

A Gunfire
WESTERN NOVEL

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A HILLMAN
PUBLICATION

**FRANK C.
ROBERTSON**

A man with a determined, intense expression is shown from the chest up, leaning over a wooden box. He is wearing a bright red, long-sleeved shirt. He holds a blue revolver in his right hand, which is firing a bullet, with a bright muzzle flash visible. The background consists of vertical wooden planks. A light-colored cowboy hat is visible behind him, slightly out of focus. The overall style is that of a classic pulp magazine cover illustration.

**THE
PRIDE
OF PINE CREEK**

A FULL LENGTH WESTERN

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by **FRANK C. ROBERTSON**

Pine Creek Basin was simmering from the heat of a fight between cattlemen and lumbermen when Tom Powell rode into the valley, his sympathies with the ranchers, his loyalty to his brother Verne, the county attorney, who felt it his duty to prosecute the cattlemen's leader on a murder charge.

So Tom Powell changed his name, took a job with the ranchers, and played a dangerous double game to prove his brother wrong and to keep a cowman's paradise from the clutches of the greedy lumber barons. On the job he met beautiful, courageous Jerry McConnell, daughter of the accused cattleman and his brother's former fiancée; when Jerry was around it was hard for Tom to remember his work.

And even Jerry doubted him: there were traitors among the cattlemen and Tom had kept a suspicious contact with the county attorney. When the traitors learned he was the lawyer's brother Tom Powell needed all his brains, strength, and skill with a six-gun to clear Pine Creek of outlaws.

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THE PRIDE OF PINE CREEK

by FRANK C. ROBERTSON

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THE LAST MILE THE MEN had ridden in silence. Now they had reached the top of Skeleton Pass, and the upper end of a wide, fertile valley, lush with irrigated meadows and dotted with neat, new homes, lay before them. Near the center of the valley sprawled a town; half new and half old; a lazy range town suddenly trying to make itself over into a bustling metropolis.

"Well, Thomas, here's where I'm branching off," one of the men remarked with a hard though boyish grin. "I've not forgot yet that the last time I came over this pass I was headin' the other way, with a sheriff's posse just about rifle distance behind. I'm afraid the sheriff ain't forgot either."

Tom Powell reached out to shake hands.

"I sure won't forget you lettin' me know about the jam my kid brother is in, Jorg. An' for comin' back this far with me."

"Aw, forgot it," the yellow-haired young giant growled. He was a square-headed, square-built young descendant of Danish parents who had emigrated from the old country as Mormon converts, long before the birth of their son. He was as hard and tough as mountain mahogany, and if he had a solitary virtue it was loyalty to his few friends, and a determination to finish any job that he undertook.

"You think you'll stick around in the Caribous awhile?" Powell questioned with a hint of regret, though he already knew the answer.

"Yep," Jorg Jorgensen grinned faintly. "I know some fellers there. It's still a good location. May pick me up some cattle."

Tom Powell frowned, but he didn't attempt a lecture. He was no angel of purity himself, but that didn't mean that he would fall out with a proven friend just because that friend's morals were lax in some respects.

"Goin' to hunt up yore brother right away?" Jorg asked.

"No. I may not hunt him up at all. At least I want to look things over first. For the time bein' my name is goin' to be Tom Wood."

"I gitcha. Allus thought I'd rather have an alias than the moniker I've got. But if I changed it it would have to be Olsen or Yensen, or somethin' like that. They never could mistake this Scandahoo-vian mug of mine."

"Right you are, brother Jorgensen," Tom laughed. He sat his horse and watched the broad-shouldered young Dane vanish from sight along a trail up the backbone.

A funny fellow, this Jorg Jorgensen, Powell mused. A man few people liked. A natural-born rebel, to whom the accepted codes of society meant nothing. But he had been Tom's friend.

The man turned his horse down into the valley, and presently he rode along the unfamiliar streets of what he had once known as a cowntown.

He didn't believe there was but one person in Boulder who would recognize him, for his one visit there had been brief, and ten years before. And he had no wish to see that one person until he looked things over.

The old Lone Star saloon still stood near the foot of Main Street; its false front now askew and asking for paint. The few saddled horses at the hitch-rack indicated that it was still doing business, but newer buildings up the street indicated that it was passing into decrepitude. He wondered if the same fat bartender still officiated, but he decided to ride on further before he stopped to investigate.

There were new stores and new saloons. The latter bore such names as the Gem, the Occidental, and the New Era. The town was in transition. Powell had seen it happen before where more progressive industries were driving the original cattlemen off the earth.

This, he knew, was what was happening here. Jorg Jorgensen had told him. And his own brother was one of the leaders of the progressive crowd that was exploiting the country at the expense of the old timers; one of the men ticketed for death if a certain cowboy accused of murder should be hung. Verne, the erstwhile cowboy, was the prosecuting attorney.

The man reached the other end of Main Street, where the business houses petered out, and turned to ride back. But he rode to a hitch-rack and waited there without dismounting as a lone rider came in on a side street and headed in his direction. Never, thought Tom Powell, had he seen such a colorful picture as this girl rider and her free-stepping, flax-maned sorrel mount.

She rode with natural, seemingly indolent grace which made her body an actual part of the horse so far as the animal's movements were concerned. Not a single ounce of misplaced weight would hamper the animal's freedom of action. And the girl had looks!

She wore a red shirt and tan divided skirt, brown riding boots, and a pearl-gray sombrero. Long, beaded buckskin gloves covered her strong, shapely hands. Tom didn't get a good look at her face then, but her profile was one of strength and loveliness. Her nose had the slightest little arch, and her jaw was round and firm. Dark, heavy hair had been braided and fastened low on her neck.

From sheer enjoyment of the picture Tom waited where he was while the girl dismounted a few rods down the street. He noticed, then, that she carried a .32 caliber revolver in a worn holster attached to a businesslike cartridge belt around her waist. The gun was plainly not carried for ornamental purposes, and the girl's strong features indicated that she could use a weapon when necessary.

He was about to ride on when he saw that the girl had walked straight into trouble. She had tied her mount carefully and stepped upon the wooden sidewalk directly in front of the New Era saloon.

Entering the building was plainly farthest from her intentions, but she was intercepted by two hard-looking characters who had appeared to be merely saloon bums sunning themselves on the sidewalk. Tom pricked up his ears with interest, and unobtrusively moved Midnight close enough to enable him to hear what was being said.

"It's none of your business who I am," he heard the girl say hotly. "Get out of my way."

"Oh, no," one of them said. "You're comin' with us, sweetheart."

