his way silently in the direction of the stable, to the rear of the stage station. His feet moved noiselessly through the thick sand as he wended his way among the mesquite trees and prickly pear.

Reaching the stable door, he found it shut. He tried to open it, then discovered it was padlocked. At the same instant a voice from within the stable asked, "Who's there?"

Mike didn't reply. He had no time to reply, for at that moment he felt a gun barrel jabbed against his back and a voice asked coldly, "What you lookin' for, mister?"

A second form detached itself from the shadows, saying, "Let him have it, Howie, if he don't answer pronto!"

Mike didn't bother to raise his arms. In a very drunken voice he hiccuped: "Eet eesh of the dreenk I'm wan', senores. For why—*hic!*—ees theese so fine cantina make close? Weeth the t'roat like

the san'papai, the dreenk—*hic!*—ees of the very real necessity."

"Oh hell!" one of the men growled disgustedly. "It's that damn Mex Bull hired. Drunk as a hoot owl——"

"Who ees dronk?" Mike demanded indignantly.

He turned to face his accusers and promptly fell sprawling.

"No, he's not drunk," the man known as Howie said sarcastically. "He's just short of bein' petrified."

"Last time I saw him," the other man said, "he was snoring on Bull's porch. Ralston fell over him once. Probably woke up and felt the need of a drink. Then got turned around and staggered down here in his search for the saloon. Why, listen to the bustard snore!"

Mike had again fallen asleep at the men's feet. Howie seized him by the collar of his jacket, perked him upright, and shook him vigorously. "Now get to hell out of here, Mex," he growled, giving Mike a savage push in the direction of the saloon. Mike staggered frantically to keep from falling again and managed to stay erect as he kept going. A few yards farther on he commenced to sing in a thick, drunken tenor a song that had something to do with his being a grandee of old Madrid. To the two guards at the stable it was all very funny. They stopped laughing when the man inside the stable spoke again. "Who was that?"

"Nobody that can help you, mister—just a drunken Mexican."

Back on the saloon porch, Mike sat crouched in the shadows. "Who was in that stable?" he asked himself. "And why is it necessary to have two guards on the door? Somebody must be awfully afraid of his prisoner escaping."

The sun was high when Bull Jackson left the stage station and approached the saloon, bearing a plate of greasy stew and a cup of coffee. After kicking Mike awake he handed over the food. Mike ate in silence, then followed his employer inside the saloon, where he placed the plate and cup on the bar.

"My head," he groaned, "is of a size."

"Serves you right for stealin' my whisky," Bull said coldly.

"I am only make the borrow. Someday I'm pay. Een my own country I am the ver' reech hombre. But right of the moment I am in the dire requiremen' of one leetle wheesky——"

"Nothin' doin', Mike," Bull said flatly. "Go on down and douse some water on your head."

"Watair?" Mike shuddered.

Exasperatedly Bull roared, "Get out of here, for crissakes, and wash your face!"

"Si, senior. I'm do heem at once." Mike was suddenly humble.

Every inch of his form dripping the extreme depression of a hang-over, Mike left the saloon and headed for the water trough at

the rear of the stage station. Here he doused his head in water. The rear door of the stage station was open. Mike glanced inside. He saw four men there. One man swore contemptuously at him as Mike passed.

Halfway back to the saloon Mike's foot caught in a length of stout cord buried in the sand. He stooped down and examined it. It seemed to run in the direction of the saloon. Acting on a sudden impulse, Mike gave the cord a jerk. Immediately a bell jangled somewhere off to his left. Two men came darting from the stage station, crouching low, and made their way toward the stable, where they hid in the brush near the stable door.

Mike frowned. "That's dang funny." He dropped the cord and went on.

Arriving back at the saloon, he found Bull Jackson standing on the porch, a puzzled expression on his face. "Senor Bool!" Mike exclaimed excitedly. "I have jus' heard reengeeng the bells of heaven. Eet was a miracle!! I'm trip over the length of streeng and of the immediately theese angels' bells make the sound so delicious——"

"Oh, jeez!" Bull exclaimed disgustedly. "So it was you. You leave that cord alone, you hear? That's a signal I have when I want the boys in the stage station."

"Ees not of heaven—no?"

"No!" Bull snapped and swung back into his saloon. Mike followed him inside in time to see Bull stoop below the counter a moment. Some distance off came the short clang of a bell. "All clear," Bull muttered, half to himself.

"Regarding the dreenk——" Mike commenced.

"You don't get any drink," Bull swore, "not until you've swept up."

Mike eyed the broom standing in one corner, with extreme distaste. "Weeth theese head, theese is not my day for sweepeeng. But the dreenk I mus' have. Look, you." He drew from someplace in his dirty white pants a handful of small uncut turquoise stones and approached the bar.

"Jeez! Where'd you get them, Mike?" Bull's eyes gleamed greedily.

"I'm get heem from my oncle who live in New Mexico. I get the dreenk—no?" He placed a stone on the bar.

Bull quickly poured a glass of whisky and set it before Mike. Mike downed it.

"Look, Mike," Bull proposed. "I'll give you a whole bottle for those stones you got there."

Mike shook his head. "I'm not weesh to make the deal," he said placidly. "Many ridairs, many of the cow come through here las'

night," he commented rather listlessly. "Did you not heer them? No?"

"You never mind those riders and cows," Bull rasped, then changed his tone. "They're friends of mine."

"You have many frien's—no?"

"Yeah, sure, everybody likes Bull Jackson."

"Theese Bool—he's ver' fine *caballero*," Mike flattered.

"I reckon I'm all right, at that." Bull smirked.

"He geeves of the dreenk."

An angry look crossed Bull's face. "T'hell he does," Bull growled. "And I don't want no more of your salve."

"Ees not salve," Mike said earnestly. "Of all the men I see here las' night, you are the—the—how shall I say heem? An' there are not so many of men theese morneeng. Weel come tonight, many more of your frien's?"

Bull shook his head. "You want to know too damn much, Mex," he said roughly. "Let's talk about those turquoise stones of yours. I know where I can sell 'em."

"I'm not want to sell theese so-fine stones. There is no need. Een my own country I am the ver' reech hombre——"

"Cut out that tripe," Bull growled. He reached below his bar, produced his shotgun, and placed it meaningly on top. "Do you still think you don't want to sell?"

Mike shrugged his shoulders. "I am not sure eef you can make the persuade," he replied. Reaching to a scabbard slung at the back of his neck, beneath his jacket, he produced a long thin-bladed knife, which he proceeded to whet on the sole of one sandal.

Bull gulped. These Mexes, he considered, were knife throwers from away back.

"Hav I evair tol' you of my brothair?" Mike asked idly. "Weeth the knife he was what you call almos' supreme. At ten paces he could split the fly on the wall."

"That's dang sharp knife throwin'," Bull admitted.

"You are correct as the hell," Mike said slangily. "I know of but one man who was better weeth the knife than my brothair."

"Who was that?"

"The teacher of my brothair."

"You mean this teacher could do better?"

"Sure. I'm do hem at twenty paces. I am the teacher of my brothair."

Bull swallowed hard and managed to get his heart back in place. Cautiously he reached to the shotgun and stuck it back under the bar. "Speakin' of jewels," he said carelessly, "if there's one stone I don't care for, it's a turquoise. Now you take a diamond and you got somethin'."

Mike brightened. He tested the keen edge of his blade on a hair from his head, then asked, "You got some diamonds, Bool? Maybe, after all, we make a deal for my turquoise." He slipped down from the table and, knife in hand, approached the bar.

Bull turned pale. "No, no," he said hurriedly. "I never owned a diamond in my life. I can't say I care for jewelry."

"Is true," Mike agreed, slipping his knife back into its sheath. "Jewels are not for the men—only for the pretty *muchachas*." He changed the subject abruptly. "You want I should make some more of the sweep—like yesterday?"

"Not like yesterday," Bull said, relieved that the knife had disappeared from sight. "You raise too much dust."

Jackson retired to his stool at the end of the bar. These Mexes were queer hombres, he mused, friendly one minute, ready to cut your throat the next. But those turquoises, now. Jackson made up his mind to get those. Tonight. He'd give Mike plenty of whisky, and then when he was too drunk to object . . . Jackson's eyes grew heavy. Leaning his head back against a shelf, he went sound asleep . . .

By the time he awakened Mike and the gray nag had disappeared. Bull couldn't believe it as first, but a thorough search of the grounds showed no trace of his Mexican assistant.

"Probably no more than I should expect from a Mex," Bull grumbled.

15

THE FIRST CLUE

"WHAT did you say this stuff was?" Stony asked, running his tongue over a lower lip. His eyes had brightened suddenly.

He was in Tucson's room at the Blue Cloud Hotel, busily engaged in scrubbing from his body the dark stain that a few short hours before had helped in his characterization as a Mexican. Blankets had been pinned over the two windows in the room. A lighted oil lamp stood on the dresser. Lullaby sat on the bed. Tucson occupied a chair.

"What's this stuff?" Stony repeated. "I got a drop on my lip, and it don't taste bad."

"It's called gin," Lullaby drawled. "There wasn't any alcohol to be found in Blue Cloud. Titus said gin would do the job just as well. He had some in a keg that came from New York. It sure removes that stain."

Stony lifted an unlabeled bottle and tasted the contents. "You know," he said seriously, "if I had more time, being a Mexican would be my hobby—if I could only have gin to take off the coloring

every time. Do you know that stuff wouldn't make a bad drink——"

"Look," Tucson cut in, "you've been here ten minutes and you haven't yet told us what you learned. You talk like you'd had some fun."

"I did, kind of." Stony grinned.

"But what did you find out?"

"I'll tell you in a minute. Lullaby, swab that color off my back, will you?" Lullaby got to work while Stony talked. "Most important of all, I learned there's a prisoner there—don't know who he is, but they keep him in that old stable with a double guard on the door. They sure ain't taking any chances of him escaping."

"Could it be Molly's father?" Tucson asked.

"Could be. I couldn't say for sure, though."

"Well, that's a first clue, anyway," Tucson said.

Stony told them about the herd of cows that had passed through. "They were headed for some town named Branch City. A feller named Mitch gave another cow hand named Hertz some papers to go with 'em. My guess is they were phony bills of sale."

"Branch City," Tucson pondered. "I know where that is. It's up in Wyatt County—right near the southeast corner where Wyatt edges into Tresbarro County. They've probably got some more of the gang up there to take over the stock when it arrives and dispose of it."

"Did you get to see the brands on the cows?" Lullaby wanted to know.

Stony nodded. "There was a little of everything—Horseshoe-N, Bell, Coffe-Pot, Rafter-L, 21-Bar, O-Slash-P—but no Dollar-Sign-L animals. There was probably two hundred altogether. There were a few other brands too."

"Lombard's playing smart," Tucson speculated. "He's scattering his thieving, so the missing animals won't be missed so quickly."

"That's the way it looked to me," Stony agreed. "I discovered something else. There's a cord under the saloon bar. Cowbell on the other end, down near the stage station. Whenever any strangers show up in Wagon Springs, Bull Jackson gives the cord a tug as a warning to the rest to lie low until the strangers have departed. There must be quite a gang there from time to time, though if you didn't know what was going on you'd think those buildings were deserted."

"Is there a gang there all the time?" Tucson asked.

"I don't think so," Stony said. "I think Wagon Springs is just used as a halfway station for the rustlers. One gang picks up the cattle, then turns 'em over to the other gang for delivery. If anybody saw the same men running cattle up to Branch City all the time he might grow suspicious. The crew that delivered the cows when I was there pulled out early this morning. Going to the Dollar-Sign-L, I suppose."

Besides Bull Jackson, there were only four men there when I left. The crew that took over the cows were expected to make delivery in Branch City tonight late. That means they'll return tomorrow and probably spend tomorrow night at Wagon Springs before going on to their home ranch."

From that point on Lullaby and Tucson asked various questions regarding the setup at Wagon Springs. Stony furnished details and by the time all of the stain had been removed from his body and his hair was once more blond, the pseudo Mexican had pretty well covered the ground of his adventure. "And," Stony concluded, working up a thick lather of soap and water on his muscular, naked frame, "that's about all I have to report."

Tucson nodded. "Look, Stony, what sort of gang is over there at Wagon Springs? Anybody with brains that might suspect your abrupt departure?"

"After what I've told you, you should know, pard," Stony said reprovingly. "In short, they're really real damned fools. No decent hombre could have been fooled with that act I put on. It really wasn't genuine. Bull Jackson and the rest at Wagon Springs just thought I was genuine. I lived up to what they thought a Mexican should be."

He toweled his body and got back into his own clothing. After buckling on belt and gun he went swiftly through the pockets of the dirty white pants he'd discarded and spilled a handful of turquoise stones onto the dresser. "Want some pretties?"

"Where'd you get those?" Lullaby asked.

"From a Navajo woman I ran across on my way to Wagon Springs. Say, how about my horse?"

"He's been well taken care of at the Otero Livery."

"That's good. I noticed quite a few hombres in town when I snuck in tonight," Stony said. "Why the crowd?"

"Have you forgotten this is Saturday night?" Tucson said. "Pay night for most outfits, I suppose."

"Well, let's get over to Titus Shaw's and get a drink."

"That's a good idea." Lullaby brightened.

Out on Main Street the way was thronged with men. All saloons were running full blast. The three pardners started across the street toward the Blue Cloud Saloon. Yellow light shone from doors and windows on either side of the street. There was a bedlam of voices to be heard. Stony suddenly remembered the crimson eagle feather he had procured from Nick Armitage. Reaching up, he plucked the feather from Lullaby's Stetson and replaced it in his own sombrero.

"Hey, what you doing?" Lullaby made a snatch at the feather but missed.

"Just taking what belongs to me," Stony said.

"Damn," Lullaby grumbled. "I was hoping that Armitage would try to take it away from me while you were gone."

"Have you seen him?" Stony asked.

Lullaby shook his head. "Haven't seen any of that Dollar-Sign-L crowd in town."

Tucson said, "They're probably in town tonight, though."

Stony cuffed his befeathered Stetson to a more jaunty angle. "I hope so," he commented belligerently.

They reached the saloon, mounted the steps, and crossed the porch to the swinging doors. The bar was lined with men. Titus Shaw spotted them when they entered and called, "Be with you in a minute, gentlemen."

Tucson and his partners managed to squeeze into a spot at the bar. Titus arrived and took their orders. He looked sharply at Stony. "Glad to see you. Did it work out all right?"

"I haven't heard any complaints," Stony grinned.

Titus departed and returned a few minutes later with three bottles of beer. He lowered his voice: "Nick Armitage was in a spell back. He allowed he'd seen Lullaby wearing his feather earlier today."

Lullaby drawled sleepily, "He wouldn't have been making any threats, would he?"

Titus replied, "Only to the effect that he was going to get his feather and that the hombre that wore it would wish he'd minded his own business."

Lullaby grinned. "It's Stony's affair now. Boy am I glad I got rid of that eagle trimming?"

The drinker standing next to Tucson turned out to be Quint Bell, owner of the Bell Ranch. Titus introduced him to Tucson and his partners. Bell was an elderly man with tobacco-stained mustaches.

"I'm glad to be among the first to welcome a new owner into our country, Smith," he said cordially. "I've heard of the 3-Bar-o you own over near Los Potros."

The men talked cattle and cattle prices. Quint Bell bought a round of drinks. Tucson asked if he'd had any trouble with rustlers. Bell shrugged his shoulders. "There's bound to be a few natural losses. Whether I can blame 'em on cow thieves is another thing. There's been nothing to worry about yet, anyway."

They talked on for another five minutes. Stony suddenly discovered Lullaby was no longer with them. Next he found that the red feather was gone from his hat. Lullaby had slipped it out without the movement being noticed. Quickly he drew Tucson to one side and told him what had happened. "That dang Lullaby," he said, concern in his voice. "Where do you think he went?"

"My guess is the Sunfisher Bar," Tucson said grimly.

"That's what I'm afraid of." Stony nodded. "It would be just like him to walk right into a nest of Dollar-Sign-L men, thinking to keep me out of a fight with Armitage. What do you think?"

"I think we better head for the Sunfisher pronto."

They said good-by to Bell and hurried out.

At nearly the same instant Lullaby was entering the Sunfisher Bar. He came strolling through the swinging doors, the crimson feather in his Stetson a direct challenge to Nick Armitage when he spotted it. Armitage was standing drinking at the bar, next to Santee Lombard. Near by were Limpy, Shorty, Frank Ettinger, and several more of the Dollar-Sign-L crew.

The barkeep spotted Lullaby first. "What'll it be, Joslin?" he asked, at the same time passing a signal to the Dollar-Sign-L men.

"I'm not drinking right now," Lullaby drawled. "I heard Armitage was looking for me."

Nick Armitage, at the sound of his name, swung away from the bar. A hot flush crossed his features as he spotted the feather in Lullaby's Stetson. Savagely he slapped both hands against the holsters at his hips, then took four steps that brought him face to face with Lullaby.

"You got guts to come here, Joslin," he sneered.

"That's just an idea of yours," Lullaby said quietly.

"What do you want?" Armitage demanded, somewhat taken aback by Lullaby's manner.

"Word reached me that you wanted this eagle feather I'm sporting."

"You mean," Armitage said eagerly, "that you've come to give it to me?"

Slowly Lullaby shook his head. "I just strolled down to see if you wanted to try and take it, Armitage. If you saw me with it earlier today and didn't try to take it, I've been wondering if you lacked nerve to try."

Armitage ripped out an oath. "I'll show you if I got the nerve," he rasped.