Just a pair of drunks, Tom thought, and loosened himself in the saddle. A second later he saw that he was wrong. One of them flipped back his lapel and disclosed an officer's star. Tom relaxed. Tangling with an officer before he had been five minutes in town was not so good.

The girl reached for the six-shooter at her waist, but they were too quick for her. One of them caught her hand; the other reached for her gun. But the girl was not easily subdued. With an unexpected display of strength she broke loose and started to run. But again she was not fast enough. One of the men stuck out his foot and the girl sprawled upon the board sidewalk.

She was up in an instant, but each man seized an arm and they propelled her violently over against the end of the saloon, where she faced them defiantly with clenched fists and flashing eyes.

Tom certainly didn't like the looks of the two coarsely dressed officers, and he admired the girl's spirit. Not once had she cried out for help. But he wondered why they were trying to arrest her, and why she was unwise enough to resist officers of the law.

"We know who you are, hellcat," one of the men ground out angrily. Somehow in the struggle she had raked his face with a fingernail, and he was trying ineffectively to wipe away the blood. "No wonder they're goin' to hang your old man. The hellcat would have shot one of us if she could, Dode."

"I'm shore anticipatin' a lot o' pleasure, sister, when I see 'em take your old man outa the jail yonder an' stretch his neck," the smaller man chuckled. "Mebbe I'll fit the black cap over his head myself. It'll be a good show. You wanna be there?"

"Oh, you beasts," the girl moaned. "Let me go. How dare you touch me?"

"Sister, we'll touch you when an' where we please," the smaller officer said insultingly. "But we wasn't gonna hurt you if you hadn't showed fight. We just wanna take that shootin' iron off you, because orders is that nobody from Pine Creek Basin is allowed to pack a gun in Boulder."

"What right have you, or anybody else, to make an order like that?" the girl flashed.

"It's sheriff's orders, an' we're special deputies hired to guard your

old man so his friends can't carry out their threats to git him outa jail till we crack his neck for him. That goes fer you, too, sister, an'—"

Tom Powell felt that it had gone far enough, and swung to the ground. Deputy sheriffs they might be, but they had no right to manhandle this girl. And more heinous still was their brutality in taunting her with the fact that her father was going to be hung. He stepped close to the men.

"Better let go the lady's arms, gents," he said quietly.

They swung about, and one of them let go the girl's arms and took a bellicose step forward. He was a big man, even larger than Tom Powell, who was far from being a weakling. He wore the heavy shoes, woolen socks, moleskin pants, and checkered shirt affected by lumberjacks—a breed of men new in this country.

"Say, who the hell are you?" the fellow blurted. "You a new Pine Cricker I ain't saw yet?"

"It makes no difference who I am," Tom said steadily. "You can't manhandle that young lady like you're doing and get away with it while I'm around."

The girl started to say something, but before she could speak the lumberjack deputy growled an oath and took a step forward. His shoulders hunched and he started a swing from the sidewalk that was designed to knock the interloper halfway across the street.

Just what happened the onlookers didn't quite see. Tom Powell stepped quickly in; the edge of one hand came sharply up and caught the deputy under the chin. The click of the man's teeth coming together could be heard half a block. The wild swing became a mere overhand paw which no more than brushed the stranger's shoulder. And then the man's face was caught in a deft chancery applied by Tom Powell's two hands. The man snorted and tried to break free, but the pressure on his neck was too great to withstand. His head bent and he was lost. The next second he was spinning wildly over the edge of the sidewalk to land in a heap in the debris of the street. It had happened in less than five seconds.

The other man still held the girl's arm with a perfunctory gesture, but when Powell started toward him he released his grasp upon her and reached for his gun. Just as his hand closed upon it Tom Powell's arm lashed out like the hind leg of a mule, and the deputy went down in a crumpled heap against the end of the saloon.

A number of men had poured out of the New Era and another saloon across the street. The sight of the two toughest characters of the town, both down, provoked an eloquent silence as they waited for the next move.

Tom Powell ignored them all. He turned to the girl. "Maybe you'd better move your horse farther down the street, Miss," he advised.

"Thank you very much for your help," she said, "but this street is public, and I'll leave my horse anywhere I want to." She unbuckled her gun belt and stepping gracefully but unhurriedly over to her horse she hung the gun on the saddle horn.

"Now maybe Sheriff Marsh's gunmen won't be so badly scared," she added cuttingly.

The man who had been knocked against the saloon got slowly to his feet.

"Not scared enough, Miss McConnell, that we can't keep your old man in the jail until its time for him to be hung," he jeered.

"And to act as nursemaids for the men who are trying to have him legally murdered," the girl retorted with a depth of feeling that made Tom glance at her with surprise.

"Thanks again," she said to him with a swift change of tone. "If you're going to be around here long I'd advise you to patronize the other end of the street. There are still a few decent people left in this town down that way."

With that she turned and walked rapidly away. Tom was amazed, to see that her courageous defiance of the bullies drew no applause from the bystanders; nor so much as an approving glance.

Tom started toward his horse, but the man he had thrown off the sidewalk stopped him.

"Where do you think you're goin', feller?" he demanded.

Out of the corner of his eye Tom saw that both deputies now had their hands on their guns. He saw, too, that the loafers were all sympathizers with the deputies.

"I was just goin' to find a livery stable to tend my horse, and then look for a room," he answered evenly.

"We'll find a room for you, buddy," the man said. "No damned spur-jingler kin assault an officer in this town an' git away with it. Yo're under arrest."

"Fine!" Powell answered with a grin that took the two special officers somewhat aback. "I'll have a lot of fun tellin' the court how I had to slap you two down because you were bullyin' a girl who was tendin' to her own business."

The smaller man, whose name Tom was to learn was Dode James, stepped close and thrust his six-gun against Powell's spine while he removed the latter's gun. The other officer snapped a pair of handcuffs about his wrists. Powell realized that it could have done him no good to resist.

For he wasn't the least bit sure that he wanted to resist. For the first time in his life he wanted to break into jail. He had come back to help his brother Verne, with whom he had broken six years before. Now Verne was a lawyer, the prosecuting attorney who was trying to hang the father of the girl Tom had just helped. And from Jorg Jorgensen Tom had learned that prior to Jim McCon-

nell's arrest Verne had been engaged to his daughter, and now they were such bitter enemies that McConnell's friends were threatening to kill Verne if McConnell was convicted.

The inside of the jail would be the best possible place for an interview with Verne.

2

WITH AN OFFICER ON EITHER SIDE of him Tom Powell was conducted toward the dingy-looking courthouse that stood removed from all other buildings at one corner of the town.