Santee Lombard cast a quick puzzled look toward the doorway. It was difficult for him to believe Lullaby would come here alone. He said swiftly to Armitage, "Tell him in a hurry, Nick. It's your chance. Both guns to the middle!"

"I'll handle this, Santee," Armitage spat over one shoulder. He commenced to back away from Lullaby, his muscular form going into a half crouch. Three paces—four, five, six. His fingers curved, closing down, above the butts of his twin guns. "Make your draw, Joslin," he snarled.

Lullaby laughed softly, thumbs still hooked into gun belt. "You sure you don't want to think twice about this?"

"Damn you, draw!" The half bellow of rage left Armitage's throat even as his fingers closed about gun butts.

And then—no one quite knew how it happened—Lullaby had shifted swiftly out of range. His six-shooter was out, belching lead and flame. Armitage was spun half around by the impact of the heavy .45 slug as his right gun sent three flaming shots harmlessly into the floor. Armitage's left gun was clear of holster now, too, but it fell from his hand as his knees buckled and he slumped face-down on the pine flooring.

For an instant there was a dead silence. Powder smoke swirled around the oil lamps hanging above the bar. Then Lullaby's voice drawling, "Anybody else want to try for this red feather?"

An obscene curse left Lombard's lips. "A hundred to the man who plugs Joslin first!" he yelled.

"Hold it, you hombres!" Tucson's voice filled the room as he and Stony burst through the swinging doors, guns in hands. "I'm boring the first scut who touches trigger!"

"Get 'em high!" Stony snapped.

By this time Lullaby had moved over beside his pardners. Their guns amply covered the room. Lombard and his men lost little time getting their hands in the air.

"You can't get away with this, Smith," Lombard raged.

"We're getting away with it," Tucson replied coldly.

"Joslin shot down poor Nick without giving him a chance," Lombard commenced. "I demand——"

"Don't lie, Lombard," Tucson said sternly. "Just before we came in here we heard Armitage challenging Lullaby to draw."

"That's right," put in a white-faced man standing in one corner. "I heard it all." He wasn't one of Lombard's crew.

Lombard darted a look of hate at the fellow. "Shutup, you coyote."

A crowd had gathered, drawn by the sound of the shots. Deputy Ben Canfield came pushing inside. "What goes on here?" he demanded pompously. Some of the color left his face as his gaze fell on Tucson and his pardners. Then he saw Armitage's silent body crumpled on the floor, with the widening splotch of crimson spreading from beneath. "My Gawd!" he gasped. "It's Nick!"

"It *was* Nick," Lombard snapped. "Ben, put Joslin under arrest——"

"You're putting nobody under arrest, Canfield," Tucson interrupted, "unless it's Lombard and some of his snakes. I heard Lombard offering a hundred bucks to the man who'd plug Lullaby——"

"That's a lie!" Lombard yelled.

Tucson's gun muzzle tilted directly toward Lombard. He said coldly, "Would you like to back up that statement with your gun, Lombard?"

Lombard hesitated. "Maybe I just spoke in excitement," he said, laughing nervously. "I didn't really mean to call you a liar, Smith."

One of the citizens of the town spoke up. "Hell, there's no cause to arrest Joslin. It was a fair fight. Armitage pulled first. He just wasn't any match, though, for Joslin."

Lombard glared at the man but didn't say anything.

Stony grinned. "Deputy Canfield, I reckon there's no work for you to do, unless it's cleaning up the mess here. C'mon, pard, let's drift."

16

THE NEW SHERIFF

TUCSON and his friends slept late at the hotel the following morning—that is, late for them. It was after eight o'clock before they finished their breakfast and stepped out on Main Street. The thoroughfare looked deserted.

"Blue Cloud looks sort of subdued this morning," Tucson commented.

"It was plenty wild last night," Stony said.

Lullaby frowned. "Damned if I like this killing business."

Stony nodded. "You're right pard." Then to Tucson, "What's the program for today? You anything in mind?"

"I figured we might as well drift out to the Horseshoe-N and see how everybody is getting along . . . Say, that looks like Ben Canfield coming."

Glancing down the street from their position in front of the hotel, they could see Deputy Canfield just pulling away from the hitch rack near the jail. Canfield had a bedroll behind his saddle and sat hunched despondently on the horse's back as it drew near.

Lullaby said, "He looks like he's leaving town."

The horse was almost abreast by this time, not moving very fast. Tucson called, "Morning, Canfield. You going away?"

Canfield raised his head. "Hello, Mr. Smith. Yeah, I'm leaving—for a spell anyway." His tones sounded bitter. He touched spur to his pony and sped on.

Tucson looked after the man, a frown on his face. "Hmmm!" Tucson mused. "That's downright queer. I wonder if Blue Cloud is to be without a deputy."

"Let's drift over to Titus Shaw's saloon," Stony proposed. "Might be he'd know something about this."

They crossed the street and entered the Blue Cloud Saloon. Titus was behind the bar. He had only two customers, both of whom were talking at the far end of the long counter, their heads close together. Titus said good morning to Tucson and his friends and took their orders. By this time the other two customers were staring at the Three Mesquiteers. When Titus had served drinks he said, "Gentlemen, shake hands with Phineas Osgood and Sheriff Rafe Quinn—Mr. Smith, Mr. Joslin, and Mr. Brooke." The men shook hands. Titus added, "Mr. Osgood is owner of our local bank."

Phin Osgood was portly, with protruding eyes, a well-curved black mustache, and an apoplectic-looking complexion. He wore citizens' clothin, including a "boiled shirt" and black string tie. His shoes carried a high polish. Sheriff Quinn was lean, with narrow shoulders, prominent jawbones, and buck-teeth; his lips were thin. There were a couple of razor nicks on his freshly shaven countenance. A six-shooter was slung at either hip.

"Glad to know you men," Phin Osgood said pompously. "Will you join us in a drink?"

"Thanks, no," Tucson replied. "Titus just served us. It's a mite early in the day to take any more."

"Quite so," Osgood agreed. "I do very little drinking, as a rule. Just happened to run into our sheriff on the street, and he insisted I come in and imbibe with him."

"I reckon." Tucson nodded. He spoke to the sheriff. "We just saw Ben Canfield leaving town. You figuring to appoint a new deputy here?"

"Eventually," Quinn said shortly. "I'm having Canfield handle things in Chancelor for the present. I'll be running Blue Cloud myself, until things quiet down. Canfield didn't look like he was big enough for the job."

"And you are, of course." Stony smiled in a joking way.

Sheriff Quinn's eyes narrowed. "I aim to show anybody that gets tough just where they get off," he stated flatly. "There's been too many killings around here to suit me."

Lullaby said quietly, "I killed Nick Armitage last night, Sheriff. You figuring that needs any further investigating?"

"If it does I'll let you know," Quinn said shortly.

Lullaby said politely, "Thanks. I'll appreciate that."

Quinn's face reddened a trifle. "As a matter of fact, that's one of the things that brought me over here."

Tucson put in: "Somebody didn't lose any time telling you."

"I have ways of learning things," Quinn said darkly.

Phin Osgood looked rather nervous. "I'm sure there'll be no further trouble over that killing," he put in. "As I heard it, Mr. Joslin acted purely in self-defense."

"Did Joslin have to go to the Sunfisher looking for trouble?" Quinn asked peevishly.

"I didn't go there looking for trouble," Lullaby pointed out, "until Armitage started making threats. He drew first and challenged me to draw. What would you expect me to do—take to my heels?"

"It might have been wiser in the long run," Quinn said.

"Meaning just what?" Tucson asked, thin-lipped.

"What I said. Figure it out," Quinn growled. "I'm just telling you hombies that I don't want any more killings around here."

"That is certainly welcome news." Tucson smiled. "You intend, then, to find out what happened to Clem Norton, and who killed those Horseshoe-N cowboys, and who tried to force Miss Norton to sell her ranch——"

"You got the ranch," Quinn snapped.

"Look here, Rafe," Phin Osgood intervened, "I think you're giving Mr. Smith the wrong impression. After all, he's a-newcomer to our community. We should make him welcome. He's had one or two unfortunate experiences since he and his friends arrived in Blue Cloud, but I see no reason why everything won't be peaceful from now on."

"I'm intending it will be," Quinn growled, starting toward the doorway. "I'll see you fellers some other time." He pushed angrily through the swinging doors and clumped off down the street.

"My, my," Phin Osgood said, "Rafe is certainly upset about the way things have been going here. He told me he had no idea Canfield was so inefficient."

"And yet," Tucson pointed out, "he's sent Canfield over to Chancellor to run the office in his absence."

"Probably letting the man down easy before he kicks him out," Osgood suggested.

"At any rate," Stony put in, "Quinn sure got here in a hurry. I wonder who in town sent for him."

"I wouldn't have the least idea," Osgood replied. He changed the subject. "By the way, Mr. Smith, I wish you'd drop into the bank and see me someday at your convenience. I'd like to get better acquainted."

"Why, that's mighty nice of you." Tucson smiled.

"Well, gentlemen," Osgood concluded, "it's been nice making your acquaintance. I hope to see you again soon." He once more shook hands all around and took his departure.

When he had gone Lullaby said, "I wonder who sent for Sheriff Quinn."

"That's something I wouldn't know," Titus said, "but when I opened up this morning I glanced down the street and saw Quinn and Osgood just leaving the Sunfisher Bar. The Limited had only been through about half an hour before, so Quinn must have got in touch with Osgood as soon as he arrived."

"Meaning," Tucson said, "that Osgood sent for Quinn?"

"I didn't say that," Titus replied, "but that's what I think. I know Osgood was one of Quinn's strong backers in the last election."

"What do you suppose they were doing in the Sunfisher?" Stony asked.

"Probably trying to find out what happened between Lullaby and Armitage last night," Titus said. "I think Quinn would like to pin a murder charge on Lullaby. Probably couldn't get the right kind of evidence, though. Then they came here and asked me what I knew about the fight. I told them I didn't know anything, except that I'd heard Armitage making threats regarding Lullaby. Quinn seemed plumb disappointed when I told him that. I don't think anything more will come of the matter, though. I heard Phin Osgood tell Quinn he might as well forget the whole business."

Tucson said, "Since when does a town banker tell a county sheriff what to do?"

"I've been wondering about that myself," Titus said.

"One thing is sure," Tucson frowned. "Rafe Quinn isn't any jelly-spined homb'e like Ben Canfield. Quinn is a fighter, or I miss my guess, and mean as dirt. We'll have to watch out for any move Quinn makes."

They talked a short time longer, then Tucson and his pardners said "Strong," to Titus and headed in the direction of the livery stable, where they saddled their ponies for the ride to the Horseshoe-N. A few minutes later they were loping easily along the trail that ran northwest from Blue Cloud.

17

RARIN' FOR ACTION

THE THREE RIDERS had scarcely left the outskirts of the town behind them when Stony said, "I'll catch up to you in a minute, pards. Keep going. Spurring ahead of them, he suddenly turned his pony from the trail and cut at a tangent into the brush.

Lullaby looked at Tucson. "Now what's Stony aiming to do?"

Tucson shrugged. "You've got me. I haven't the slightest idea."

They pulled their ponies to a slower gait and loafed along the dusty way.

Lullaby asked, "Just how far is it to the Horseshoe-N?"

"Molly said it was just about eighteen miles."

"Nice day for riding, anyway."

A sudden yell from behind caused them to turn in the saddle. Stony was hurrying to catch up, leading behind him a gray nag with an extremely dilapidated saddle on its bony spine. Lullaby looked at it with distaste as Stony rode alongside.

"My gosh, pard," Lullaby said reproachfully

"But this is the horse I had at Wagon Springs," Stony said.

Lullaby shook his head. "You can fool me on a lot of things, Stony, but you can't make me believe that's a horse. You've been robbing some museum of its prehistoric bones."

"Dammit!" Stony exclaimed in some exasperation. "Prehistoric bones don't move of their own accord."

"My point exactly," Lullaby said gravely. "What's that thing on its back—some sort of growth?"

"It was a saddle once," Stony said sulkily. "This horse did me a good turn at Wagon Springs and——"

"What did it do—draw the flies off'n you?" Lullaby guffawed. "What do you call it?"

"Look, dim-wit," Stony said patiently, "this beast may look like a sack of bones to you, but to me he's a noble charger. I'm in his debt. I'm aiming to see he has a good home for his declining years. And I've named him Lancelot."

Lullaby cocked a skeptical eye at the nag. "If you ask me, he's a wreck, if I ever saw one."

Tucson was chuckling to himself. "I reckon, Lullaby, we just can't appreciate Stony's kind heart. Think of him hiding this—this—this Lancelot in the brush and hiking into town afoot last night. That's a real sacrifice when a cowpoke actually walks."

"Dammit!" Stony growled. "What could I do with it? It wouldn't be worth its feed bill at a livery. I couldn't just turn the poor critter loose to fend for itself. It's scarcely any teeth left. Why, the buzzards were already commencing to circle when I picked it up this morning. So I figured we could take it to the Horseshoe-N and put it out to pasture for the remainder of its days."

"Said remainder is likely to happen any minute along the trail, I'd say," Lullaby drawled.

"Don't be too hard on Stony," Tucson said gravely. "This is just more evidence of his big heart."

And so they argued while the miles drifted past, and Tucson put in a chuckling remark from time to time. Before they realized it

they had topped a small grassy ridge and were looking down on a clump of ancient cottonwood trees, among which nestled the Horseshoe-N buildings. A short time later they crossed a narrow plank bridge over Cougar Creek and trotted down toward the main house.

Molly, seated on the long gallery that fronted the rock-and-adobe ranch building, had seen them coming through the trees and stepped out to meet them, followed by her Mexican girl, Maria Lopez. "This," Molly said, "is a treat. I was wishing you'd come out today. I'm eating down in the mess house with my crew, or your crew, whichever it is. Being Sunday. Sourdough George promised to cook something special."

"Thank heaven we're in time for dinner," Lullaby ejaculated.

"How have things been?" Tucson asked.

"I couldn't ask for anything better, if Dad were only here," Molly commenced, then broke off, "Good grief, Stony! What's that animal you're leading?"

"He claims it's a horse," Lullaby snickered, "and he's stuck with his story. It's name is Lancelot, and it's a noble charger."

"But why——?" Molly looked bewildered.

"I'll tell you about it later." Stony flushed. "Right now all I ask is a home for the poor critter."

"Lancelot can have it." Molly smiled. "In fact, you men are entitled to anything the Horseshoe-N has to offer. Ride on down to the corral. Maria and I will be along presently."

The three men reined their horses in the direction of the bunkhouse. A sudden yell greeted their arrival; men came tumbling from the building, led by Red Sherry. Only Sourdough George remained in the doorway, a dour expression on his long features. "Three more hungry mouths to feed," he crabbed. "With Lullaby I might as well cook for six extra."

"Back to your kitchen, you despoiler of good food," Lullaby growled. He spoke to Sherry. "How's it going, Red?"

"I can't kick," Red laughed.

Tucson said, "How've you been, Sourdough?"

The cook shook his head. "My corns been fretting me something terrible. That's an omen of coming trouble, mark my words."

"I hope so," Bat Wing said. "Things are too quiet here."

"Ain't it right?" a couple more chimed in.

Ananias said, "Less talk, hombres. Can't you see the bosses' broncs need putting up?"

The men hurried to obey. A short time later they were all seated in the bunkhouse, a long narrow building with a double tier of bunks running along one wall. In the center of the room was a oblong table with benches on either side. Beyond, a doorway opened into the

kitchen from which there came a savory odor of cooking food. Cigarette smoke filled the room. Tucson asked, "Ananias, what's been doing since you've been here?"

"We've just sort of been getting settled," Ananias replied. "I haven't had the boys do much riding. Didn't know what minute I might get word from you that we were needed, so I've kept 'em close to the house. There's just one thing puzzling me, and I know I'm speaking for all of us—what was that dishwater-colored quadruped that Stony led in a hackamore? And why?"

There was considerable laughter at Stony's expense. Tucson said, "We'll give you the whole story when Molly shows up. I don't want to repeat it twice."

"I hope said story," Bat Wing put in, "is the prelude to something doing right soon."

"We're all hoping that," Rube Phelps said.

Tucson glanced at the men and smiled. "You *hombres* talk like you're rarin' for action."

"No mistake about it," Ananias replied.

At that moment Molly entered the bunkhouse. Ananias gave her his chair. Tucson said, "Where's Maria?"

"She'll be along when dinner is on," Molly explained. "But, Tucson, tell me what happened in town."

"Plenty," Tucson replied. He sketched briefly, with certain details furnished by Lullaby and Stony, the events that had transpired.

When Tucson had finished Molly said, "Tucson, do you really think that could be my father they're holding prisoner at Wagon Springs?"

"There's a good chance it might be," Tucson admitted.

"But how are we going to find out?" Molly asked.

Ananias Jones said, "Tucson, when do we start for Wagon Springs?"

"Tonight, I figure," Tucson replied. He turned to Stony. "How many of Lombard's gang do you think might be there tonight, pard?"

Stony answered. "Well, there's Bull Jackson and four others. By tonight the crew that went to Branch City should be back. I imagine there was at least ten men in that bunch. Then there's likely a few more up in Branch City. Lombard gave the word for all to return to the ranch, so the Branch City men will probably be there too."

"In short," Tucson said, frowning, "we'll have to count on around twenty men at Wagon Springs tonight. We'll have Lullaby, Stony, Red, Ananias, Rube, Tex, and Bat—not counting me. That makes eight of us——"

"Hey, about me now——" Sourdough George commenced from the kitchen doorway.

"I'm figuring you'll stay here with Molly and Maria," Tucson said. This brought a strong protest from Sourdough, but Tucson remained firm in his decision.

Molly frowned. "I don't like the idea of you risking your lives this way," she said. "Perhaps if you waited, Tucson——"

"Perhaps if we waited," Tucson said grimly, "they might take their prisoner someplace else. If it's your dad we can't run risks of that happening. Last night would have been the ideal time for an attack on Wagon Springs, but we didn't know in time what was going on over there. And don't put too much hope in that prisoner being your father, Molly. That's something we don't know for sure."

They talked of other things for a few minutes. "Gosh," Red Sherry said, "I'd sure liked to have seen that fight between Lullaby and Nick Armitage."

"I've a hunch"—Tucson smiled thinly—"you may see all the fight you can stand tonight at Wagon Springs. That's going to be tough going. Make no mistake about it."

"Chow's on!" came a sudden interruption from Sourdough George. "Get your seats before I throw it on the floor!"

18

GUN SMOKE AT WAGON SPRINGS

AFTER DINNER the men took it easy, smoked and formulated plans for the coming venture. An hour after suppertime horses were saddled and the men mounted. Molly and Maria came down to the corral to see them off. Tucson smiled at the concerned look on the girl's face.

"Now, don't you go to worrying," Tucson said. "We've been through this sort of thing before. We know what we're doing."

Sourdough George put in wistfully, "You'd have a heap better chance was I along with you. I got my ol' scatter-gun all loaded and ready to go."

Tucson nodded. "After all, we never know what move Lombard will make. I'll feel a lot better knowing you're here to protect Molly and Maria."

Sourdough brightened somewhat. "Well, if you put it that way, Tucson——"

"That's the way I'm putting it. I'm counting on you a heap, cooky." He turned to Molly "Well, we'll be going."

Touching fingers to the brim of his Stetson, he led the way out of the ranch yard, the others following. Instead of heading toward the road that ran to Blue Cloud, he swung around the cottonwoods

surrounding the buildings and headed directly south. Once away from the house, he ordered a brief halt to speak to his riders.

"We're going to cut through the foothills of the San Maeto Mountains," Tucson explained. "The route will take us across Dollar-Sign-L, 21-Bar, and O-Slash-P properties. We don't want to be seen—especially when we're crossing Lombard's holdings. That's why we're hugging the foothills. I've planned this trip so we should reach Wagon Springs at full moon. Any questions?" He looked from face to face of the seven riders."

Sherry asked. "You know better than I do, but couldn't we sneak in better if we waited until the moon is down?"

Tucson nodded. "We probably could, if we were just going to Wagon Springs looking for a fight. But Stony is the only one of us who is really acquainted with the layout there. We've got to find the stable where that prisoner is held and get him out in a hurry. We don't have any time to stumble around in the dark. It's going to be a matter of hit and get away as quick as we can. The fact that Lombard is holding a prisoner shows they don't want him to talk to outsiders. They might even kill him to keep him from being taken. That's why we've got to work fast—take 'em by surprise."

"I get the idea." Red nodded.

"A lot is depending on you, Red," Tucson went on. "You've got to bring up that horse you're leading and get the prisoner into the saddle. For all we know, he may be weakened by a long captivity. No"—noticing the sudden look of worry that creased Red's forehead—"you won't be alone, naturally. You'll have plenty help. When we get near Wagon Springs we'll stop for another powwow and get details straightened out."

The fact that no one else asked questions was proof of the deep faith put in Tucson's leadership. The little cavalcade again got under way, with Tucson and Stony and Lullaby leading. Behind came Ananias and Red. Rubc, Tex, and Bat Wing were spread out to one side.

Three quarters of an hour later the riders circled a low rise of ground and saw before them a vast sea of sand and mesquite, with a full moon riding high in the night. They rode steadily for another fifteen minutes, then Tucson asked Stony, "Think it time we stopped, pard?"

"I was just going to suggest it." Stony nodded. Tucson gave the word, and the men again drew to a halt.

"Wagon Springs is only about a quarter mile farther," Tucson said. "Lullaby, Bat Wing, and I will wait here. Stony will take the rest of you on to the town. You'll have to move easy and careful. Keep your horses quiet. Stony will point out the stable they've got

the prisoner in. I don't know whether it will be locked or not, but it probably will. You'll have to shoot off the lock."

"How about those guards Stony mentioned?" Ananias asked.

"If they put up a fight you'll have to give 'em what they ask for, but maybe we can draw 'em off."

"How do you mean, draw 'em off?" Red Sherry asked.

Tucson explained: "After Stony has showed you where the prisoner is held, you fellows lay quiet in the brush until you hear shots from the direction of the saloon. When Stony leaves you he'll come back here where we're waiting. We'll go on to Wagon Springs and start a fight of some sort in the saloon. That should draw everybody up to the saloon. When that happens, you men who are responsible for rescuing the prisoner can get busy. If you get away clean, Ananias and Red will accompany the prisoner and head for the Horseshoe-N as fast as horseflesh will carry you. Don't wait for us. If possible, Tex and Rube can join us at the saloon—but only after the prisoner is in the clear. Got that straight?"

"It's straight," Red said, "only I was thinking——"

"About what?" from Tucson.

"Suppose this prisoner isn't Molly's father after all?"

"No matter who he is," Tucson returned dryly, "I reckon he'll be glad to escape from Lombard."

"If I had any brains"—Red flushed—"I'd have thought of that without asking you."

"Don't let it worry you, Red." Tucson smiled. "All right, Stony, if you're ready."

Stony nodded and touched spurs to his pony. Ananias, Rube, Red, and Tex followed. Tucson eyed them as they gradually melted into the surrounding mesquite. Then he rolled a cigarette and lighted it. Lullaby and Bat Wing followed suit.

The minutes ticked off slowly. The wind had come up and was blowing quite strongly across the sandy waste of mesquite and prickly pear.

"This wind might help some," Bat Wing commented.

Lullaby smiled. "Getting nervous, Bat?" he drawled.

Bat shook his head. "Just eager to get started. Stony seems to be taking a hell of a time to get back here. I hope he didn't run into any trouble."

"I don't reckon he did," Tucson replied.

"I reckon you're right," Bat agreed. He got down from his saddle.

"I'm going to stretch my legs a mite."

Tucson and Lullaby followed suit. They crouched on haunches near the horses, conversing in low tones, the ears of each cocked in the direction of Wagon Springs for any unexpected sound.

"I reckon we couldn't hear anything through this wind, anyhow," Lullaby said.

The wind had increased by this time and was whipping the limbs of the mesquite trees.

"Figure a sandstorm's coming up?" Tucson said.

Lullaby shrugged. "Could be, pard. I don't know, though. This section gets a lot of breeze pretty regularly."

Bat Wing said, "I was just wishing I'd brought an extra six-shooter along. I loaned my other gun to Jeff before we left the 3-Bar-o. He was getting one of his hawg-legs repaired."

"I brought an extra tucked in my waistband," Tucson said.

"Me too," from Lullaby.

Abruptly Stony emerged, riding, from a clump of near-by high brush. Tucson said, "Damn if you don't remind me of an Indian at times. What's the layout, pard?" He was getting back in his saddle as he spoke. Lullaby and Bat did likewise.

Stony reined his horse near. "I left Red, Ananias, Rube and Tex stationed on three sides of the building where the prisoner is held. There's two guards there, squatted in the brush, not far from the door. The padlock is on; I could see it in the moonlight."

Tucson asked, "How's the setup look?"

Stony went on: "I left my horse in the brush for a spell and did some scouting around. There's quite a gang there—twenty, anyway, in the saloon. They're plumb bold tonight. No blankets on the windows or anything. There's a cook and one other hombre down in the stage-station building. Aside from them and those two guards on the prisoner, everybody is in the saloon. I guess it's lucky we decided on tonight."

"Why?" Tucson asked.

"It looked like most of the gang was figuring to leave. There were a lot of bedrolls around."

With the wind whipping into their faces, the four riders started for Wagon Springs at a lope. There was no longer any necessity for approaching secretly. Stony reined closely to Tucson, speaking loudly, so his voice would carry above the wind. "I managed to cut the string that's tied to that warning bell. The minute Bull Jackson sees us he'll give it a yank to warn those two guards to lie low. If they don't get a warning strangers are in the neighborhood, they won't be alert when Red and the rest strike. And from their location, the guards can't see us approach. This wind will kill the sound of our broncs' hoofs, I figure."

"Good work, pard," Tucson replied.

The ponies pounded on, and within a couple of minutes the riders arrived before the Wagon Springs Saloon.

Tucson and the others pulled up before the saloon and left their reins dangling on the earth when they dismounted. Tucson led the way up the one step to the porch and through the doorway of the saloon. Following him came Lullaby, Stony, and Bat. They stepped inside, where the air was thick with tobacco smoke, to find the bar jammed with men.

Tucson elbowed an open space at the counter, and the others quickly wedged in.

Gradually, the noise in the saloon died down as the occupants realized strangers had entered. All eyes were now on Tucson and his companions. Stony had already seen Bull Jackson stoop below his bar and reach for the bell cord. Now Bull came, frowning, down the bar. "What you going to have?" he growled in surly tones.

The men ordered beer. Bull said, "No beer. You hombres better ride on to the next town."

Lullaby drawled insultingly, "This is a hell of a saloon."

An angry muttering ran through the room. Tucson said, "All right, barkeep, set out what you got—probably rotgut."

Bull Jackson flushed, put out a bottle and four glasses. "You fellers act like something got stuck in your craw."

"Is that any of your business?" Bat snapped.

Bull was puzzled. It was unusual to find strangers like these who were, apparently, spicing for a fight. A man at the far end of the bar said angrily, "You need any help, Bull?"

Bull replied quickly, "You keep outten this, Marve. We don't want any trouble. These hombres will be leaving."

"What makes you think so?" Stony queried.

Bull glanced quickly at Stony. "Say, I've seen you before someplace."

"I've been there." Stony smiled.

"Where?" Bull asked.

"Someplace." He poured his drink, tasted it, then set it down unfinished as his companions had done. Bull's face became redder every instant. Stony said, "Rotten liquor."

"Nobody asked you to come in here," Bull growled.

Contemptuously Tucson spun a dollar on the bar. "By rights, I should get about ninety-nine cents change."

Bull pushed the dollar back. "If you feel that way, you hombres don't have to pay, but I'm asking you to get out—now."

The room tensed, waiting for Tucson's reply. The eyes of the men gleamed angrily when Tucson answered with a sneering laugh. "Jackson," he said, "there's something almighty wrong with you. Maybe you're sick or you wouldn't speak that way——"

"By Gawd!" Jackson exclaimed. "I remember you fellers. Three

of you came through here about a week back. You"—speaking to Lullaby—"ate up all my crackers."

"Yeah, I remember," Lullaby admitted.

"Is that all you remember about us?" Stony asked impudently. "Take a good look, Bull."

Jackson scanned him narrowly. "There's something mighty familiar about you, hombre. I'll think of it in a minute."

"I'll help out your memory." Stony grinned. His voice suddenly changed, "Leesten, Bool, een my own country I am 'ver reech hombre. Deed I evair tell you about my brothair who throw the knife? At ten spaces he could split in two the keetle fly on the wall——"

"By Gawd!" Jackson's eyes bulged. For an instant a stunned expression came into his face as the full import of Stony's words commenced to seep into his mind. Abruptly he dived below the bar and came up with his shotgun in hand. "Stop 'em boys! They're spies!"

Even as Bull's shotgun swung toward Stony, Lullaby's long arm reached across the bar; his gun barrel crashed with telling effect against Bull Jackson's head, and Jackson dropped like a poled ox, the shotgun exploding harmlessly in the direction of the ceiling.

Tucson sent a shot ripping above the heads of the men in the saloon. "Don't draw, you hombres. We've got you covered!"

19

FIRE!

AT ALMOST THE SAME INSTANT the guns of Tucson's companions roared. None of the four shot to hit anyone with these first shots. Their job was simply to delay action here while a rescue was effected a short distance to the rear.

A man yelled, "A few of you get out to Norton—quick!"

At the sound of the name a thrill ran through Tucson. They had guessed right then. As there was no rear door to the saloon, anyone leaving would have to pass Tucson and his friends. "We've got 'em bottled up proper!" Tucson yelled.

A leaden slug whined past his body. Tucson fired once, twice. A man yelped with pain and collapsed to the floor. Other guns were barking now. Miraculously Tucson and his companions went unhit.

Another man pitched abruptly to the floor. Bullets ripped into walls and the front of the bar. Shooting suddenly broke out some distance back of the saloon. Tucson caught the sounds above the din of firing within. "We'd better get out!" he snapped. "C'mon, pards!"

Slowly the four backed toward the entrance. Across the room,

from behind an overturned table, came sharp flashes of orange fire. Lullaby snapped two quick shots in that direction. A pair of ragged, splintered holes appeared, as though by magic, in the table top. The gun behind it fell silent.

Beyond the bar an ugly-visaged individual had retrieved Bull Jackson's shotgun and was shoving in fresh shells. Stony's gun shifted to one side, roared. The bullet struck just beneath the twin hammers of the double-barreled weapon, tearing it violently from the man's grasp. With a startled yelp he ducked below the bar. Stony thumbed a second shot through the bar front. He didn't know whether he hit anything or not.

The room was swimming with powder now, the acrid odor burning eyes and throat and nostrils. Bat Wing grunted with sudden pain and staggered to one side. His face went white. Tucson yelled, "You hit bad. Bat?"

"It's nothing," Bat gritted through set teeth. He braced himself against the front wall. Crimson flame spurted from his six-shooter muzzle.

"You get out!" Tucson snapped.

"I'm staying," Bat objected, and lifted his gun again.

Tucson spoke quickly. "Lullaby—Stony—cover us until we get out, then come in a hurry!"

Bat was still protesting when Tucson swept him up under one arm and half carried him to the outer air and to his waiting horse. "Into the saddle!" Tucson said.

"But, dammit," Bat said weakly, "I can still——"

"Will you get on that horse!" Tucson roared his exasperation and practically hurled the stubborn puncher into his saddle.

At once the horse, frightened by the gun explosions and unusual activity, went bucking wildly over a large area. Bat had retrieved his reins, however, and was sticking with the frantic animal. Seeing that Bat was capable of staying on, Tucson jumped to his own waiting pony as Lullaby and Stony came backing from the saloon doorway. Men were following closely, now that Tucson and his companions were showing signs of retreat.

Tucson again got his six-shooter into action. Three men burst from the building and spread out along the porch, sharp flashes of orange flame jetting from their hands. Lullaby and Stony were just mounting. Stony didn't quite make it. Tucson heard him swear as he staggered back and abruptly sat flat on the earth, almost below his horse's belly.

"Stony!" Tucson yelled. He thumbed two swift shots.

From his sitting position Stony started throwing lead right and left. Tucson's guns were empty now. Swiftly he plugged out exploded

THE THREE MESQUITEERS

shells and inserted fresh cartridges into cylinders. By the time he again glanced up Stony was on his feet again, climbing into his saddle.

A sudden wild yell sounded at the side of the building as Rube Phelps and Tex Malcolm came running to get into the fight.

Above the rattle of gunfire Tucson's voice reached them. "Did you get Norton out?"

Tex yelled back, "Yes, but there's hell to pay——"

The rest of the sentence was lost as he and Rube unlimbered their guns. The new arrivals proved too much for the Lombard forces. Immediately they beat a swift retreat inside the building, leaving one of their number on the porch. For a brief moment the firing fell off while the men in the saloon slammed shut the door.

"Hell's bells!" Rube Phelps swore disappointedly. "Have we got 'em licked already?" He strode up on the saloon porch, six-shooter in hand, and with the barrel of the weapon smashed through the window glass. Here, taking careful aim inside, he fired. A lamp hanging from the ceiling crashed to the floor, splashing oil in all directions. In an instant it caught fire from the still-burning wick. There was a sudden *woosh!* as the flame flared.

A bullet snarled over Rube's shoulder. Now he was aiming at the lamp above the bar. There came a sudden explosion; broken glass and kerosene cascaded to the top of the counter. An instant later the top of the bar was aflame.

Rube laughed as he backed away from the window.

"Good work, Rube," Tucson said. "You had a real idea."

Inside the saloon were startled yells as the men fought to put out the rapidly spreading fire. Tex exclaimed, "All we got to do it wait until they're forced out, then we can renew the fight."

"We'd better make tracks as soon as possible," Tucson said. "We're still outnumbered."

Stony and Lullaby swung up alongside Tucson. Tucson looked narrowly at Stony. "I saw you go down."

"Yes, dammit, you did," Stony said peevishly. "Just as I started to get on my horse a slug tore a heel off my right boot. It threw me off balance, and I sure sat down hard."

Bat Wing came loping back, his horse again under control.

Tucson asked, "You sure you're all right, Bat?"

"It was just a scratch across the hip," Bat replied. "Sort of paralyzed my leg a second or so. It's not bleeding much."

Flame was bursting from the roof of the saloon now, fanned by the strong wind. There were no more shots.

"We could pick off a few more," Tucson said, "but we'd better slope fast. Rube, Tex, where are your ponies?"

"Down near the stable where Norton was held."

"Let's go get 'em. Ananias and Red got Norton away all right?"

"Yeah, but he's hurt bad," Tex said.

"Hurt? That's hell! But come on," Tucson continued.

They swung around the rear of the saloon building and back toward the brush.