"Fella," the larger deputy, whose name was Brig Ferry, remarked in a scarcely audible voice, "we'll make you so damned sick before you git out of this that you'll wish you'd never seen Boulder."

"I doubt it," Tom replied unconcernedly. "Strong-arm methods may work with girls and broken-down saloon bums, but they won't work with me. You're goin' to scare me up a lawyer, and before this thing is finished you're liable to find yourselves dancin' barefooted on a bed of hot coals."

"Who are you anyway?" Dode James queried.

"That's my business. But I'll tell you this much: I didn't come into this country just for the ride, and I've rode five hundred miles to git here."

He was throwing a colossal bluff, but it was working. The ruffianly special officers were impressed to the extent that they were afraid they had committed a blunder, but they didn't know how to back down.

"We'll see how big a drag you've got when you land inside a cell," Ferry told him.

"Which is just where I want to land," he retorted. "And when you've got me locked up I want you to bring the county attorney to see me pronto. Tell him *Tom Wood* wants to see him."

Instead of being locked in the county jail as he had expected Powell found himself detained in a small, dirty one-room structure that was dignified by the title of CITY JAIL. There were four or five other inmates in on minor charges of disturbing the peace.

"What're you doin' here, big boy?" one of them queried. "You don't look drunk."

"I'm not. I just pasted a deputy sheriff."

"Ray! Give 'm a hand, boys. Somebody oughta murder all these damn' special deputies that lumber company's brought in here. Ain't a damn' one of 'em hadn't oughta be here, an' the damn' sheriff is worse'n any of 'em."

"By the way, where is this man McConnell that they're tryin' to hang?" Tom asked.

"Oh, they keep him in solitary in the other jail. 'Fraid them cow-

punchers from Pine Crick Basin will ride down an' clean up the town. That's why the town is full of these thugs that calls themselves deputies."

"By Gawd, old Jim McConnell is the whitest man that was ever in this country," a seedy-looking fellow vouchsafed. "No bum was ever turned away from his place hungry, an' no panhandler ever got less'n a dollar from him."

"I tell you there'll be hell a-poppin' yet in this man's town before his friends let him swing," said another.

Powell had been in the jail less than an hour when Dode James returned with two other men. One of them Tom recognized at first glance as his brother Verne. He had changed much, for when Tom had last seen him he was a slim young rancher. Now, although only twenty-six, he had grown portly, and his naturally blond complexion was whiter than Tom ever remembered it.

The other man wore a sheriff's star. He was a medium-sized man of about forty with a short, blunt nose, and small, cunning, greedy eyes. Tom catalogued the man at once as a capable officer, but ventured no opinion as to his morals.

"All right, we'll have a talk with this saddle-bum," the sheriff said loudly. "Trot him out."

"I'll talk to the county attorney, and to nobody else," Tom said, as he stepped suddenly forward.

He saw a bewildered expression pass over Verne's face, and his lawyer brother unconsciously brushed a hand across his face as though to thrust away an annoying branch that interfered with his vision.

But Verne was quick-witted and the fact that Tom had given an alias caused him to hold his tongue.

Tom was as dark as Verne was light and there was no danger that anyone would know they were related by their looks.

"Ever see this fellow before, Verne?" the sheriff asked.

"Wha—what did you say your name was?" Verne stammered.

"Tom Wood. And I want to have a talk with you—alone."

"Maybe you had better let me see this man alone, Sheriff," Verne said. "I may have seen him somewhere. I don't know."

"All right, Verne," the sheriff agreed. "Come one, Dode."

The special deputy displayed considerable reluctance at leaving, but the sheriff drew him away.

The other prisoners had withdrawn to the farther end of the room, and Tom stepped close to the row of iron bars that separated him from his brother.

"What are you doing here?" Verne asked huskily.

"Ain't you gonna shake hands?" Tom asked with a smile. "You act like you wasn't glad to see me."

"Of course," Verne said, and thrust his hand through the bars,

but his handclasp was furtive and quickly over. "I'm *not* glad to see you *here*," he said curtly. "What have you been doing?"

"Well, Verne, you're lookin' fine," Tom said easily. "Not much like the waddy I used to ride the ranges with, though. I reckon I was wrong trying to keep you that way. Now you're a lawyer an' with a big case that'll make you famous if you hang your man."

"Never mind that now," Verne said impatiently. "What did you do to get in here, and what can I do to get you out? And why are you travelling under an assumed name?"

"Because, to answer the last one first, I didn't want to embarrass you by givin' my right one. And then I thought I might be able to help you. That's why I came here, Verne. I heard you were in a jam."

"It's news to me," Verne said coldly. "I'm doing my duty, and I don't think anybody can stop me."

"I was told that if you convict this man McConnell that certain people might make it their business to see that you didn't live long enough to convict another man."

"Such threats have been made, but I'm disregarding them. The man is guilty of murder, and it's my plain duty to see that he pays the penalty—much as it hurts me to do it."

"Are you plumb sure he is guilty, or that you're doin' the right thing tryin' to hang him even if he is?" Tom asked, and was aware with a faint inner nausea that he was harking back to the tone and manner that had caused the split between him and Verne years before. Verne had never like criticism or advice. He had resented Tom's elder brother attitude. An angry flush was rising in his face.

"Of course I am. But what do you know about it? Why are you so interested in this McConnell? Just because he is a downtrodden cattleman, I suppose."

"That does prejudice me in his favor," Tom admitted, "but all I really know about him is that he's got a darn fine-lookin' daughter."

Verne's face flushed crimson, and an unhappy look came into his eyes. "I suppose you know that before this trouble came up Jerry McConnell and I were engaged. If you don't mind we'll not drag her into the conversation. Now what were you doing—"

"Now ain't that a shame?" Tom interrupted. "I suppose she tried to get you to dismiss the case?"

"No. She wanted me to resign and defend her father."

"Well, why didn't you do it? If it was the father of the girl I meant to marry, and—"

"You don't understand. The man is *guilty*. It was asking me to sacrifice my professional integrity. I couldn't do that, even for Jerry."

"I'm afraid you an' me would differ about that, but I'm mighty glad to hear that I've been misinformed and that you are in no personal danger."

"I didn't say that," Verne denied quickly. "As a matter of fact plenty of threats have been made. Practically the whole of Pine Creek Basin is in rebellion against the law. It has been necessary to hire a large force of special deputies to prevent a jail-break from the outside. And they have said freely that if they can't save McConnell they will kill me and Sheriff Marsh and a few more. But I'm not letting their threats alter my course."