By this time Rube and Tex had found their ponies and mounted. Tucson looked back. Already one corner of the stage station showed a flickering tongue of leaping fire.

The building where Norton had been held showed an open door and shattered lock. Four still bodies sprawled on the earth near the door. Stony called to Rube and Tex: "You said Ananias and Red got away all right?"

"That's what I said. We had some shooting to do though."

"Let's go!" Tucson called.

Putting spurs to their ponies, the men quickly left the scene of the gun battle.

Five minutes later they caught up with Red and Ananias. Tied to the saddle between them rode Clem Norton. He was slumped down, only the ropes supporting his sagging body. His eyes were closed. Moonlight picked out the details of his pale lined face and silvery hair. The man was unconscious.

Ananias said quickly, "Everybody all right?" He and Red stopped the ponies as Tucson and the rest drew abreast.

"We're all here," Tucson replied. "Bat got a scratch."

Red was gazing back toward Wagon Springs, where a lurid glow was spread against the sky. "Looks like a fire back there."

Tucson related briefly what Rube had started in the way of conflagrations. "By cripes!" Red chuckled. "That was smart."

"You're right," Tucson agreed. "Say, what happened to you? And what's wrong with Norton? Tex said he was hurt."

"Shot twice," Ananias supplied. "Alongside the head and in the back."

"You mean when you rescued him?" Tucson asked. "Let's have a look at him."

"There's nothing more you can do, Tucson," Ananias said. "But he's hit right bad. It probably isn't doing him much good, moving him, but we couldn't leave him there. No, it happened before we got there. Sometime today."

Tucson considered swiftly, then gave orders. "The Horseshoe-N isn't much farther than Blue Cloud. If we can get Norton to his home he'll have Molly to care for him——"

"Providing we can get him there alive," Ananias interrupted. "He should have a doctor——"

"I'm thinking of that," Tucson cut in. "Stony, you fan tail to town. There's a Dr. James Tuttle there. Get him out of bed and rush him to the Horseshoe-N. And don't lose any time. Lullaby, you go with him."

Side by side, the two men flashed off through the mesquite in the direction of town.

The glow in the sky above Wagon Springs was brighter than ever now. "I'll bet the whole dang setup goes up in smoke," Tucson commented. "After years of this Southwest sun, that timber will go like paper." He turned to Bat Wing, who had dismounted and rolled down his overalls. "Much of a wound, Bat?"

Bat shook his head as he wound a bandanna around his left leg. "Furrow plowed across, just below the hip. It ain't serious."

"We got off lucky," Tucson said. "Ananias, what happened at your end?"

"We laid in the brush, waiting for you to start your fracas in the saloon. We could see the guards near where Norton was held prisoner and could have shot them right then. However, I figured to see if they'd leave for the saloon when you commenced shooting. At the first shots in the saloon the two guards tensed like they were going to head that way. We held our fire a minute. Then, sudden, one of them damn mule-eared rabbits come flashing through the brush right under my nose. It like to scared hell outten me, it was that close. I jerked back quick, and one of those guards heard me. He started firing in my direction."

"I threw down on him instantly," Red cut in, "but missed my first shot. The two guards had jumped back in the brush by that time. Ananias gave the word to close in on 'em and we did."

"Red and me rushed 'em," Ananias went on. "About that time two more hombres came running from the old stage station. Rube and Tex took care of them. The lead slinging was right hot for a minute or so, but we downed all four. Then Red shot the lock off'n the door of the stable where Norton was held and we carried him out."

"Was he unconscious then?" Tucson asked.

Ananias shook his head. "His mind was right woozy though. He mumbled his name—Clem Norton—and got out a few words about being shot today while he was attempting an escape, but I couldn't get the clear of it before he passed out cold. We couldn't leave him there, so the next best thing was to lash him into a saddle and take him away, which same we did."

Tucson's voice shook with anger. "Did you bandage Norton's wounds?"

"Do you think," Ananias said, "I'd use dirty rags like that to

bandage wounds? Howsomever, I figured I'd better not remove 'em until we could get fresh wrappings."

"The dirty scuts!" Tucson said, grim-faced. "Imagine them padlocking Norton in that place, and him wounded this way. They must be awfully afraid he'd make a getaway. And what does he know that Lombard is so scared will get out?"

"There's something more than just cattle thieving going on," Rube Phelps said, "or I miss my guess."

"That's the way it looks to me." Tucson nodded.

"Think we should get moving?" Ananias said.

"I don't think we'd better move farther with Norton in that condition," Tucson replied. "It would shake the life out of him—tied in the saddle that way. For all we know he may be bleeding internally."

"What can we do?" Red asked.

"I've been thinking of that," Tucson replied. "Ananias, you, Rube, Bat, and Tex will stay with Norton. Get him out of that saddle and stretched on the ground as quiet as possible. Keep a sharp lookout for anybody passing this way from Wagon Springs. What's left of those hombres will be riding to tell Lombard what happened."

"What you aiming to do?" Tex asked.

Tucson explained. "I got a pretty good idea of the layout of this country from Molly when I talked to her. The O-Slash-P Ranch, owned by a feller named Ollie Paddock, can't be too many miles from here. Red and I will see if we can't find it and borrow a wagon and some blankets. I understand Paddock is a right hombre, so we shouldn't have any trouble getting what we need, providing we can locate his place. C'mon, Red, let's slope. See you later, cow hands."

"*Adios*," Bat said. Rube and Tex voiced similar remarks. Ananias added, "You'd better hurry as much as possible, Tucson. I don't like the sound of Norton's breathing."

"We won't be wasting any time," Tucson replied. He kicked his pony in the ribs and, followed by Red, quickly disappeared in the vast sea of waving mesquite.

Time passed slowly to the men waiting in the brush.

Two hours later, when the sky was commencing to gray in the east, the men heard the rumble of an approaching wagon. Then Tucson and Red came loping out through the brush. The wagon was coming behind. When the preliminary greetings were over Tucson said, "Yeah, we finally found the place. Ollie Paddock insisted on driving the wagon himself—said his team was a mite skittish with strangers."

"Paddock's all right," Red supplied. "From what he says, he and Clem Norton were right friendly."

Paddock, when he arrived with the open wagon, in the bed of

which were spread several blankets and some pillows, proved to be a middle-aged chunky man with sharp eyes and graying hair. Tucson introduced him to the others, then they set about lifting the unconscious Norton into the wagon and making him as comfortable as possible.

Paddock's eyes flashed angrily. "Well, it's something that you've found Clem, anyway," he stated. "The next thing is to string up the skunks responsible for this. Mr. Smith says Lombard is behind these moves."

"You can forget the 'mister,' Ollie," Tucson said. "And remember, I didn't say I had proof—actual proof—against Lombard, though we're right sure. We do know that he rustled some of your stock. When we move against Lombard we want to have facts that will stand up in court."

Finally they were ready. Paddock climbed to the driver's seat. Tucson said, "We'll have to go mighty careful when we cross Lombard's holdings. We'll stay back in the low hills, like we did on the way down here. Once we get near the Horseshoe-N one of us can ride ahead and sort of get things ready."

It was broad daylight by the time they reached the Horseshoe-N. Lullaby and Stony had already arrived with the doctor. Molly, white-faced but steady, met them as they rode into the ranch yard. She ran immediately to the wagon before it had come to a full stop, looking long at Clem Norton, then turned to Tucson. "Is—is he still alive?" she asked.

"Just about," Tucson said wearily. "Doc Tuttle's got a job ahead, I'm afraid."

20

TUCSON MAKES A PROPHECY

TWO DAYS HAD PASSED, with Dr. Tuttle never straying far from his patient's side. Clem Norton hadn't yet recovered consciousness. The wound on his head had presented no problem; that the doctor had cleansed and dressed. The ugly bullet hole beneath Norton's left shoulder blade, however, was a different matter. Probing had produced a battered .45 slug from a point dangerously near the heart. Norton had lost a great deal of blood; certain complications had set in before he could get medical attention. Dr. Tuttle refused to hold out much hope to Molly.

"You mean the odds are against Dad's recovery?" Molly asked.

"A doctor is only human, girl. I can do so much and no more. After that it's up to nature—and your nursing." He broke off, scowling.

"By Godfrey! If Tucson Smith hadn't requested me to keep this business quiet I'd most certainly be inclined to raise a posse and lynch a few people."

"I think we'd better leave that end of it to Tucson."

"Probably. Meanwhile, I'll come back tomorrow. I've just got to get back to my patients in Blue Cloud. If Clem should regain consciousness while I'm gone I don't want anybody talking to him. I want him kept quiet. Remember that!"

Molly promised to remember and, when the doctor had mounted his waiting horse the girl returned to the bedroom where her father lay.

It was getting along toward suppertime. Ordinarily the punchers would have still been out on the range, but Tucson had given orders they were to stay close to the ranch house in case anything turned up. Tucson, accompanied by Lullaby and Stony, had left for Blue Cloud that morning, just to learn if anything regarding the fight at Wagon Springs had reached Sheriff Rafe Quinn's ears and what action, if any, the sheriff intended to take.

In Tucson's absence it was understood that Ananias was to be in charge. At present Ananias was seated in the bunkhouse looking over an ancient copy of the *Police Gazette*. Sourdough George was banging pots and pans in his kitchen, just off the bunkhouse proper, preparatory to getting supper. Rube, Bat, and Tex were engaged in their customary "baiting" of the cook, while Red Sherry looked on, a broad grin on his face.

Hoofbeats were heard approaching. Ananias got to his feet and glanced out the bunkhouse window. "Tucson, Lullaby, and Stony coming," he announced. He started out the door to greet Tucson and his partners. Tex, Red, Rube, and Bat followed, Bat limping a little to the rear.

By the time the horses were unsaddled and the men had entered the bunkhouse supper was on the table. For a few minutes there was silence, broken only by the clatter of dishes and cutlery. Sourdough brought in a coffee-pot of considerable size and seated himself at one end. Now and then he rose to replenish certain platters. No one really had much to say until the meal was nearly finished and cigarettes were rolled.

Ananias asked finally, "Learn anything new in town today, Tucson?"

"One or two things," Tucson replied. No—in reply to another query—"I didn't see anything of Lombard and his gang, unless you include Sheriff Rafe Quinn as one of the gang."

"Which same we do," Lullaby stated.

"And," Stony added, "I've got my suspicions of Banker Phin

Osgood as well. I saw him come out of the Sunfisher Bar, acting chummy as all get out with Quinn."

Tucson went on, "As soon as we got to Blue Cloud I sent a wire to the governor, telling him the situation here didn't look too good and asking for authority to act in my own way when the time comes."

"You really do know the governor, then?" Red asked.

"We were kids together." Tucson nodded. "Anyway, I've done a few jobs for him before, so I didn't have any trouble getting what I wanted. The governor's telegram reached me shortly before we left Blue Cloud. I am now a special investigator for the state with full authority to make arrests, raise posses, or do anything of the sort I see fit. I've even the power to arrest Sheriff Quinn if I feel like it."

"Does Quinn know all this?" Tex asked.

Tucson shook his head. "I'm keeping the news secret for a spell until I get ready to act. I told the telegrapher at the railroad station to keep it under his hat too. So long as Lombard thinks that Quinn is the only lawman in Blue Cloud, he'll act right free, I figure. If he thought I had authority he might draw into his shell. That's what I do not want. I want him out in the open as much as possible, so we can get proof of what's going on around here."

Tucson stubbed out his cigarette butt in his coffee-cup saucer and continued, "A prospector drifted into town with word that there'd been a fire at Wagon Springs and only one of the small shacks was still standing. The rest of the buildings burned to the ground. The prospector said there were some charred bodies there, too, not to speak of some dead men farther back from the saloon building."

"That's exciting news." Ananias said dryly.

"I talked a little to Rafe Quinn," Tucson went on. "Quinn allowed as how he was going to make an investigation of that fire and the 'murders,' as he called them. I knew he was fishing for news, so I told him, flat out, and to save time, that we'd gone over there to rescue Clem Norton. That sure took the wind out of Quinn's sails. I knew he suspected us, but he never expected me to admit it."

"I thought we were going to keep quiet about our part in that doing," Ananias said.

"I didn't want the news to get out for a couple of days," Tucson said. "I hoped Lombard would start something, but he didn't. But we couldn't keep what we did secret for long. There were several men at Wagon Springs that night who have returned to the Dollar-Sign-L. They'd be bound to see us in town one of these days and tell Lombard, anyway. If we can only catch 'em in Lombard's company we'll have all the evidence we want . . . How's Clem today?"

"Molly says there's no change," Red replied. "Fever still high. Doc Tuttle had to go back to Blue Cloud this afternoon. He'll be out here again in the morning."

"Wondering about Clem was what brought us back to the ranch," Tucson said. "Gosh, I hope he regains consciousness soon. I've got to return to Blue Cloud in the morning. Banker Osgood wants to see me on business. He left word with Titus Shaw. I tried to catch him at his bank, but the bank was closed and nobody seemed to know where Osgood was."

"Maybe he left for the Dollar-Sign-L to talk things over with Lombard," Rube said.

"I thought of that." Tucson nodded. "Anyway, I'll see him tomorrow. Maybe he'll drop something that will prove valuable. Maybe he just wants to pump me and learn how Clem Norton is. I refused to give Sheriff Quinn anything definite when he asked how Clem was. I think the Dollar-Sign-L gang are counting on Clem's wounds making him too weak to talk much, if any. But I'll bet, right now, Lombard is almost sweating blood, wondering if Clem has told us anything. Of course we haven't proof that Lombard engineered the kidnapping, but I feel certain he did. Howsoever, the courts only convict on actual evidence." Tucson rose from the table. "I'm going up and talk to Molly a spell. Red, after a time you'd better come up and relieve me. Molly won't want to talk to me all evening."

Red flushed with pleasure. "I'll be glad to help out, Tucson."

Tucson smiled. "It will be one of the pleasanter ways of helping out, Red. Pretty quick now you'll be helping out on something a heap more serious or I miss my guess. There isn't any room in this country for murdering rattlesnakes." He paused and added grimly, "There's a job of exterminating to do right soon!"

21

SHOWDOWN!

Tucson reached Blue Cloud the following morning about ten o'clock. Lullaby and Stony had remained at the ranch, as Tucson wanted a strong force there should anything come up that required fighting men. As he had said to Stony just before leaving:

"I've a hunch Lombard is growing desperate. By this time he knows that we've rescued Clem. He doesn't know what Clem has told us. We've got him wondering a heap."

Arriving in Blue Cloud, Tucson had left his pony in front of the Blue Cloud Saloon hitch rack and entered the barroom. Titus Shaw

was busily engaged in polishing glasses. There weren't any customers at the bar. Titus glanced up and smiled. "Top of the morning, Tucson."

"How's it going, Titus?"

"I can't kick."

"Anything new come up?"

"Well"—Titus paused, frowning—"I don't know as this would interest you or not. My wife was feeling poorly this morning, so I told her to stay in bed. I ate my breakfast in the hotel dining room. When I came in I noticed Phin Osgood and Sheriff Rafe Quinn eating together. There were plenty of vacant tables, so they must have had a special reason for being so chummy. Their heads were real close together, and they were talking low."

"You didn't hear what they were talking about?"

Titus shook his head. "Nary a word. Quinn finished his breakfast a few minutes later and departed without saying a word to me. I left the restaurant about ten minutes after. When I stepped out on the hotel porch Rafe Quinn was standing near the tie rail talking to Limpy Fletcher and Frank Ettinger, who looked as if they'd just rode into town. I heard Quinn say, 'No, you boys ride back to the ranch. I've got my sheriff's badge for authority for anything I do. You tell Lombard I said for you to keep out of this altogether. Things are bad enough as it is, without messing plans up any more.' A minute later Limpy and Ettinger rode out of town."

Tucson pondered. "I wonder what those hombres are cooking up. First Osgood wants to see me. Then you spot Osgood talking confidential to Quinn. Next Quinn is telling Limpy and Ettinger that he has sheriff's authority for whatever he does. It's damn queer. What's he planning to do?"

"You got me."

"I'm going to drift along to the bank now. Maybe Osgood will have something to tell me that will prove interesting. I'll drop in later and get a drink, Titus. It's a mite early to start lifting 'em now."

"Hell's bells! You don't have to buy a drink every time you come in here. I'm glad of the company."

"Thanks. I'll see you later."

Tucson sauntered east on Main until he reached the corner of Lamy Street where the Stockmen's & Miners' Bank was located. He mounted a short flight of three steps, opened the door, and stepped inside. A third of the way back a partition with a cashier's grille stretched nearly across the room. At one end of the partition was a closed door marked "Private." To the right of the entrance was a small wall desk with, beneath, a wastebasket. A man was engaged in getting some money at the grille. When he had stepped aside Tucson

approached the cashier, who was a middle-aged man with thinning hair and a downtrodden appearance.

"Is Phin Osgood in?" Tucson asked the cashier.

"What's the name?"

"Tucson Smith. He wants to see me on business."

"Just a minute, Mr. Smith." The cashier left the window.

Tucson glanced through the metal bars of the grille and surveyed the rear end of the bank. There was a small desk there and several ledgers. In a far corner was a large iron safe. In the right-hand wall was a closed door through which the cashier disappeared. He was gone but a moment, then returned with: "Mr. Osgood says to come right in." He gestured to the door marked "Private" at the end of the partition. "That's the entrance to Mr. Osgood's office."

Tucson said, "Thanks," and stepped over to the indicated door. Opening it, he walked inside and closed it after him. Osgood stood just within, waiting to greet Tucson. "Come in, come in," he said with overdone cordiality. "It's pleasant to welcome you to my sanctum of financial worries."

In the rear of the office was a tall window with iron bars protecting the glass panes. Osgood's roll-top desk was placed against the left-hand wall, just beyond the closed door that opened on the bank proper and through which the cashier had entered to announce Tucson. Placed next to Osgood's desk chair was a straight-backed chair with arms. Built into the right-hand corner was a clothes closet with closed door. A worn carpet covered the floor.

"Sit right down, Mr. Smith," Osgood invited, indicating the armchair just beyond his own seat. Tucson seated himself, half facing the desk and Osgood, with the clothes closet and window at his back.

"It's rather awkward, this facing the wall and my desk," Osgood laughed self-consciously, "but if we face the other way I find the glare through that window is rather annoying to the eyesight. I'm always promising myself to rearrange this room, but I never get around to it, somehow."

"You wanted to see me on business?" Tucson cut in.

"Yes, but first will you have a cigar?" Tucson refused. Osgood plucked one from the open box on his desk and lighted it. He puffed strongly a few minutes to get it going. "Ah yes, business. However, before we get to that, may I congratulate you on finding Clem Norton? I understand he's in a pretty bad way."

"Where'd you hear that?" Tucson asked bluntly.

"Why—er—I don't recollect right now. The town's full of talk about the case, you understand. I meet so many people——"

"Among them Rafe Quinn, probably."

"Who? Oh yes, the sheriff. Come to think of it, I believe I did exchange a few words with him. You may not know that he strongly disapproved of the action of you and your friends."

"That's going to worry me to death," Tucson said dryly.

"Oh, I don't agree with him, of course. But Sheriff Quinn insists that you and your friends took the law into your own hands. He feels you should have come to him with what you knew and he would have taken the proper legal steps to apprehend the scoundrels who were holding Clem Norton prisoner. As it is, while you rescued Norton his captors escaped——"

"Not completely," Tucson put in.

"Well, yes and no." Osgood frowned uncertainly. "I understood there were several dead bodies found in the ruins at Wagon Springs. Had Sheriff Quinn been in charge of that business at Wagon Springs he would have taken prisoners, made them talk, and discovered just who was back of that dastardly scheme."

Tucson laughed scornfully. "Clem Norton disappeared long before I ever came here. Ben Canfield made no effort at all to find him. What makes you think that Sheriff Quinn would have been any more efficient?"

"There's a big difference between the men you name, Mr. Smith."

"Correct. Canfield was a fool. Quinn is a coyote."

A fit of coughing overtook Osgood at this point. Tucson smiled thinly, shifted his position a trifle, and, taking out his "makin's," commenced to roll a cigarette.

Osgood cleared his throat with difficulty. "I'm sure you misjudge the man, Mr. Smith. However, that's neither here nor there, at present. My aim is to preserve peace between you and our sheriff. You may not know it, but he is strongly inclined to place you under arrest—you and your pardners—for the part you played at Wagon Springs."

"On what charge?" Tucson scratched a match and touched flame to his cigarette.

"On a charge of obstructing justice. Had you given your information to Sheriff Quinn, I'm sure he would have acted differently."

"I'm positive of that," Tucson said coldly. He drew hard on his cigarette and rose to his feet. "If this is the business you wanted to see me about, I'll be on my way. You can tell Quinn to arrest and be damned—but warn him that sure as hell he'll get smoked aplenty if he tries it."

"Sit down, Mr. Smith. This all has nothing to do with the business I want to talk over. I merely told you how things stood as an evidence of my friendship."

"Much obliged. Let's drop the subject and get to your business."

Reluctantly Tucson again sat down. "What's on your mind, Osgood?"

"The first day I met you," Osgood said, "I offered you a loan if you planned to restock the Horseshoe-N. Are you going to need any money?"

"Not at present," Tucson said shortly. "We have plenty of cows to keep going with, providing rustlers don't clean us out."

"Oh, I'm sure you have nothing to fear from rustlers in this section."

"We won't argue that now," Tucson replied.

"I'm interested to know," Osgood continued, choosing his words carefully, "just how good the title is to your ranch."

"I have a bill of sale properly witnessed and signed by Molly Norton."

"So I understand. Do you happen to have it with you?"

"Yes." Tucson wondered what this was leading to.

"May I see it?"

Tucson produced the bill of sale and showed it to Osgood. Osgood studied it closely, then glanced up. "I see your name, as purchaser, has been inserted in lead pencil. I'm not sure that's legal."

"It's legal enough for me, and it suits Molly Norton."

"May I ask what you paid her?"

"Sure," Tucson laughed. "go ahead and ask. I'm not going to tell you though." He folded and replaced the bill of sale in his pocket.

The banker frowned. "I'll come direct to the point. Do you care to sell the Horseshoe-N?"

"If I can get my price. I've already set a price of a hundred thousand dollars."

"You're crazy!" Osgood exclaimed. "Why, the Dollar-Sign-L sold, a trifle over a year ago, for far less. And Lombard's ranch is a much better piece of land than the Horseshoe-N."

"I'm not interested in that. I've stated my price. If you want to meet it, fine."

"Oh, I had no thought of purchasing. I was asked to look into the matter by a man who deals in ranch properties."

"Who?" Tucson drew deeply on his cigarette.

"I'm not at liberty to state his name," Osgood said peevishly, dropping all pretense of friendliness. "Smith, it might be to your best interests to sell. You already own, with your partners, the 3-Bar-o Ranch near Los Potros. Why should you want another outfit in this section? It may cause you trouble in the long run."

"That," Tucson said flatly, "sounds like a threat."

"Take it any way you like," Osgood snapped. "I have no more to say on the subject." As though the words constituted a signal of some sort, he repeated, "I have no more to say on the subject. Good day!"

Tucson started to rise from his chair. At that moment the door of the clothes closet banged open and Rafe Quinn stepped out, six-shooter in hand. "You sit right where you are Smith!" he snarled. "There's got to be a showdown between you and me!"

22

DYING MAN'S RIDDLE

"SHERIFF QUINN!" Phin Osgood exclaimed. "I——"

"Cut it, Phin!" Quinn snapped. "There's no need for your talk." He kept his six-shooter covering Tucson, speaking from the corner of his mouth to Osgood, never removing his eyes from the redheaded puncher in the chair. "You, Smith, don't reach for your gun or I'll bore you pronto!"

Tucson had settled coolly back in his seat. "This," he said calmly, "isn't as much of a surprise as you think. I had a hunch you were in that closet."

Quinn rasped. "Smith, I'm arresting you for that job at Wagon Springs——"

"Just a minute," Tucson cut in. He drew deeply on his cigarette, stalling for time, then lowered the hand holding the cigarette to his right knee. "I'm not quite so dumb as you think I am, Quinn. Of course you can always claim I resisted arrest after you've shot me. You figure your sheriff's badge will protect you. And when I'm dead you'll steal that bill of sale from my pocket. But you're forgetting my pardners. Do you think you can get away with this? What'll they be doing?"

"I'm not interested," Quinn interrupted roughly.

"Don't pull that trigger just yet," Tucson said quietly. "You want a certain bill of sale. What sort of deal would interest you?"

"Well"—Quinn frowned, momentarily thrown off guard. "I'd have to think it over."

"Well, think fast, hombre, think fast." Tucson laughed grimly. At the same instant he flipped the glowing cigarette between his fingers directly at Quinn's face, "shooting from the knee," as it were.

The movement took Quinn by surprise. He saw the cigarette butt coming and jerked his head to one side to avoid it. At the same instant Tucson leaped from the chair, two shots from his six-shooter almost blending with the roaring report from Rafe Quinn's gun.

Quinn's shot flew wild and ripped into the pigeonholes of Osgood's roll-top desk. An anguished groan left Quinn's lips as the gun dropped from his grasp and he clutched at his middle. His left hand pawed

at the gun in his other holster, but the man lacked the strength to draw. He swayed uncertainly for a moment, then toppled to the floor at Tucson's feet.

Tucson, still moving fast, shoved Osgood to one side. Osgood went hurtling against the front wall of the office and sagged there, panting hard. Swiftly Tucson jerked out the drawers in the banker's desk. In the second drawer he found a short-barreled, nickel-plated revolver. This he removed and stuck into the waistband of his trousers. "I'm not taking chances on you, Osgood!"

There was a heavy knocking on the door that led to the cashier's section of the bank. "Mr. Osgood! Mr. Osgood! Were those shots? Are you all right?" The cashier didn't wait for a reply but came plunging in, his face white. At sight of the room swimming with gun smoke and the wounded sheriff on the floor, the man recoiled. "My God! Mr. Osgood, are you hurt?"

Osgood straightened up and shook his head. He was ashen, trembling as though with an attack of palsy. "No, no, I'm all right," he said with difficulty. "Sheriff Quinn was hidden in my clothes closet. He and Mr. Smith had an argument—Is there anyone in the bank?"

"Not at present, Mr. Osgood."

"Get back out there. Someone may come in any minute. If anyone asks if there were shots here, tell him no. Say that those sounds came from the direction of the railroad depot."

"Yes sir, Mr. Osgood. I doubt the shots could be heard outside." The cashier went out and closed the door behind him.

Osgood turned back to Tucson. "I certainly can't account for Quinn being in that closet——"

"You can, but you won't," Tucson snapped. "I can, though. There's no use you lying, Osgood. You were in on this plot to kill me——"

"Smith, I protest that——"

"Protest and be damned. Just keep well away from me or you'll get what I gave Quinn. I don't trust you, Osgood."

Osgood backed against the wall, then made his way on trembling legs to his desk chair, where he sat heavily down. Tucson kneeled at Quinn's side, turned the dying sheriff on his back. Quinn's eyes were already growing glassy. With an effort he focused his eyes on Tucson's face. A look of pain swept across his twisted features. He tried to speak but failed.

Tucson said, "You haven't much longer, Quinn. Do you feel like telling me what's going on here?"

A look of resentment came into Quinn's eyes as they moved slightly to find Osgood. He tried to speak. Tucson bent nearer the dying man's pallid lips.

"Cougar Creek—rise in Twin Sister—Mountain——" Quinn man-

aged. The words were barely intelligible. He tried to say more, but it was gibberish to Tucson's ears.

"That man's wandering in his mind," Osgood snapped, bending forward from his chair. "He doesn't make sense."

Tucson bent still lower, caught one more word, but the rest was choked off by the death rattle in Quinn's throat. Blood gushed suddenly from his mouth. Tucson felt for the man's pulse. There wasn't any. Slowly he rose to his feet.

"What did he mean, Osgood, by saying Cougar Creek rises in Twin Sister Mountains?"

"How should I know—or anybody else? He was delirious. Everybody around here knows that Cougar Creek heads up in the Twin Sisters."

"The Twin Sisters on Lombard's property?"

"No, they're on the Horseshoe-N—but what difference does it make?"

"That's what I'd like to know." Tucson frowned.

Osgood said, "What else did he say?"

Tucson shrugged. "I'm not sure. He was cursing either you or me, I'm not sure which. I only caught the 'damn' part."

He plucked the nickel-plated revolver from his waistband and tossed it onto the desk. Then he replaced the cartridges in his depleted gun cylinder, shoved the weapon back in holster, and started toward the door.

"Smith," Osgood exclaimed, "what am I to do with this body? You can't leave Quinn here like this."

"That's your problem, Osgood. My suggestion would be to call in the undertaker, but it's up to you."

"I'll call in more than the undertaker." Osgood's voice shook with anger. "Just as soon as possible I intend to get in touch with the proper authorities and get a new sheriff appointed here—one who will make you suffer for this crime."

"You'd better leave the law enforcing to me from now on," Tucson said cryptically, strode to the door, opened it, and passed through.

On the street in front of the bank a knot of men had collected. One of them said, "Hey, mister, was there some shooting in the bank a spell back? The cashier says there wasn't, but a couple of us heard shots from that direction."

"Nothing wrong with your ears," Tucson said grimly. "The undertaker will be toting out Sheriff Quinn's body right soon, I expect."

Disregarding the men's exclamations of surprise, Tucson strode back to the Blue Cloud Saloon. He hoped there wouldn't be any customers there when he entered; he wanted to talk to Titus con-

fidentially for a few minutes. His hope was fulfilled: Titus was alone, rearranging bottle; on the back bar, when Tucson came in.

"Back again, eh?" Titus greeted. "Say, Tucson, did you hear any shots a spell back?"

"Heard 'em and shot a couple of 'em myself," Tucson replied. "Phin Osgood and Sheriff Quinn had a neat little plot fixed up to wipe me out. It didn't work. I had to kill Quinn."

"Judas Priest!" Titus exclaimed. "What happened?"

Tucson told him briefly what had taken place, then repeated Quinn's dying words. "You any idea what Quinn could have been trying to tell me?"

Titus, frowning, shook his head. "It's a riddle to me," he confessed. "Hell! Everybody knows Cougar Creek rises in the Twin Sisters. So what?" He paused; then, "You're sure Quinn wasn't just wandering in his mind?"

Tucson shook his head. "No, I'm quite sure his mind was clear. That's what makes it puzzling. Well, I'll just have to forget it for a spell. Here"—drawing from his pocket the telegram he'd received from the governor of the state—"read this. I'd figured to keep it quiet a spell, but Quinn's death forces my hand. We've got to have a law-enforcement officer in Blue Cloud."

Titus raised his eyes from the telegram and handed it back. "Seems to me this makes you the lawman hereabouts," he said.

"I can't stay in town, though," Tucson explained. "I'm going to appoint Lullaby my deputy here for the time being. Will you take the matter up with the justice of the peace? Tell him about this telegram and that Lullaby will be taking over for a time. You're a responsible citizen. Titus, and the J.P. will know this is on the level."

"Sure, I'll take care of it for you."

Tucson strode from the saloon, rounded the tie rail, and got into his saddle. Before the jail and deputy sheriff's office he again dismounted. The office door was unlocked. Tucson entered and walked back along the corridor between the cells. There were no prisoners there. He returned to the office, examined the contents of the desk, but found nothing that would throw any light on the riddle Quinn had voiced with his dying breath.

"Nothing here but 'wanted' bills, an expense account Canfield forgot to turn in, some rusty handcuffs, and some blank forms waiting to be filled out." Tucson muttered, pawing over several scattered papers. He found the key to the office door, stepped once more to the outside, locked the door behind him, and, mounting, rode swiftly in the direction of the Horseshoe-N.

TUCSON GOES DOWN

Tucson arrived at the ranch covered with dust and perspiration. Stony and Lullaby headed for the corral the instant he rode in. Stony asked, "What's doing in Blue Cloud?"

"Plenty! I killed Rafe Quinn this morning."

"T'hell you did!" Lullaby exclaimed.

Tucson related briefly what had happened. He concluded, "We can't leave the town without a peace officer. Lullaby, I'm appointing you deputy for the time being. Here's the key to Quinn's office. You'll find a deputy badge in his desk. When you hit Blue Cloud, wire the governor in my name and have him appoint a deputy for Chancellor in Ben Canfield's place. I want Canfield held on a charge of negligence in office. Thinks are breaking fast, and I figure he might turn state's evidence later when we'll need witnesses. Now, get going fast!"

"I'm on my way." Lullaby nodded and ran back to the bunkhouse to get his gun and cartridge belt. Five minutes later he was in the saddle, riding rapidly to town. As Tucson and Stony walked back toward the bunkhouse from the corral Stony said, "Doc Tuttle says Clem's a mite better today." The rest of the crew greeted Tucson before the bunkhouse. Tucson told the story of how he had killed Quinn. When he had finished he glanced up to see Sourdough standing in the doorway. The cook had a sour expression on his face. "Yeah!" he said grouchily. "Yo're so busy shooting guns and killing people you ain't got time to get here for your dinner. I work my fingers to the bone trying to——"

"Look, cooky," Tucson pleaded. "I'm plumb starved. I'll eat anything that don't tackle me first. How's about a snack?"

When he had finished eating Tucson strolled up to the ranch house to talk to Molly. The girl and Maria were seated on the long front gallery. Both spoke to him. Maria left for the interior of the house after a moment. Molly said, "Dad's better this morning."

"So I hear."

"His temperature is down one whole degree. Dr. Tuttle feels sure he can pull him through now, if he'll only regain consciousness." The girl looked weary; there hadn't been much sleep for her the past few night.

"You don't want to wear yourself out, girl," Tucson said. "It wouldn't do to have two patients for Doc Tuttle to take care of, you know."

"I'll be all right. Maria's been just fine. She's a better nurse than

I am. She really is. Anything new happen in Blue Cloud today?"

"I killed Sheriff Quinn."

"Tucson!" Molly's eyes widened.

"It was him or me, Molly." Tucson told what had happened. When he had finished he asked, "What do you suppose Quinn meant by saying that Cougar Creek rises in Twin Sister Mountains?"

"I haven't the least idea." Molly frowned. "Everybody around here knows that. Look"—she led the way from the gallery and pointed toward the peaks of the San Mateo Range—"there are the Twin Sisters. You see, those two highest points close together."

Tucson nodded. "I was talking to Stony about 'em a spell back. He calls 'em the Sin Twisters. Maybe he's got something there. Somehow those two peaks and the Cougar are responsible for the skulduggery that's going on hereabouts." Tucson and the girl returned to their seats on the gallery, where Tucson asked, "You've never had any trouble with Santee Lombard over water rights, have you?"