That, Tom knew, was like Verne. He would not be frightened out, and nothing could swerve him from a course he had outlined to follow.

"You've sure got to be a language-spoutin' fool," Tom said with mock admiration.

"Yes?" Verne said coldly. "Well, what about your case? They tell me you're in here for striking and resisting an officer. That's a pretty serious offense. Were you drunk?"

"I was not drunk. I've not even had a drink. I merely roughed up a couple of these special deputies you were talking about because they were manhandling Miss Jerry McConnell. You may be too righteous and law-abiding to stand by and do nothing about it when you see a girl thrown to the sidewalk, and then jerked around by a couple of thugs, but I don't happen to be built that way. And Miss McConnell was only going quietly about her business."

The effect upon Verne was startling.

"They—they were molesting Jerry?" he gasped. "The drunken fools!"

"They wasn't drunk!"

"This is a devil of a mess," Verne said presently. "Why can't they let Jerry alone? Feeling is already stirred up far too much now with the whole county taking sides. All I'm trying to do is enforce the law. If you come to trial Jerry will be summoned, and her father's lawyer will try to make out that she's being purposely persecuted at the behest of the Teton Lumber Company. She already thinks I'm being paid by them—which isn't true. I'll have to cross-examine her, and she'll hate me worse than ever. You'll have to plead guilty, Tom."

"Not me," Tom refused smilingly. "If I have to stand trial I'll tell the whole truth and make the best defense I can."

"But don't you see what a spot it puts me in? Those fellows will insist that you be punished. If you aren't it'll look bad for them. My God, first I have to prosecute my fiancée's father for murder, and now I have to appear against my own brother."

"It looks like these deputies—or the people who hire 'em—have the Injun sign on you," Tom said. "How come?"

"That's a lie," Verne said angrily. "The real fault lies with those ranchers up on Pine Creek. It's their threats of violence that have made it necessary to hire men like James and Ferry. The only men

we can get who will take the job are employees of the Teton Lumber Company."

"And this lumber company, I understand, is anxious to get up on the head waters of Pine Creek and cut off the timber that the cattlemen want preserved. To remove all opposition the company is makin' it as tough for the cowmen as they can in the hope that they'll go broke. And you are playin' the lumbermen's game. That's the nub of the whole situation, ain't it?" Tom demanded, for the first time speaking sternly.

"No!" Verne fairly shouted. "I'm not concerned about that. My business is to prosecute violators of the law. Jim McConnell killed a man. It was murder. It's my job to see that he pays the penalty. Nothing else."

"Old single-minded Verne," Tom mused aloud. "The reasons behind a man's actions don't mean a thing to you."

"He'll have an opportunity to present them at his trial."

"Like hell! I've seen trials. That's why I never wanted you to be a lawyer. When McConnell tries to tell of the persecutions he may have endured you'll be up there on yore feet yellin' that the lumber company ain't on trial, and that evidence of things leadin' up to the killin' is incompetent, irrelevant, and immaterial."

Again Verne flushed darkly. "I dispute your claim to know more about my profession than I do," he said with frozen dignity.

"I'm sorry, kid," Tom said sincerely. "I didn't knowingly come here to cause you trouble. I came because I thought you might need some help. I heard that your life was in danger, and I figgered that my gun might come in handy, if nothing else. I'm just sorry that I find you on what I think is the wrong side of the fence."

"How could *you* help *me*?" Verne half sneered.

"You never can tell. But when I get out of here I'm goin' to try to get a job with this McConnell outfit under the name of Tom Wood. I don't want anybody to know who I am. Believe me, kid, I'm for you first, last, and all the time. But I want to be damned sure you're not makin' a mistake," Tom said earnestly.

"There may be something in what you say," Verne said reluctantly. "I have often wished that I could have a reliable man up there to report on their activities. By telling the sheriff that you're the friend of an old friend of mine, and that I can use you, I can get you released upon my recognizance, and Marsh will make his deputies drop the charges against you."

"That's fine. But before I'm released I'd like to spend a night in the same jail with Jim McConnell. In the same cell, if possible," Tom requested.

3

SO JERRY MCCONNELL WAS THE GIRL on whose account Tom found himself in durance vile, and Jerry was the girl whom Verne had given up at what he conceived to be the call of duty.

Well, Tom mused, he had never been able thoroughly to understand Verne, and he probably never would. Family loyalty ran strong within him, and he meant to back Verne to the limit, whatever his play; but he certainly couldn't see himself giving up a girl like Jerry, no matter how guilty her father might be.

He was eager to see what kind of a man Jim McConnell was. Jorg Jorgensen had spoken highly of him, but then Jorg was an outlaw at heart, and didn't care who knew it. So, too, did Tom's fellow prisoners in the town calaboose hold the man in high esteem. But that could not be considered any high recommendation. Tom wanted to talk to the man face to face and form his own opinion. But he was prejudiced in advance in McConnell's favor.

The other prisoners hurriedly retreated to the farthest limits of the jail when Verne returned half an hour later with Sheriff Marsh.

"Been nice knowin' you," one of the prisoners called, as Tom was let outside. Tom grinned and waved his hand in farewell.

They led him around to the front of the courthouse and into the office of the sheriff. Marsh seated himself, and lighted a cigar, but the Powell brothers remained standing.

"Verne, here, tells me he used to know your father," Marsh remarked finally.

"Did I say something funny?" he demanded.

"Not at all, not at all," Tom disclaimed, more amused than ever at Verne's forbidding frown.

"Anyway," the sheriff went on, "it's a lucky break for you. It's not healthy tanglin' with the law in these parts, and you sure got in bad to begin with. But if you've got sense enough to realize that the only way to get out of a bad jam is to make yourself useful I reckon we can give you a chance."

"And what you call bein' useful," Tom remarked, paying no attention to Verne's pleading gestures that he hold his tongue, "is to help you hang this man McConnell so the Teton Lumber Company can have a free hand up there in that Pine Creek Basin country, no?"

"You seem to know a lot about things, for a total stranger," the sheriff said suspiciously.

"Man, you don't imagine the McConnell case ain't been heard of outside of Boulder, do you?" Tom asked with a manner of surprise. "I've got ears, and I've heard about this case long before I got in here."

Sheriff Marsh did not seem any too happy about the notoriety of the case, if what Tom said was true.

"Well, I'll put you in with McConnell now," he said, "and if them ears you've been braggin' about are what you say they are they may come in useful."

"I forgot to tell you," Tom said humbly. "I've also got an awful good forgetter. Of course, by a tremendous effort, I might be persuaded to remember almost anything—"

Tom was laughing inside. Verne's fingers, he knew, were fairly itching to take him by the throat and choke him off.

"Money, huh?" Marsh snorted. "You've come to the wrong place if you expect to be bribed. You'll do well to keep out of the penitentiary."

Nevertheless, it was plain that the sheriff felt more secure in knowing that he was the kind of man who would sell out for cash.

As they left the office Verne managed to get his mouth close to his brother's ear, and whispered fiercely, "Will you keep your mouth shut?"

"What did you say?" Tom asked loudly.

"I—I—said did—do you want a haircut?" Verne stammered. "I can send down a barber."

Tom's bushy head of hair stood in need of a trimming and he blandly accepted the offer.

He was led down a long corridor, and then down a short stairway to the basement of the building and up to a heavy iron door which entered the cell block. Only one cell, however, seemed to be occupied. Tom knew that the occupant was Jim McConnell.

The man who was slated to be hanged was tall, raw-boned, and wore a dark, well-trimmed beard. He wore dark trousers and a light shirt. He was reading. As the three men entered he glanced up casually, and recognizing the county attorney, and the sheriff who wanted to hang him, he closed the book. His eyes were blue and kindly, but they were the kind of eyes which would never quail in the face of danger. Tom warmed to the man instantly.

"How are you, Sheriff? Hello, Verne," the prisoner greeted. "Got some company for me at last?" There was neither friendliness nor outright animosity in his tone.

"How do you do, Mr. McConnell," Verne said stiffly.

The sheriff was more at ease.

"Don't know how long this drunken cowhand will be with you, Jim," he said, "but we thought he might be company for you for a little while. He made the mistake of trying to beat up a couple of my deputies."

"I hope you're as comfortable as is possible, Mr. McConnell," Verne said awkwardly, while Tom was being locked in the adjoining cell.

"No complaints, Verne—except that you're makin' one hell of a big mistake keepin' me here at all," McConnell answered.

"That is for the law to decide," Verne intoned.

"Your law," McConnell said with a faint trace of bitterness.

"Hey, where do you think yo're goin'?" they suddenly heard the guard at the other end of the corridor challenge.

"They told me they thought the sheriff was back here. I want to see my father," came a girl's voice.

"It—it's Jerry!" Verne blurted. He seemed utterly confused.

"All right, let her come," Sheriff Marsh ordered.

A moment later the girl stepped into the corridor. Tom Powell watched interestedly when she recognized Verne. Her cheeks flamed, and her head went a little higher, but she came on steadily.

"I suppose I'm still not to be permitted to talk with my father without there being witnesses?" she addressed the sheriff.

"That's the rules, Miss. You can have five minutes."

"I think I'll be going," Verne said. "Good—good-day, Miss McConnell."

The girl ignored him. Verne's retreat was effected with more dispatch than dignity.

Jerry came on down the corridor and kissed her father. "How are you, Dad?" she asked with a tenderness in her soft contralto voice that brought a lump into Tom's throat.

"I'm fine, Jerry," McConnell answered. "All I'm worried about is how you're all gittin' along out at the ranch."

"We're all right, but—" She hesitated. Obviously there were things she couldn't say under the wide-open ears of the sheriff. In her hesitation she glanced toward the next cell, and her gaze fell upon Tom Powell, and her eyes widened.

"What have you got that man in here for?" she demanded.

"Arrested for disturbin' the peace," Sheriff Marsh replied.

Jerry stepped to the door of Tom's cell. "Was it—was it for interfering with those brutes who stopped me?" she blazed.

"I'm afraid that was it," Tom said. "The mayor didn't like to have his streets cluttered up with waste matter."

The puncher had wondered how they could all be so casual if feeling was as intense as it was said to be. Heretofore, only Verne had appeared in any way excited. Now he saw how paper-thin was the veil of courtesy which governed these bitter enemies in their enforced relations.

"What's that?" Jim McConnell rasped. "Has anybody been botherin' you, Jerry?"

"Just a couple of my deputies asked her to take off her gun. They were perfectly polite about it, but when she tried to shoot one of them they had to stop her," the sheriff answered before the girl could speak.

"Polite!" Jerry blazed. "They didn't even have the excuse of being drunk. They pawed and insulted me. I wasn't afraid of them, but they had me backed against that New Era saloon of yours when this man came along and made them stop."

"My deputies have a right to stop anybody on the street, and disarm them," Marsh stated heavily.

"By God, Marsh, if it's got so it ain't safe for my daughter to walk the streets of Boulder it won't be safe for you," McConnell said. He had risen to his full height, and caged in by iron bars though he was, he looked twice as formidable to Tom Powell as the sheriff did.

"So you've come out in the open at last with your threats, have you?" Marsh retorted. "I've been hearin' about what them Pine Creek friends of yore's was aimin' to do. Well, I'll tell you something: I'm goin' to give my men orders to shoot on sight the first man we catch prowlin' around this jail. An' another thing: no more visitors. The only person you'll be allowed to see from now on is your lawyer, an' I'll be right with him."

"Why, you dirty—" McConnell raged. He reached through the bars to grab at Marsh, but the sheriff was too quick for him. Marsh had drawn his gun, and now he slashed downward with it and the barrel caught McConnell across the back of the hand. Blood spurted and bones cracked. McConnell jerked his hand back with pain.

"You coward!" Jerry cried furiously.

"Keep out of this, Miss," the sheriff stormed, "or I'll slap you silly."

"You swine." The girl voiced such contempt that the sheriff seemed tempted to carry out his threat.

The guard came running. "Git this girl outside—and see that she don't come back," Marsh ordered.

Tom Powell felt a surge of rage as he saw the bullet-headed guard seize the girl and forcibly propel her toward the entrance. But there was nothing he could do about it. He was behind bars.

"Good-bye, Dad, don't let them get you down," Jerry called. "Good-bye, mister. If they dare to try you I'll be there to tell the truth."

"Marsh, some day I'll make you pay for this," Jim McConnell gritted. "I've tried to be a model prisoner and treat you and that dirty snob of a Verne Powell like you were human bein's, but now I'm through. I'll treat you for what you are—a pair of lowdown, stinkin' buzzards."

"Not long you won't, because you're damned soon going to swing," the sheriff taunted.

"And if I do the boys from Pine Creek will fill you and Powell so full of lead that it'll take a yoke of oxen to drag you to the graveyard."

"You'll find that the day is past when you can intimidate officers of the law," Marsh spoke the final word, as he walked down the corridor.