Molly shook her head. "There's plenty of water for both of us, and more. Cougar Creek also takes care of the 21-Bar and the O-Slash-P as well. By the way, Ollie Paddock rode over to see how Dad was getting along this morning. Ollie is pretty angry over this whole business. He left word you should call on him if you need any hands to round up Lombard and his gang. I explained to Ollie we'd have to have proof against Lombard first."

"We may need Paddock's help yet." Tucson nodded. "Once I can get the evidence I need, we'll act fast, but until then I'll sort of have to pick my way easy." He tried another angle. "You don't suppose there'd be gold or silver or anything of the sort around Twin Peaks, do you?"

"I don't think so. There's an old mine shaft up there, but the gold pretty well panned out long ago. If you want to pan Cougar Creek you can find a trace of gold now and then. You might make fifty cents a day"—Molly smiled—"if you ever go broke on cattle. I remember some surveyors were quite excited when they ran across a few grains of gold—"

"What surveyors? When was this?"

"Oh, about six months back. They were working across the state. Some sort of topographical survey for the state. We had them to supper one night. One of them was fooling with a gold pan down at the creek. He gave it up in a little while though. No, mining is all finished in these parts. Dad used to say it was good cow country, nothing else."

Tucson left the house a short time later. For the remainder of the day he sat around by himself, thinking deeply. After supper he drew

Stony to one side. "Things are moving too slow to suit me" he stated. "I've got to have some action."

"The riddle of the Sin Twisters bothering you?" Stony asked.

Tucson nodded. "Lombard knows something I don't. When it commences to grow dark I'm going to ride to the Dollar-Sign-L and do some scouting around. Maybe I can hear something if I keep my ears open."

"Good idea. I'll go with you."

Tucson shook his head. "This is a lone-wolf job. The more spies, the more chance of noise, if you know what I mean. One man can move around where more might be noticed."

"But, Tucson——"

"But me, no buts. My mind is made up. Sooner or later Lombard is going to get word of Quinn's death. That may force his hand. He may decide to come here and raid the ranch or something. I want every man available on hand. With Lullaby in Blue Cloud it's more important than ever that you stay here to run things, should anything come up."

"Okay, but I hate to see you going it alone."

A short time later Tucson saddled a fresh horse and headed off across the range in the direction of the Dollar-Sign-L Ranch. He rode steadily for an hour, then slowed his pony to a walk.

It was pitch dark by this time, a little too early for the moon to be up. Overhead the sky was sprinkled thickly with stars, and to the right, rugged peaks of the San Mateos were silhouetted darkly against the night heavens.

Suddenly Tucson saw a small square of yellow light. "There it is," he muttered. He changed course a trifle. An oblong of light—an open doorway—appeared. Tucson approached cautiously. The lights undoubtedly came from the bunkhouse. It would be better to approach the building from the rear. He went on a trifle farther, then halted near a big mesquite tree. Here he dismounted, tossed his reins over a branch, and proceeded on foot.

After a few minutes he heard horses. Corral bars loomed before his eyes in the gloom. He was nearly to the bunkhouse by this time. There were other buildings, all dark, placed at various points. A minute later he could hear voices in the bunkhouse but couldn't distinguish the words. Slowly he worked his way around the corral.

Hoofbeats drummed suddenly in the night. A rider came tearing into the ranch yard. Light from the bunkhouse shone on him momentarily as he flashed on his way to the corral. As he passed the bunkhouse he yelled, "Santee!"

"That you, Shorty?" came Santee Lombard's voice from the bunkhouse doorway.

By this time the rider had reached the corral and dismounted a few yards from the point where Tucson was crouched, hidden, in the darkness. Lombard came running from the bunkhouse. "That you, Shorty?" Lombard asked again.

"It's me," Shorty Davitt replied. "I got bad news."

A second man followed Lombard from the bunkhouse and caught up with the owner of the Dollar-Sign-L. Shorty had stripped the saddle from his trembling pony by the time the pair arrived at the corral. "There's hell to pay," Shorty snapped.

Lombard's voice sounded sharp. "What do you mean, Shorty?"

"Rafe Quinn's a dead duck! We'll get no more help from that direction."

"Quinn? Dead!" Lombard exclaimed. "What happened?"

"Smith killed him this morning in Osgood's office. The whole town was talking about it when I got in Blue Cloud." Shorty turned to Politan. "Dave, your plans all seem to go on the rocks."

The foreman replied pettishly, "My plans will work when they're followed. That's why I sent Limpy and Frank to town. But Quinn wouldn't let them stay. He was hell-bent on doing it all himself. Just how did it happen, Shorty?"

"I'm not sure. Osgood still acts like he's in a daze. He swears the sheriff had the drop on Smith, but suddenly Smith yanked his gun and fired. Quinn died almost right away. It's a damn good thing too. Osgood says he started to confess what we're doing."

"Christ!" Lombard swore. "That would tear our plans wide open."

"That's not all," Shorty went on. "That Joslin is in town. He's got a badge and is acting as deputy. How do you figure that?"

"I don't," Lombard said sharply. "I don't like it, either."

Shorty picked up his saddle, and the three men started toward the bunkhouse. When they had entered the building Tucson once more got into action. He crept closer to the bunkhouse, where he could hear the men talking excitedly about the news Shorty had brought.

He was approaching the back wall of the bunkhouse now, where an open window allowed light and voices to escape. He took a few steps nearer. The voices of the crew inside the bunkhouse sounded louder now.

Step by step Tucson approached the open window, moving carefully lest a careless boot scrape on gravel and warn the Dollar-Sign-L men that an enemy was near. He could hear Limpy Fletcher's coarse tones now. "I'm all for riding to town pronto and taking that new deputy to pieces."

Then the precise, careful tones of Dave Politan: "We will make the plans here, Limpy. Your job is to do as we tell you."

Almost above Tucson's head, now, was the window through which the voices issued. Tucson took one more step. Then it happened.

The earth suddenly gave way beneath Tucson's feet. He felt himself falling, falling. Thrusting out his arms, he tried to save himself, but his hands encountered only emptiness. A loose branch whipped across his face. He landed with a heavy jolt on one shoulder. Earth and gravel commenced to pour down on him. A rock came crashing against his head, and his senses faded and were enveloped by a dense black curtain of oblivion.

Cries of alarm sounded within the bunkhouse. Men came running. Someone shouted for a lamp. Then Lombard's voice: "Look's like we caught a coyote in your trap, Dave."

"Hold that lamp nearer," Politan said; then, "We've caught a prize coyote. That's Tucson Smith! Mighty smart, wasn't he, sneaking around here? But this time he's been outfoxed. This little trick spells the end of the great Tucson Smith—an end that's long overdue!"

24

A DUEL AGAINST ODDS!

TUCSON AWOKE ABRUPTLY. It was still dark. He couldn't figure out where he was. He found himself lying on the floor inside a building. Light from the waning moon made a square of light at a wide-open doorway.

He tried to move his feet and hands, only to discover that both were tightly bound. His head ached terrifically, but he didn't feel too bad. "But what in the devil happened?" he wondered. "One minute I was on solid ground; the next it had caved in. Something hit me on the head. I reckon Stony was right; I should have brought somebody with me."

A man's form was silhouetted momentarily against the doorway. Tucson called, "Hey, how about a drink of water?"

The man didn't reply but disappeared. Tucson heard him call, "Hey, Santee—Dave! Smith is awake."

And a voice replied from the bunkhouse, "The whole crew will be awake if you make so much noise. There's work to do tomorrow, remember."

Footsteps sounded on the gravelly earth. Then the beams from a lighted lamp flashed across the doorway and Santee Lombard entered, followed by Politan, Limpy, and Shorty Davitt. The men entered the barn and crossed to where Tucson lay. They stood looking down on him.

Tucson said quietly, "I could use a drink of water."

"I imagine you could," Politan said softly, his chubby face lighted with amusement. "Awfully thirsty, aren't you, Smith? That's fine. I really enjoy this."

"Who's your friend, Lombard?" Tucson asked. "He looks like something you might find under a rock."

"He's my forenan," Lombard commenced.

"Allow me to introduce myself, Mr. Smith," Politan said. "My name is Politan—Dave Politan. It's a name you'll remember"—he made a sound that was half giggle, half chuckle—"for the short time remaining to you, at least. I haven't before had the pleasure of making your acquaintance, but I've seen you in Blue Cloud. Perhaps I should say I've never *encountered* you previously——"

"Lombard," Tucson appealed to the owner of the Dollar-Sign-L, "is there any law against my having a drink of water?"

"I reckon not," Lombard said grudgingly.

"Don't do it, Santee; don't do it," Politan advised. "Think of all the trouble he's caused you. You'll never succeed by pampering your enemies."

"Politan," Tucson said, "I'll bet you get a lot of fun pulling wings off flies, don't you?"

"Oh yes, Mr. Smith." Politan beamed, rubbing his hands together. "And have you ever watched a horned toad with two legs cut off? It's really amusig——"

"Christ! Cut it out, Dave," Lombard growled. He turned to Shorty. "Go get some water."

Tucson said, "Much obliged, Lombard," when Shorty had departed.

A minute later Shorty returned with a cup of water, which he held to Tucson's lips. Half the water splashed over Tucson's face. He didn't mind, though. The water was cooling on Tucson's parched throat.

"Smith," Lombard said, "we've searched you, but we didn't find that bill of sale. Where is it?"

"Where you'll never find it," Tucson replied.

Lombard nodded. "I figured you'd be stubborn. Smith we've got to kill you. You and your pals are too damn nosy!"

"You're runnin' true to form, Lombard. But before you bump me off, I'd appreciate learning what happened to me. It seemed like the earth caved in or something."

Politan giggled. "It did. Neat, wasn't it? You see, Mr. Smith, I had a feeling you might come sneaking around here to see what you could learn. I had a trench dug on three sides of the bunkhouse, then covered it lightly with branches and earth. I feel it was a very successful trap. I intended to place some jagged sections of broken

glass—point up—at the bottom of the hole, but Santee didn't allow me enough time for that——”

“Smith,” Lombard cut in with a gesture of annoyance, “I've got to get rid of you. You're in my way. You've learned too much. For the last time, will you tell us where that paper is?”

Tucson shook his head. “No dice, hombre. But before you kill me I'd like to know what your game is here. It couldn't harm you now for me to know. I'm just plain curious. Why do you want the Norton ranch? What have the Twin Sisters to do——?”

“Don't tell him, Santee,” Politan cried in alarm. “He's tricky! He might find some way to leave word for his friends before we've finished him. Don't you breathe one word of it!”

“I reckon Dave's right, Smith,” Lombard said heavily. “We've already taken too many chances on you. Like Dave says, you're tricky——”

“Thanks for the compliment,” Tucson said dryly.

“But we can be tricky too, Mr. Smith,” Politan stated, rubbing his hands together. “When we have to we can be just awfully smart, don't you know. Right now you're taking it very easy. You think that some of your friends will show up here and rescue you. They may show up, but they won't rescue you. By the time they come we won't be here—and there won't be a trace of you anyplace.”

Tucson said impatiently, “Lombard, I'm getting tired of your foreman's *blabla*. If you're hell-bent on killing me, let's get it over with.”

“That suits me,” Lombard said. “We haven't decided yet just how we'll do it.”

Tucson said, “You might give me back my gun. I'll fight a duel with any half dozen of you, if that suits you.”

“We're not that foolish,” Lombard said shortly. “Put a gun in your hand and no telling where you——”

“But wait, Santee,” Politan put in, his eyes sparkling. “We should be grateful to Mr. Smith for a wonderful suggestion.” He bent his head close to Lombard's and talked, low-voiced, then stood back. “That would be very enjoyable to watch.”

Lombard looked sharply at his foreman. “You've got the damndest mind, Dave. Sometimes I think you're cracked.”

“Oh, my, no,” Politan snickered. “I'm just clever. And with Limpy to fight the duel——”

“Me?” Limpy looked aghast.

“Now, don't you fret, Limpy,” Politan said consolingly. “I know what I'm doing. If Mr. Smith insists on having a gun we'll just place one within his reach. Do you agree, Santee?”

Lombard frowned. “Well, dammit, Dave——”

"Please don't cross me, Santee," Politan begged pettishly. "Nearly every time I have a good idea you won't let me——"

"Jesus!" Lombard growled. "You and your ideas! All right"—coming to a sudden decision—"have it your way. But get away from here. You'd better head up to that old line camp in the foothills. It's up to you. If you like that sort of thing, go to it. But I don't want to be there. I don't mind seeing a man shot, but——"

"Thank you, Santee. I've always said you were squeamish. We'll leave at once, then I'll meet you in town later."

"But look here," Limpy commenced again, "I haven't said that I'd——"

"You will, Limpy." Politan giggled. "This is the best scheme yet. You'll admire it; I know you will. Come on, we'll get ready."

As though the place were distasteful to him, Lombard hurried from the barn without another word. The instant he had disappeared Politan approached Tucson, raised one booted foot, and kicked the prone cowboy in the ribs. Tucson sensed the blow coming and rolled slightly, thus evading the full force of the kick.

A few minutes later Politan, Limpy, and Shorty left the barn. Tucson wondered what was coming next. He suddenly realized beads of perspiration were forming on his forehead. "Good lord!" he muttered. "I've seen some bad ones in my time, but this Politan hembre sure has a twisted streak along with his badness."

The moon was down by this time. There was a short period of inky blackness that eventually turned to gray. Gradually it grew lighter outside. Tucson didn't know how long elapsed as he lay there, bound hand and foot, waiting for the return of Politan. After a while he heard the sounds of horses outside. Next Politan, followed by Shorty and Limpy, appeared. Limpy was grinning confidently now.

"Still here I see," Politan said cheerfully, rubbing his hands together. "Well, Mr. Smith, it won't be long now. We'll be starting before you realize it. Santee thought you should have a last breakfast before your departure, but I vetoed the suggestion. I explained to him that eating only dulls a man's mind and that you would have to be very sharp—very sharp, indeed—this morning. You see, Mr. Smith, we're going to let you have the duel you suggested. We're not treating you badly, you see. We're giving you one chance—one chance in a million." His high, nervous laughter grated on Tucson's nerves. "Get him out to his horse, boys." He turned back to Tucson. "You'll be glad to know we found your horse where you left it."

Shorty produced a knife and cut the rawhide bonds around Tucson's ankles. "Get up, Smith," he growled, "and walk out to your horse. I'll be plugging you if you run for it."

"We'll both plug you," Limpy rasped.

"Mr. Smith wouldn't run," Politan said, "not with his hands tied that way. And, Shorty, when we get outside, just hold his pony's reins so he won't try to escape."

Tucson struggled stiffly to his feet. With Limpy and Shorty watching him closely, a gun in the hand of each, he made his way out of the barn. Four saddled horses waited there. The sun was still three quarters of an hour from rising. Tucson glanced down towards the bunkhouse, where smoke rose from a chimney. He caught the tang of burning mesquite in his nostrils and wished for a cup of coffee. Damned if he'd beg Politan for a cup, though. He wouldn't give Politan that much satisfaction. A few men were down near the corral, rubbing their eyes as though they had just awakened. There was nothing to be seen of Santee Lombard.

Politan gave further orders. Shorty climbed into his saddle, holding the reins of Tucson's pony. Politan and Limpy stood near while Tucson mounted. When he was in the saddle Limpy lashed his already-bound hands to the saddle horn. "Just so you won't get any ideas, Mr. Smith," Politan smirked.

I've got the ideas, all right, Tucson thought. If only Shorty wasn't holding the reins of the pony an escape might be possible. As it was, however, there wasn't a chance for Tucson to get away. All three men were armed. Tucson saw his cartridge belt and holstered .45 slung over the saddlehorn of Politan's saddle. Also, in Politan's belt was a hunting knife in a scabbard. Tucson wondered what the knife was for.

The horses started. Shorty led the way, holding the reins of Tucson's pony. Politan and Limpy rode on either side of Tucson. There was silence for some time, while the horses moved rapidly away from the ranch buildings in the direction of the rolling foothills stretched along the foot of the San Mateo Range. Now and then Politan giggled and glanced at Tucson, but Tucson refused to be coaxed into speech.

Once Politan said, "There's no need of you being sulky, Mr. Smith. We're really being very kind to you." His tones were pettish, as though he were disappointed at not having broken Tucson's nerve. "We could shoot you down without a chance, you know. As it is, you'll have an opportunity to use a gun."

Tucson said calmly, "You're really going to let me have my gun?"

"And a knife too, Mr. Smith. You see, we think of everything." He gestured toward the knife at his belt. "This is really a very good blade. I spent hours sharpening it——"

"To cut the legs off horned toads, I suppose," Tucson said disgustedly.

"That among other things," Politan confessed smugly.

"I wonder," Tucson mused aloud, "how it would be for slicing off your ears."

Politan looked shocked. "My ears?" He shuddered. "You've really very bloodthirsty ideas, Mr. Smith. I don't like it at all." He edged his horse away, as though the very thought had given him a bad turn.

Despite his predicament, Tucson was amused. Two could play at this game. Tucson went on, "And the knife would be very convenient for shaving off the tip of your nose." Brutally he added, "I wonder what your eyes would look like boiled."

"Boiled! My eyes?" Politan paled. "You mustn't talk like that." For a moment the man positively turned green. He drove his pony nearer to Tucson, lifted his reins, and slashed Tucson across the face with them. Tucson ducked his head and managed to avoid the full force of the blow, but two livid welts immediately appeared across his left cheek. "Maybe that will teach you not to think of such things," Politan reproved. "I don't like you to talk that way."

The horses moved along higher ground now. By this time Politan had recovered his self-possession, but he didn't reopen the conversation. Tucson said, "So I'm going to have a knife and a gun and fight a duel with you three. Well, that's——"

"Oh no, Mr. Smith," Politan contradicted. "Shorty and I are just to provide an audience. Limpy is to be your only opponent."

This was puzzling. Of one thing Tucson felt certain: Matters would be arranged in such a way that all the odds would lie with Limpy. He felt sure Limpy would never dare face him in a duel where all things were equal.

The horses dipped down across a shallow hollow and headed toward a tall clump of cottonwood trees. As they drew near Tucson could see what remained of an old log cabin swiftly going to ruin. This must have been the line camp Lombard had mentioned. Apparently it hadn't been used for many years. Well, Tucson thought, this is it. Within a short time now he'd learn just how it felt to face Death. He'd faced the grim reaper on many occasions previously but never before in a situation precisely like this one.

The horses drew to a halt. Politan dismounted and walked about, sizing up the varicous tall cottonwoods. Finally he indicated an ancient tree with a trunk more than a foot through and called to Limpy, "This should be about right. There are no other trees close by to interfere with your shooting, Limpy. I feel sure it will be very acceptable to Mr. Smith. Bring him over here."

The lashing that secured Tucson's arms to the saddle horn was untied, though his wrists still remained bound. Guns in hand, the

men watched warily while he dismounted and was led to the big tree. Here he was backed against the trunk, and Shorty swiftly lashed a lariat around his chest, under the arms, securely tying him to the tree. Tucson wondered what this was all about.

Politan surveyed the captive with considerable enjoyment. "I hope you're comfortable, Mr. Smith. The rope doesn't bind too tightly around your body, does it?"

Tucson said, "Do you have to tie me to a tree to shoot me, you bastards?"

"You'll be free shortly." Politan smiled silkily. "Don't become impatient, please. You wouldn't want to spoil my plan, I know. Shorty, get his gun."

Shorty brought Tucson's cartridge belt and holstered .45 and dropped the weapon onto the earth about ten feet from the point where Tucson was bound to the tree.

"Very nice." Politan beamed. "Not too close, but not too far, either. Limpy, are you ready?"

"Ready, hell!" Limpy rasped. "I'm plumb eager."

He took up a position about twenty-five feet in front of Tucson, one hand poised above his gun butt. Politan said, "You'd better have your gun out and ready, Limpy."

"Hell!" Limpy objected. "I'll have plenty time to draw——"

"Do as I tell you, Limpy," Politan ordered. "We can't afford to run unnecessary risks."

Limpy did as ordered.

Politan drew the knife from his belt and approached Tucson. "Do you commence to get the idea, Mr. Smith?" he asked with a foolish giggle. "I'll cut the rope that holds your wrists together. Then I give you the knife. Your gun is lying in plain view there on the earth. All you have to do is cut the rope that holds you to this tree and get your gun. Then you and Limpy can shoot it out, as you requested a while back. A very neat plan, don't you think?"

Anger welled in Tucson's heart, but he kept his voice steady. "And you call this giving me a square break?" he demanded. "With Limpy there, his gun already out? Cripes! He'll be able to plug me before I can reach my gun, even after I've cut this rope. And if I was lucky enough to get in a shot on him, there's you and Shorty——"

"There are always certain risks to be run in a duel, Mr. Smith," Politan laughed. "I think this all very enjoyable, but if you object we can shoot you where you are." His eyes glittered crazily. "But please don't disappoint us. I think it will be so amusing to watch you scrambling to get your gun while Limpy triggers lead——"

"Oh hell," Tucson snapped. "I'll accept your proposition. Free my wrists and give me that knife."

Politan beamed. "I thought you'd see it my way." Quickly he cut Tucson's wrists free, then, stepping back, cautiously extended the knife. Tucson didn't accept it at once. He flexed his fingers, endeavoring to get circulation restored to his long-cramped hands. Suddenly one hand darted out, seized the knife from Politan's grasp, and made a savage slash at its owner, which Politan avoided only by scurrying frantically out of danger.

"You see, you see," he squealed excitedly to Limpy and Shorty. "He's really dangerous. He tried to injure me—after I gave him a knife too. That's pure ingratitude. Watch him closely, Limpy."

"He won't get away with nothing," Limpy bragged evilly. "Are you ready, Smith?"

"Ready." Tucson nodded. His face had paled slightly.

"You will have until the rope is cut through," Politan said. "After that you'll have to defend yourself, Mr. Smith. And hurry, please. I can see Limpy is growing impatient."

25

COLD STEEL!

TUCSON paused a moment more. Twenty-five feet away stood Limpy, drawn gun in hand. Ten feet away, on the earth, lay Tucson's .45 in its holster. If he could only cut the rope that held him to the tree and reach his gun, he'd have a chance. But Limpy would commence shooting as soon as the rope fell away from Tucson's body—could probably get in three shots before Tucson could reach the six-shooter on the ground. And besides Limpy, there were Shorty and Politan to contend with. It didn't look as though he'd have much of a chance. Tucson mused, a grim smile on his rugged features.

He glanced at Politan and Shorty. One stood on either side of him. Shorty was the nearest, being only about five feet away. Politan wasn't taking any chances; he had backed several paces. Tucson's mind worked fast. The instant the rope was cut they were expecting him to leap for his gun. Maybe he could fool them if Politan and Shorty didn't get into the action too quickly. They were watching him closely; though now, so sure were the two men that Limpy could handle the shooting, the guns of both were in holsters.

"You goin' to take all day?" Limpy snarled.

"Hurry it up," from Shorty.

"You know, Mr. Smith," Politan said peevishly, "it's not fair to take advantage of our good nature by keeping us waiting——"

"You won't have to wait much longer," Tucson laughed shortly.

"This rope will be off plumb quick now. I'm starting."

He examined the blade of the knife. It was a long, sharp weapon, whetted to a razorlike edge. Drawing in his body as much as possible, he gathered up the slack of the rope in one hand and commenced slowly to cut through it. Strands fell apart as the length of cold steel bit into them.

Tucson's mind was still operating keenly while he worked. The rope was nearly cut through now. With one hand Tucson gathered the remaining section into a loop. Another strand parted swiftly. Only a slender thread—and Tucson's muscular grip—held the rope together now. If he could only get it cut all the way through before his opponents were aware of that fact, he'd still have a slim chance.

Slowly he sawed on. There! The rope was cut through at last, but Tucson held the two ends in his muscular grip. He tensed his body for the leap.

"What are you doing, Mr. Smith?" Politan asked curiously.

"You goin' to take all day?" Limpy repeated.

"This knife is right dull"—Tucson was still going through sawing motions with the blade, pretending the rope hadn't parted—"but I'm doing my best. Be with you in a minute." He knew Politan and the other two weren't close enough to see what he was doing.

Suddenly, with an eye-defying flip of the wrist, Tucson sent the keen-bladed knife flashing through the air toward Limpy Fletcher! At the same instant the severed rope dropped at his feet and, ignoring his own gun on the ground, he leaped toward Shorty Davitt, who was so taken by surprise that for a moment he stood petrified. And then Tucson was on him, jerking the six-shooter from Shorty's holster.

Limpy fired once, but the gleaming knife speeding directly at him disconcerted Limpy's aim. The bullet flew harmlessly high as he turned his body in a fruitless effort to avoid the knife, but the movement came too late. The needle-sharp point of the knife struck deep in Limpy's side, plunging in just below the left ribs. With a gasp Limpy sank to the earth.

Meanwhile, Shorty had grasped the gun Tucson was ripping from his holster. There was a brief struggle. The gun roared, then Tucson jerked it free. Shorty cursed in a choking voice, and abruptly wilted, face-down, on the ground.

A frustrated, frightened wail went up from Dave Politan. Pulling his gun, he fired three shots at Tucson. All flew wild. Limpy, sprawled on the earth, was raising his six-shooter for another try. A spurt of white fire darted from the weapon even as Tucson released another bullet. He felt the lead from Limpy's gun cut through the handkerchief at his neck, then saw that Limpy was now on his knees, eyes wide, mouth open, the hilt of the knife still protruding from below

his ribs. For an instant Limpy stayed erect, then toppled over sidewise.

Two explosions came in quick succession from Politan's gun. Both missed. Politan was running away now, trying to reach his horse. Tucson thumbed one quick shot which kicked up dust beneath Politan's feet. The next instant Politan went sprawling on his face to lie silent and motionless.

Tucson straightened up and drew a long breath. "I'm sure lucky," he told himself. Eyeing sharply the three figures on the ground, he strode over, retrieved his own belt and gun, and strapped them on. Then he examined Limpy and found him dead. Shorty was dying fast, his eyes already glazed. He ceased breathing even while Tucson was looking at him.

Tucson's eyes narrowed as he gazed at the silent Politan. "I'm certain I didn't hit him," Tucson muttered. "Is this a trick?"

Gun in hand, he approached the prone Politan and nudged the man's body with his foot. The result was amazing. Politan flopped frantically about on the earth, then managed to get to his knees, his clasped hands raised imploringly to Tucson.

"Don't kill me, Mr. Smith," he begged. "I really didn't mean any harm. I know I've done wrong, but if you'll only let me live I'll do anything you say."

"Why, you dirty, yellow-livered stinking bastard!" Tucson exclaimed in amazement. "You're not hurt at all—just scared plumb witless."

Tears were running down Politan's face now. Pleas for mercy tumbled in a jumbled cascade from his white lips. Finally with a frame-racking sob he threw himself face-down on the earth and lay there, shoulders heaving convulsively.

Tucson looked down on Politan in disgust, feeling slightly nauseated. Such an exhibition of cowardice wasn't good to see, he reflected. "I never knew, Politan," he said slowly, "that any man in the cow country could break up like this. I've seen some pretty ornery skunks crack under pressure, but for sheer chickenhearted quailing in a pinch, you take the cake. For cripes' sakes, get up and quit sniveling. You may be able to plot schemes—dirty schemes—like hell, but you sure lack the nerve to see them through when you get in a tight spot. I don't know how Lombard—black as he is—ever stood for you."

"Yes, Mr. Smith." Politan rolled over and came to a sitting position, his face streaked with dirt and tears. "Just don't shoot me—"

"Shut up!" Tucson said irritably. "You're not worth shooting, not worth the powder to blow you to hell, where you deserve to go. Instead you're going to prison."

"Yes, Mr. Smith." Politan brightened now that he knew Tucson didn't intend to kill him. "I guess I deserve to go to prison."

"Stop that crawling, will you?" Tucson sighed. "Yeah, you're headed for a cell all right. Remember what I said about cutting off your ears? You wouldn't want to go to prison without ears, would you?" Tucson seated himself on the ground at Politan's side.

"Oh-h-h," Politan quavered. "Please don't——"

"Dammit!" Tucson snapped. "Don't start that. I just want you to tell me a few things, then we'll get started."

"Anything you want to know, I'll gladly tell——"

"All right. First, what did Rafe Quinn mean by saying Cougar Creek rises in the Twin Sisters? What's that got to do with what's going on around here?"

"It does, you know. That's why they're going to build the dam on the Horseshoe-N——"

"Dam!" A great light dawned on Tucson. "That's what Quinn was trying to tell me when he was dying. *Dam*, not damn! And I thought he was cursing me. Go on, Politan, spill the rest of it."

Little by little Tucson got the whole story. Nearly two years before, the authorities of the state had decided to dam up Cougar Creek and thus, eventually, divert its waters to the barren wastes northwest of the grazing country hereabouts, leaving only enough water to flow in the channel to take care of the ranches now watering at the stream.

"You see," Politan explained; he had recovered much of his composure by this time and was eager now to please, "it was decided first to build the dam on Dollar-Sign-L property. There's a huge saucer-shaped section of the Dollar-Sign-L that is ideally suited to such purposes"

The story went on: Rafe Quinn, through his political connections, had got word of the projected dam, which was being kept secret from the public. Quinn had gone to Osgood with his idea, and the banker had put up the money to buy the Dollar-Sign-L property. Later it was planned to resell to the state at an exorbitant profit.

"However," Politan continued, "Osgood didn't know Quinn very well, so he insisted on bringing Santee Lombard and me into the scheme. Lombard bought the ranch with Osgood's money. Santee always left planning to me. I agreed the plan was a good one and that we'd all get rich at the expense of the state. You see, we'd know Phin Osgood up north many years ago, before he was a respected banker." An oily smile flitted across Politan's soiled features. "I could tell you a lot of things about Phin."

"You'll have plenty time later. Get on with your story."

"After Lombard had bought the Dollar-Sign-L we ran into trouble. The state had made a new survey and decided to build the dam up

between Twin Sister Peaks on Horseshoe-N property. Of course that did make a better site, as building there wouldn't entail taking any grazing land out of production——"

"And that left you fellers holding the bag, after Osgood had put his money into the Dollar-Sign-L," Tucson put in.

"That's right." Politan nodded. "I told Osgood we'd have to buy the Horseshoe-N, too, if we wanted to make our scheme work. We couldn't afford to lose out, after the money we'd invested."

"You mean the money Osgood invested."

"Well, Lombard and I had put in some money—all we had. Unless we could get the Horseshoe-N, we stood to lose what we'd put in. Of course we had the Dollar-Sign-L, but ordinary ranching was too slow for us. We decided we had to have the Horseshoe-N, so we could make a nice profit from the state. But when we tried to buy the place Clem Norton said no. Time was growing short so——"

"So you embarked on a plan of intimidation," Tucson said grimly. "First you killed two cowboys who worked for Norton. Who killed them?"

"Shorty killed one; a puncher named Tony Barnett killed the other. While we're on the subject, Mr. Smith, it was Nick Armitage who killed Steve Maxwell. I'd like you to remember I never killed anybody."

"Go on. Why did you kidnap Clem Norton?"

"We thought we could force him to sell. We planned to have him give a bill of sale with a fictitious name filled in—just as we planned later with Molly Norton. Eventually the bill could be transferred into Lombard's name. But after we held Norton awhile we learned that he wasn't the real owner of the Horseshoe-N; that the ranch was in Molly's name. We would have let Norton go at once, only one day when Santee came to Wagon Springs his mask slipped down and Norton saw him. After that we had to hold him. He tried escaping three times. The last time a man named Howie Irvine shot him while he was getting away. That was the day you and your men arrived in Wagon Springs and burned the place. You see, they had let Norton out of the stable for a little while, and he made a run for it. Then Howie shot him."

"Whose bright idea was it to get Molly to sign a bill of sale in return for her father?"

"I don't just remember," Politan evaded.

"You're a liar, but go on."

"Well, it was all sort of worked up between Limpy, Shorty, Frank Ettinger, and Tony Barnett——"

"Anyway, they were working under your orders, you mean."

"Let's not argue about that, Mr. Smith. It really doesn't matter.

But we promised the girl that her father would be restored if she signed the paper. It was Tony Barnett who came and persuaded her to go to Wagon Springs. The whole plan was upset by that Red Sherry fellow; we had to have a witness to Molly Norton's signature. When Sherry was passing through Blue Cloud, Shorty, Frank Ettinger, and a couple of the other boys got him into a poker game and cleaned him out. Then they followed him and made him go to Wagon Springs with them."

"And at Wagon Springs," Tucson cut in, "Red upset your plans. You tried to make him tell you what he'd done with that paper by threatening to frame him for Norton's murder, but it didn't work."

"I had nothing to do with that. That was Limpy's and Ben Canfield's idea."

"More lies, I reckon, but let it pass. Why did Canfield have to leave so sudden?"

"He lost his nerve. He was dreadfully afraid of you, Mr. Smith. After Joslin shot Armitage, Phin Osgood wired Rafe Quinn to come to Blue Cloud and take charge. He was afraid you'd corner Canfield and force him to tell what he knew. You can see I've really had very little to do with all this——"

"Except making plans and arranging for a little cattle rustling. I'd like to know about that too."

"The cattle stealing was all Lombard's idea. I had little to do with it. We never did get into that end very deep, though we had a good start. In time it would have amounted to something big, I imagine. Our men would pick up a few cows here and a few there. Then we'd drive to Wagon Springs where another crew waited to take over the herd. The herd would then be driven up to Wyatt County where we had good connections for selling. We always forged bills of sale in Wyatt County, so nobody ever learned what was up. The rustling, you see, was just a side line to pick up some extra dollars."

"You certainly are a nice gang of coyotes," Tucson growled. "Something was said about your crew having work to do today. What sort of work?"

"Lombard is taking the crew to Blue Cloud. He says he is going to show the town, once and for all, who is boss in this section. There'll probably be a few fights. That will bring your pard Joslin into action. As deputy he'll have to——"

"Good crapes!" Tucson leaped to his feet. "Lombard is figuring to bump off Lullaby in the confusion."

Politan nodded. "Lombard is pretty crooked, Mr. Smith. Tonight he plans to raid the Horseshoe-N and wipe out your whole crew."

"The hell he will!" Tucson snapped. "Get on your feet, Politan."

You and me are going places. And don't lose time or I'll cut off your ears yet."

At that moment Tucson heard the sounds of horses' hoofs. He drew his gun and waited. Suddenly Red Sherry appeared through the trees. "Tucson!" he yelled joyously.

"Hi, Red!" Tucson hailed. "What brings you here?"

Red glanced at the dead bodies on the earth, then at Politan. His mouth gaped in surprise. "What's happened?" he queried.

Tucson told him in terse sentences. Red flushed angrily and glared at Politan. Before he could say anything Tucson asked again. "What brought you up here, Red?"