The two cells were separated only by iron bars. McConnell came over and faced Powell.

"Kinda had a little row with the sheriff, didn't I?" he grinned wryly.

"Better let me see if I can do something for that hand," Tom said.

"It'll be all right. I'll wrap my handkerchief around it. If I ain't too damned mad I'll ask 'em to send me a doctor when they bring our suppers. I'd like to have got a-hold of Marsh and brought him up close enough to have planted just one good punch on that snub nose of his."

"Fellers like us are kinda under a handicap against men like him," Tom said ruefully. "We're on the wrong side of these bars."

"Tell me about the ruckus that brought you here," McConnell requested.

Tom told him.

"You're a stranger in the country, then?" McConnell asked.

"As a matter of fact I was in here just a few days about ten years ago."

"Ain't lookin' for work?"

"You guessed it the first time."

"I could use a man, if he's experienced. If they don't keep you in here you ride out an' tell my brother Jack that I said put you on. Jack is my foreman."

"Well, that's fine. But in view of all this trouble that seems to be comin' up I don't know whether I want a job or not. What's it all about?"

"Just this," McConnell said. "A lot of us fellers have been up there in the Pine Creek country for more than twenty years. Most of us have done pretty well. But recently there's been a land boom here in the valley. Farmers have moved in here and taken up the land. They had a right to, I reckon, even though it deprived us of our best fall range. Some of 'em even come up in our country an' took up land that we had fenced. It was government land, but we'd always used it. Them nesters have caused us a heap of trouble, but even that was all right, I reckon, though we did deal kinda hard with a few that we knew were stealin' cattle."

"An old range-country settlin' up," Tom commented sadly. "I know the story. I've seen it happen before."

"Well, they got strong enough to elect a new set of county officers, an' they set right in to handin' us a dirty deal all along the line. We had some trouble. Then this Teton Lumber Company moved in an' started slashin' timber. They demanded right of ways which we wouldn't give 'em."

"Why?"

"Because there ain't any more timber up there than the country needs. If it's cut off a little at a time it'll last for years, and there won't be no harm done. There's been a saw-mill up there for ten years owned by a man named Lorenzo Bedford. But this big company means to put him out of business, and denude the whole upper country in a couple of years.

"When the timber is gone so is our water supply. You have to have timber to hold the moisture in an irrigated country. That's the big thing. But the immediate battle is because this timber outfit in retaliation for us insistin' on our rights has its men chase our cattle to hell an' back on the pretense that they may git in the timber an' have a tree fall on 'em. The result is they chase our stuff out of the shade in the summer-time; the flies drive 'em crazy an' they just trail back an' forth an' lose weight. Honest to God, my beef steers averaged a hundred and fifty pounds less weight last fall than they should have done, an' the trouble didn't start until late August," McConnell explained.

"And what have you done about it?" Tom queried.

"What we can. They plan to float their logs down Pine Creek to a big-new sawmill they're plannin' to build here. But before they can git 'em to water they have to use ox teams to log 'em across land that me an' some of my neighbors own. We stopped 'em, that's all."

"And now you're in the jailhouse," Tom sighed.

"Now I'm accused of murder. I don't mind sayin' that I organized the boys up there, and I took the lead in everything we done. But I told everybody that there must positively be no killin' if it could be avoided. As a matter of fact this man Creed that was killed was the most decent one of the whole bunch. Somebody killed him, but it was none of my doings. But they've built up a case of circumstantial evidence against me, an' it looks like I'll swing."

For the first time a note of dejection came into the cowman's voice.

"Aw, it can't be that bad," Tom consoled.

"It's not on my own account I'm worried," McConnell said. "I can take my medicine. But the rest of the boys up there are hot-headed. They ain't bluffin' when they say they'll git the sheriff, the prosecutin' attorney, an' the jury if I swing. I know it won't do any good, an' it'll only git a lot of them into serious trouble. I could hold the boys if I was out of here. An' I do hate to think that my girl must live her life with the stigma that her father was hung as a common criminal."

Looking at the man closely Tom Powell was convinced that McConnell was telling the truth. He was in deadly earnest, and he didn't look like the kind of man who would lie.

"Have you explained things to my—my friend, the prosecutor?"

Tom asked. "It looks like he could see your side of the question."

"Not him. You don't know that big-headed young upstart. All he can see is what he calls his duty. The new crowd elected him, and he has to stay with 'em if he advances politically. What burns me up is that he had us fooled. Why, my daughter was even engaged to marry him."

"Do you think she still cares for him?"

"Jerry? She hates the ground he walks on. She never would have fallen in love with him, I reckon, if he hadn't himself been a cowman before he got to be a lawyer. Jerry's been away to school, but she still likes the range, an' I guess they kinda hit it off."

"He must be a stubborn cuss to give up a girl like her for the sake of doin' his duty," Tom hazarded.

"For the sake of holdin' office," McConnell snapped. "But he has got guts of a fashion. That's the only thing I can admire about him."

The cowman's hand was hurting him badly, and Tom perceived that the man was tired of talking.

"I'll take that job—if I git out of here," Tom said. "It looks to me like you got a dirty deal."

The next morning the sheriff came into the cell block with a tall, dignified, gray-headed lawyer who exchanged cordial greetings with McConnell.

"You can talk ten minutes, but every word must be so I can hear it," the sheriff said.

"Thank you, George," Judge Warner said, "but this morning I want to do most of my talking to your other prisoner here. Jerry McConnell has engaged me to conduct his defense—with his permission."

"Why, sure," Tom agreed.

"It won't be necessary," the sheriff said acidly. "My deputies refuse to sign a complaint. The prisoner will be released immediately."

"I didn't think you would care to have Jerry take the stand and relate how she was browbeaten and manhandled by your drunken, inefficient deputies," Warner said.

"My deputies are all right," Marsh snapped. "And I'll stand responsible for anything they do. If you're wise, McConnell, you'll plead guilty to the murder charge, give up that fight against the lumber company, which is sure to win anyway, an' take your medicine. It might save your wife an' daughter a lot of grief—an' mebbe danger."

"I know my women folks," said McConnell steadily. "They'd rather see me hung an' stand anything themselves than have me a quitter. But I'm not hung yet, Marsh."

The sheriff unlocked the cell door and signalled for Tom to come forth. He conducted Tom to his office in the front.

"Now listen, fellow," he said sternly, "you're not talking to the county attorney now. He's only a fool kid and anybody can pull the wool over his eyes. But I know your type like a book, and I know how to handle you. Now if you want to play ball you'll do all right in this country. If you don't I'll make it too damned hot to hold you. Now, what did you get out of old McConnell last night? What did he say?"