Red explained, "When you didn't come back all night we got sort of worried. You'd ordered Stony to stay at the ranch, but he was in charge, so he sent me to see if I could uncover anything. I arrived at the Dollar-Sign-L. There was nobody there except the cook, but I found a deep trench near the bunkhouse, and your Stetson was laying at the bottom of it. Here"—tossing the hat to Tucson—"that hat told me you'd been there, and under a little pressure the cook admitted it. He confessed that you and some others had headed up this way. I tied the cook up in his kitchen and followed tracks. A spell back I heard some shooting and I came on fast and—well, here I am."

"Good work, Red. We've got to work fast. There's a scheme afoot to kill Lullaby. Lombard and his crew have gone to Blue Cloud." He swung on Politan. "How many men will Lombard have with him?"

Politan did some mental figuring. "Around fifteen, I guess."

"That means we've got to have help," Tucson snapped. "Red, you know where the O-Slash-P is. High-tail it there and tell Paddock what's doing. Ask him to get his fighting men to town as soon as possible. Take Politan with you. Toss your throw rope around his neck, and if he hangs back, just jerk him out of the saddle and drag him behind. Don't let him get away. He'll be an important witness. You can tie him up and leave him at Paddock's place when you get there. And if he gets stubborn, slice off his ears."

"But what are you going to do?" Red asked.

"I'm aiming to ride hell out of three horses and get to the Horse-shoe-N"—Tucson spoke swiftly—"so I can round up Stony and the other boys. There's no time to lose!"

Tucson had already seized the reins of Shorty's and his own horse and leaped to the saddle of Limpy's pony. Jabbing the horse in the ribs, he got under way, kicking up sudden clouds of dust as he moved.

Red gazed after him an instant as he disappeared rapidly through the trees, the two horses he was leading covering space with long

ground-devouring strides. Then Red turned back to Politan. "Get in your saddle, sidewinder." He spoke contemptuously. "We're going places in a hurry—and my rope's going to be around your neck. I'm sure hoping you'll put up an objection. I haven't killed me a skunk for a long spell."

But there were no objections on the part of the spiritless Dave Politan. Meekly he obeyed the order, and the two started swiftly for the O-Slash-P Ranch.

26

A RIDE AGAINST TIME!

TUCSON was really pounding his horses across the range. The sun was pushing high above the San Mateos now, pouring down rays of ovenlike heat. The horses were streaked with sweat and dust. When he guessed he was a third of the way to the Horseshoe-N, without slowing speed Tucson drew Shorty's horse alongside and transferred his weight to its saddle. Tossing aside the reins of Limpy's horse, he glanced back over his shoulder to see the animal run on a few yards, then falter and stand, head down and trembling with fatigue, in the tall grass.

Tucson jabbed savage spurs to Shorty's horse now and plunged on, leading his own horse behind. The miles flashed past, with Tucson striving to get more and more speed out of the pony. The landscape was a swiftly moving panorama of tall grass, mesquite, rocks and stunted trees. The wind whipped into his face, bringing tears to his eyes.

Almost before he realized it Shorty's horse commenced to stagger. "Thanks, pony," Tucson muttered. "You've given all you had." He drew his own horse alongside, switched into his own saddle without losing an instant's time, then released the fagged pony he'd been riding. "Here we go, horse," he said, patting his mount on the neck. "I've been saving you for the last lap. Now let's see what you've got!" The pony's stride lengthened as it shot forward like a cedar arrow from a yew bow.

By the time the Horseshoe-N buildings hove in sight the third horse, too, was just about beaten out. Tucson ripped out a wild cowboy yell that brought men running from the bunkhouse. He pulled up his foam-flecked mount in a shower of dust and gravel at the corral and slipped to the ground. Stony came running, followed by the others.

"What's up, pard?" Stony exclaimed.

"There's a plot afoot to rub out Lullaby. We've got to get to town

fast. Saddle up a new pony for me. I want to see Molly before we leave."

He left on a run for the ranch house. Molly met him in the doorway as he crossed the gallery. "I heard you when you came in, Tucson," the girl said. "What's the matter? Where's Red?"

"Red's all right," Tucson said swiftly. "He's riding to pick up a crew at the O-Slash-P. We've got to get to Blue Cloud and stall off trouble for Lullaby——"

"I won't hold you then," the girl cut in, "but there's some good news you've got to hear first: Doc Tuttle left here just a short time ago. Dad regained consciousness while the doctor was here."

"Jeepers!" Tucson exclaimed. "That's great!"

The girl nodded, her eyes shining. "Doc Tuttle says Dad will be all right now. Dad talked a little. He told us he saw Santee Lombard at that place where he was held captive."

"I know Lombard is responsible for that—and more too. But your troubles are ended. I haven't time for details, but you're going to be rich. The state plans to buy the land around Twin Sister Peaks for a dam. That's why Lombard tried to get your property. Osgood and Sheriff Quinn were in on the deal."

"Good grief!" Molly's eyes widened. "I can't believe it!"

"You'll get the whole story later." Tucson was already stepping down from the porch. "Just leave things to us."

"Tell Red I said to be careful." Molly colored. "That goes for all of you, of course."

Tucson paused, smiling. "I've sort of been seeing things build up between you and Red," he said earnestly. "Red's on my pay roll now, but if you ever need a good foreman I'll be glad to recommend him."

"Maybe," Molly replied, her dark eyes dropping, "it's more than a foreman I'll be wanting."

"I'll tell him that." Tucson grinned.

"Tucson Smith! Don't you dare!"

But Tucson had already vanished beyond hearing and was approaching the corral at a swift run. Arriving there, he found all his men mounted and waiting impatiently. Sourdough George cradled his shotgun in one arm. "I'm going too," he said defiantly.

"I'd be disappointed if you held back, Sourdough." Tucson nodded and leaped into the saddle of the fresh horse that awaited him. "Let's go, hombres!"

"But what happened?" Stony spurred close to ask the question. Similar queries came from the rest.

"I'll tell it on the way," Tucson snapped. "We can't lose time talking here."

He and Stony moved into action. Behind came Sourdough, Ananias, Tex, Rube, and Bat Wing. The group swung out of the ranch yard in a thick cloud of dust and headed out for the road to Blue Cloud, each man riding as if all the devils from hell were in full pursuit. As they rode Tucson yelled his story to Stony. Some of the others caught a word here and there. The crew finally learned, through the rush of wind, what had taken place at the Dollar-Sign-L and later. Their faces became even more grim as they leaned low on their ponies' necks and pleaded with the animals to give just one more bit of speed.

Mile after mile fell to the rear. Before long, topping a high spot in the road, they saw the first rooftops of Blue Cloud. They were only a mile from the town when, glancing off to his right, on the road to the O-Slash-P. Tucson glimpsed Red Sherry and Ollie Paddock riding fast. Behind them came four hard-driving cowpunchers.

Wild cowboy yells went up as the two factions joined forces where the trails met. Spurs were plunged in; the riders swept on and on. Then, abruptly rounding a curve in the roadway, Tucson glimpsed Main Street spread out ahead. He saw a crowd gathered some distance down the road, then caught the sounds of exploding guns.

The whole picture flashed before Tucson's eyes a second later. Santee Lombard and his crew were gathered before the sheriff's office and jail, carrying on a steady fusillade of shooting. From the office doorway and windows came answering shots. Then a loud, defiant yell from Lullaby reached Tucson's ears.

"Lullaby's standing 'em off in the jail building," Tucson shouted joyously. "He's still on his feet, carrying the fight to the skunks. C'mon, men, unlimber your guns and break this up. No mercy on the lousy sidewinders!"

So swiftly did the attack come that the Lombard forces scarcely knew what struck them as Tucson and his men charged into the group attacking the jail. Lombard punchers were sent sprawling under the impact of flying hoofs. Guns roared ceaselessly. A horse went down screaming and kicking, its rider hurtling over its head to go diving into the roadway.

Powder smoke drifted overhead. Dust lifted from the road to envelop horses and men. Tucson glimpsed a man shooting from the shelter of a watering trough. He thumbed one swift shot. The man's head disappeared. Stony's six-shooter was roaring like mad. At brief intervals Sourdough's shotgun sent buckshot in various directions. Ananias leaned down and cracked his gun barrel against the head of a Lombard puncher who was running past.

Bat Wing glanced toward the jail doorway. Lullaby was standing

there now, laughing joyously, a gun in either hand spitting lead. Suddenly Bat Wing gave a yell of warning. Frank Ettinger was creeping up at one side, his gun barrel leveled at Lullaby. Bat's six-shooter spoke twice. Ettinger straightened to his toes, then spun sidewise to crash against the side of the jail building.

"It's Tucson Smith and his crew!" somebody yelled.

That seemed to be the signal to end hostilities. The Lombard men—those who were still on their feet—commenced voicing cries of surrender. These were quickly herded toward the jail where Lullaby took them in charge and placed them in cells.

Tucson had dismounted by this time. He was eagerly scanning the street in both directions. Suddenly there was a great deal of yelling from the townspeople, who had taken no part in the fight. A crowd came running to surround the punchers.

Stony came riding up. Tucson said, "You seen anything of Lombard?"

"Saw him when we first arrived," Stony said. "Threw some lead at him but missed. Then I lost him in the confusion."

"Santee Lombard?" asked a man standing near. "I just saw him duck into the Sunfisher Bar."

Tucson said, "Thanks, mister. He's my meat."

A few minutes later Tucson mounted the steps to the Sunfisher porch. At the entrance he paused, one hand on the swinging doors. "You'd better come out, Lombard," he said quietly.

There was no answer.

Tucson spoke again: "I'm putting you under arrest, Lombard."

From within Lombard spoke savagely. "If you want me you'd better come after me."

"I'm giving you a last chance, Lombard." Tucson spoke grimly. "You can surrender and stand trial or stay there and take what's coming. Politan spoiled the whole business. You shouldn't have picked such a yellow partner——"

A leaden slug ripped viciously through one of the swinging doors not far from Tucson's body. A short, harsh laugh left Tucson's lips. He tensed a moment, then with the speed of lightning pushed back the swinging doors and leaped inside the barroom.

A hail of lead swept through the doorway where Tucson had passed but a split second before. Except for Lombard backed into a far corner, the saloon appeared to be empty.

Lombard fired again as Tucson, moving rapidly across the floor, unleashed three swift shots from his six-shooter. The three reports almost blended, so close together did they emerge from the gun muzzle.

Lombard was spun half around as the shots struck. Another slug

tore harmlessly from his gun as his body jackknifed and he toppled forward to the pine flooring. For a moment his booted toes drummed spasmodically, then he lay still. Tucson strode forward and turned him over. He was quite dead.

A long sigh of relief left Tucson's lips. Methodically he punched out his exploded shells and inserted fresh cartridges. There was a slight noise near the bar. Tucson whirled around to see a white-faced bartender just rising from behind the long counter. "Is—is that all?" the barkeep quavered.

"That is all," Tucson said shortly.

The swinging doors banged open. Stony rushed in. "You're all right, pard?" he asked anxiously, eyeing Lombard's prone figure. "I'm all right," Tucson said quietly. He paused. "There's one more job to do."

"What's that?" Stony asked.

"I've got to get down to the bank and arrest Phin Osgood."

A horse and rig were just pulling to a stop before the bank when Tucson and his pardner arrived. The cashier of the bank stepped out of the rig. His eyes widened when he saw Tucson.

Tucson said, "Did you get this buggy for Phin Osgood?"

The man nodded. "He told me to get it in a hurry. I'm working for him, but—but I don't like it. I think he's planning to——"

"To run away," Tucson finished the words. "It's about what I expected. You in on this game with Osgood?"

"No sir." The man's eyes were honest, and they looked straight into Tucson's.

Tucson nodded. "I believe you. Stick around. You're going to have to take charge of this bank when we leave."

He and Stony strode on into the bank. Just as they entered the front door Phin Osgood came staggering through the doorway of his private office, burdened down under the weight of a heavily loaded satchel in each hand. His florid face paled, his mustache seemed to wilt, at sight of Tucson and Stony.

"Sorry I can't stay to talk to you, gentlemen," he panted. "I've been called to Chancellor on business. Back tomorrow——"

"Osgood," Tucson cut in sternly, "you're under arrest! Lombard is dead. Politan has confessed to what you covotes planned. Your game is up!"

The two satchels struck the floor with heavy thuds. Osgood reached to a hip pocked. His nickel-plated revolver flashed into view. "You'll never take me alive——" he commenced.

And that was as far as he got; Tucson had crossed the floor with tigerlike speed, both hands moving into action. One hand knocked the gun spinning from Osgood's flabby grasp; the other slapped

Osgood across the face with a force that sent the crooked banker reeling against the wall. That took all the fight out of him, and he commenced pleading for mercy, promising to tell of various previous nefarious enterprises in which Politan and Lombard had been engaged up in Montana and Wyoming.

"You'll have plenty of time to tell all that at your trial," Tucson said grimly. "And trying to run away with the bank's funds isn't going to make your prison sentence any shorter."

27

CONCLUSION

AFTER THINGS HAD QUIETED DOWN the men gathered in Titus Shaw's bar for a before-dinner drink. Faces were still smoke-and dust-grimed. Tex Malcolm had a shallow furrow across the back of one hand. Rube Phelps was minus a bit of skin from his right ribs. Ollie Paddock had two bullet holes through the crown of his Stetson, and one of his punchers was at Doc Tuttle's place with a bullet in his shoulder. The Lombard forces, on the other hand, had suffered more heavily. Lullaby's jail was full, and four men, not counting Lombard, had been killed. There were also several wounded at the jail awaiting attention from the doctor. Tucson's attack had come as so great a surprise that the Lombard faction never did really get set to put up a fight.

As Ollie Paddock had said, "Tucson, you should be an army general. You strike so swift and sudden, the enemy doesn't have a chance to furnish opposition."

And Tucson's reply, "I'm not forgetting, Ollie, I had you and a lot of good men behind me."

Titus Shaw chuckled. "Tucson, you sure whittle 'em down fast, once you and your pards get started. Lombard dead, Armitage dead, Quinn dead, Politan and Osgood due for long sentences—hell! I can't remember all the names of ratlesnakes you've——"

"By the way, Red," Tucson cut in, "what did you do with Politan?"

Ollie Paddock replied for Red. "We've got him tied up out to my place. I was just telling Titus my foreman has orders to shoot rather than let him escape."

"It'd be a shame to waste a bullet on the yellow skunk," Bat Wing growled.

Ananias put in, "We sure nipped a nice little rustling ring in the bud."

"That's the place to nip 'em," Tex laughed.

Tucson said to Lullaby, "You haven't told us what happened to you yet."

"Haven't had a chance," Lullaby drawled.

After Lullaby told his story, Tucson took Red's arm and drew him outside.

"I've been doing some thinking," Tucson announced.

"What about, Tucson?"

Tucson smiled meaningly. "Well, for one thing, there's going to be a nice moon tonight. I wonder how the Twin Sisters will look under moonlight. You should ask Molly to show you sometime. I think she'd be more than willing."

Red flushed and grinned. "I'll get started right away," he said.

"And something else, Red," Tucson went on, "Molly's going to have a nice chunk of money from her sale of Twin Sisters."

Red's face fell suddenly. "Yeah, I'd forgotten that."

"I was just thinking," Tucson continued, "that the Dollar-Sign-L will be up for sale, probably, right soon. It's a darn good piece of grazing land, and the buildings aren't bad—nothing wrong that paint and a little lumber won't fix up. The place will likely sell cheap. Just in case you know of any young redhead that's aiming to get married and wants to be independent on a spread of his own, let me know. My pards and I are always ready to back a coming cowman."

"Gee, cripes, Tucson!" There was something close to idolatry in Red's eyes as he tried to find words with which to thank Tucson. "You—you're really great! I don't know how to thank you."

"Don't try, Red. Here"—drawing from his pocket a folded sheet of paper—"you'd better take this bill of sale to Molly. It's about time you returned it to her, after making off with it the way you did a short spell back. Luckily I had that paper and my authority from the governor stuck down in my boot last night when Lombard and his gang grabbed me. They never did think to look in my boot. I reckon. Now go on, hurry out to the ranch and tell Molly we'll see her later."

He cut short further thanks, watched Red fondly as the young fellow hustled in search of his horse, then returned to the barroom.

The men were drinking at the bar. Stony said shrewdly, "What have you been doing, pard, playing Cupid again?"

"You might call it that," Tucson smiled. "How 'bout a drink? I want to make a toast to excitement in the days to come."

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GHOST BULLET RANGE

by **JOHNSTON McCULLY**

When he had finished trail-herding a load of cattle to Dodge City, the last thing in the world Phil Banniton expected was to take the long trail to Texas. Then word came that his help was desperately needed on his old ranch, the Diamond W, owned by his foster father, grizzled Andy Walsh, and that an old cow hand who had taught him to ride had been the last man killed by the unknown Texas murderer.

The situation on the Diamond W range was more desperate than Phil could have imagined. Riders for the rich ranch of Andy Walsh were being found dead beside their trails, always shot in the back. And always there was no clue—never a boot track or a hoof mark within shooting range of the victim.

Yet so deadly was the aim of the assassin that panic was spreading fast among the men of the Diamond W, apparently the only victims earmarked for death, and so successfully did the mysterious murderer cover his tracks that the vaqueros began whispering among themselves of ghost bullets.

Despising drygulchers—men who killed without giving their victims a chance—as the most dangerous and despicable of killers, Phil Banniton organized the vaqueros and both the lands of the Diamond W and Sirloin City became the scenes of thrilling gun battles before the killer was captured and peace restored.

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