"He said—and I absolutely agree with him—that you are a pure, unadulterated skunk," Tom answered easily.

The sheriff's face turned purple with rage. "Why, you—why, you," he jabbered. "I'll throw you back in that jail for the next six months."

"Oh, no," Tom contradicted placidly. "You have to have a charge. You can't bring that one up now that I've been discharged. And you know well enough that that old lawyer was right. You don't want Jerry McConnell getting up in open court and showing the bruises on her arms that your brutal deputies put there. This is good-bye between you and me, old top."

"And it had better be good-bye," the sheriff growled. "Get out of here."

Tom left the courthouse whistling.

His gaiety, however, was all put on. He was strongly convinced that Jim McConnell was getting a dirty deal, and equally certain that Verne was being used as a cat's-paw by the sheriff and his employers. It was simply up to him to get the youngster out of this scrape, as he had out of dozens of others when they were kids.

But he didn't deny to himself that his sympathy—he called it that—toward Jerry McConnell was largely responsible for his acceptance of the dangerous job of working for the McConnells.

4

NOW THAT HE HAD DEFINITELY DECIDED to go into the Pine Creek country Tom Powell realized that it would be as much as his life was worth if the people up there ever suspected that he was related to Verne, whom they seemed to hate even more bitterly than the sheriff. This, he judged, was because they believed Verne had betrayed them. Having been engaged to Jerry McConnell they must have expected him to take their part. The amazing thing to Tom, having seen Jerry, was that Verne had not.

He wanted to have another talk with Verne, but he felt that it would be too dangerous. But before leaving town there was a man that he wanted to see.

Jim McConnell had told him that the Pine Creek men and their friends hung out at the old Lone Star saloon when they were in town.

"We've got a few friends left around here," McConnell had said, "and the best one among 'em is old Fat Eardley, who owns the Lone Star. He weighs near three hundred pounds an' he ain't much to look at, but his heart is equal to the size of his body. If he knows you're a friend of mine you can always git anything he's got. And he keeps us posted on what's goin' on. Better see him, an' tell him I sent you."

"I'll do just that," Tom had promised. He remembered Fat Eardley from the occasion of his long-ago visit to the town, but he was certain that Eardley would not remember him.

He had hardly got past the saloon door before Fat Eardley waddled out from behind the bar and wrung his hand. He noticed that the saloon was full of men in ranch garb; certainly unusual at that time of day.

"By Gawd, fella, yo're among friends," Fat said earnestly. "What you done to them two tough, hoodlum deputies has made you a hero here."

"And is this here reception in my honor?" Tom asked with a broad grin. "Aw, shucks, it wasn't nothin' at all. Any one of you would have done the same."

"Not knowin' James an' Ferry the way we do," a man said. "Them two babies are plenty tough, an' they have the law to back 'em up."

"They knew they were in the wrong," Tom said.

"It was lucky for you, though, that it wasn't Ringo, that big shift boss for the lumber company, you bumped up against. He's issued a standing challenge, that beetle-browed walloper, to fight any two cowmen in the country at the same time," somebody said.

"And ain't nobody taken it up?" Tom asked.

"Old Kit Martel did, but nobody would take him serious. Hell, old Kit is over sixty years old, an' couldn't lick his own hand."

"Lee Crawford has said that he wasn't afraid to take Ringo on alone, but somehow he never gits around to it when Ringo is down here," somebody volunteered.

"Well, I guess I'd better stay out of this Ringo's way, too," Tom said, but he felt his hackles rising. It somehow nettled him to have anybody boast of superiority over his own tribe.

"We supposed you'd be havin' a hearin' this mornin', so the boys here kinda gathered in a body to attend the trial just to let that damned outfit know that you had friends, an' that we wasn't takin' nothin' from 'em layin' down," Fat explained the presence of the crowd.

"Well, there'll be no trial, but to show my appreciation I'll buy everybody a drink," Tom smiled.

After the glasses were empty he headed for the livery stable to get his horse, amid loud exclamations of good will.

He found Midnight in good condition; his new friends at the Lone Star having taken charge of the horse as soon as they heard of his arrest. Again he thought that it was nice to have made so many friends so quickly, but there would be just as many more to destroy him if they ever found out who he really was.

It required a ride of some four miles from Boulder to where the turbulent Pine Creek burst from its walls of solid basalt, throwing its spume angrily high into the air over the last rapids as though in final defiance of the ten-mile gorge which had kept it closely confined within narrow borders. It was really a small river, and fully capable of drowning man or beast almost anywhere in its forty-mile length.

Here, within half a mile of the end of the gorge, the Teton Lumber Company planned to build a big mill. Already a huge mill race had been constructed, and rows of long frame shacks that were to be the living quarters for the men were being built. A small, temporary saw was in place, for as yet few logs had come down the creek—only enough to supply lumber for their own buildings.

Tom could see many men working, and the ring of hammer upon nail rang out sharply in the clear, thin air. Occasionally he could hear the shout of a carpenter calling upon an assistant for supplies.

"They certainly don't act like they figgered to be stopped," Tom mused as he rode along. He had never had much experience with lumbermen, but he did know that they were a tough breed, and not easily daunted. Somehow, he began to feel sorry for the McConnells again. They were waging a game fight, but one certain of failure. He was also filled with a sense of personal dread. More farsighted than most of his profession he realized that the day of the cowman would soon be over. And with them would pass the cowboy. Always it was the farmers, nibbling, nibbling away at the free range; with now and then somebody like this Teton Lumber Company to deliver a treacherous blow to this industry already beginning to stagger back on its heels.

A narrow, but well-graded road ran along the bank of the creek at the foot of the canyon wall. In many places a right of way had been blasted out of the solid rock where the gorge crossed hard against the creek. In the course of the ten miles the road crossed back and forth across the stream over stout but ugly-looking bridges. He was to learn later than Jim McConnell was the man responsible for the road being as good as it was. There were turn-out places at intervals, but in general the road was so narrow that there were signs placed at each end of the gorge.

ALL TEAMS TRAVELLING THIS GORGE MUST HAVE BELLS

As Tom rode along his eyes were constantly upon the splashing,

careening white water. It was fascinating. In his mind's eye he could see that channel choked with floating logs.

"Lord, how they'll buck," he once remarked aloud.

He was perhaps a mile into the gorge when a horseman suddenly emerged from behind a clump of birch brush which had found room to grow in a small elbow of the creek. It was his brother.

"Why, hello, Verne," Tom exclaimed, much pleased. "That was dang good of you to ride way out here so's we could have a talk."

"I had to see you before you went up to McConnell's, and I figured you'd be along after I ordered your release," Verne said. He didn't smile, and he didn't act as if he expected an enjoyable visit.

"Yes?" Tom prompted.

"I don't think it best for anyone to know who you are, but there's danger that somebody who has known you may come along. I've met several people from the Bear Lake country here. I can tell you how to avoid them. but others may come in. But we should have some means of communication. If those people up there start anything, like a jail delivery for instance, you must be able to get me word in time to stop it."

"Verne, what makes you so dead sure McConnell is guilty?"

"Do I have to try him for your special benefit?" the younger man demanded irritably. "Creed was killed on McConnell's property after Jim had ordered all company men to stay off. McConnell was seen in the vicinity. It was right after a rain and the murderer's horse left plain tracks. Those tracks were made by McConnell's Selim horse—and he never permits anybody else to ride the animal."

"And still I wouldn't say it was an open and shut case," Tom argued.

"You haven't heard anything yet," Verne retorted. "Jim McConnell told his daughter that Creed had been killed *before the body had been discovered*. She told me that herself. Moreover, an expert on ballistics has proved that Creed was killed by a bullet fired from McConnell's gun. Creed never carried a weapon, so it was cold-blooded murder."

Tom was silenced. He had believed McConnell's protestations of innocence, but in the face of such insurmountable evidence he could no longer doubt.

"I still think if McConnell did kill him that he thought he was justified," he said weakly.

"The law doesn't think so, and I am sworn to uphold the law."

"Well, if there's a way for us to communicate, let's have it," Tom said. "I've gotta be damned careful myself now, for it'll be Kitty-bar-the-door for me if they ever find out who I am."

"That's right. If you insist on staying here your safety must be provided for," Verne said. Tom believed that in spite of his grum-

bling Verne was grateful for his presence. It dawned upon him that Verne was really worried for fear of what the cowmen might do to him, but he was too proud to make a single concession. After all there was something to be proud of about the boy.

"Got any plans?" Tom asked.

"There's a nester up there named Claude Curry who's had trouble with the cattlemen. I've given him some protection and so has the sheriff. He's our man. Get in touch with him if you have anything to let us know. And here's something else."

From his pocket he produced a folded sheet of paper and handed it over. Tom glanced at his brother questioningly; then unfolded the paper and read:

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN: *The bearer of this note is a friend of mine, and can be trusted implicitly.*
Vernon Powell.

In one corner was the county seal.

"I put that on so there could be no question of forgery," Verne explained. "If you get in a tight place that may come in handy."

"And it'll prove damned embarrassing if the cowmen ever happen to discover it," Tom remarked savagely.

"You should have ingenuity enough to conceal it safely."

"Yeh, I reckon I have," Tom remarked. He considered the matter thoughtfully, then thrust it under the sweat-band of his hat. He knew that it would never work itself out.

"Well," he said, "I reckon I'll be riding on. Anything you want me to say to Jerry?"

"What is there to say?" Verne demanded. "She'd only misunderstand my attitude."

"You could hardly expect her to whoop it up for the man who is trying to hang her father, could you; whether he was guilty or not?"

"You fail to see my position any better than she does," Verne complained. "It's *impersonal* with me. I must present all the evidence there is against McConnell. If he had come clear I'd have been more pleased than anybody."

"Yes," Tom said regretfully, "I guess I can't understand your attitude either. But I certainly can understand Jerry McConnell's."

A startled look overspread Verne's face. "If you've got any ideas about Jerry," he said harshly, "forget 'em. I'm told that she is already engaged to a fellow named Lee Crawford. And Crawford is the ringleader of those lawbreakers up there now that McConnell is in jail. Crawford is the man who has made most of the threats about murdering me and the sheriff if McConnell is hung. You'll likely meet him up there."

Tom had nothing to say. They shook hands briefly and parted.

ONCE THROUGH THE GORGE Tom Powell found the country opening up into as fine a range country as his experienced eyes had ever beheld. It was like a huge canvas with beauty flooding down from the distant sky line in a riot of color and velvet softness. It was, in reality, a vast watershed converging from three directions into the Narrow Pine Creek Basin. The slopes of the lower hills were broken with timber, aspen below pine; while in the higher reaches there seemed to be a solid expanse of fine commercial timber.

One good look at that timber let Tom know why Jim McConnell could not bear to have it denuded. A prettier country the puncher had never seen. But once turn a big lumber company loose in there, and in two years its beauty would be gone. Five years more and it would be a worthless wilderness.

There was something in what McConnell had said about the watershed. Without the standing timber there would be a shortage of irrigation water. Less water, less hay; less hay, less cattle. Once a country or a business started to run down hill it was the finish. The man could see that country through Jim McConnell's eyes. The man had loved it. He couldn't bear to see it ruined for the sake of profits which a foreign corporation would take out. And so he had decided to fight, but Tom sensed that it would be as futile as it was glorious.

"More power to you, Jim McConnell," he murmured softly.

Long, pointed ridges ran down toward the center of the valley, leaving the lush, green meadows ragged and uneven along the edges. Between these ridges, often extending for several miles up small tributary creeks were located the cattle ranches. Some of them had been improved for many years.

All of the irrigable land had been taken up and fenced years before, with the exceptions of sometimes the extreme upper end of the arm-like meadows, or perhaps some isolated mountain park. But it was these strategic sections which the intruding nesters had filed upon before the old timers fully realized what was happening.

The road, for the most part, hovered close to the main creek, and it was fenced in on both sides; but here and there a side-lane pointed the way to some ranchhouse, invariably set in a cove close against the hills.

Tom continued on, past lane after lane, for he understood that the McConnell ranch was almost the farthest one up. McConnell had been among the earliest comers and he had located where nobody above him could steal his irrigation water.

The puncher had been thinking of Jerry McConnell, but he hadn't expected to see her again before he reached the ranch. Yet he rode around a sharp-breaking ridge-point and saw her not fifty feet away.

An exact second later he saw that she was again mixed up in some sort of trouble. He spurred forward.

There were two four-horse wagons loaded with new, unfinished lumber in the road headed down the valley, while right in front of them was a two-seated mountain hack drawn by a single team. The team was nose to nose with the leaders of the front lumber wagon. There were two men in each seat of the hack, but a fifth man was on the ground, bareheaded, and with his sleeves rolled up. At first glance Tom Powell believed that he had never seen so powerful a man in his life. Certainly he had never seen such monstrous forearms. The man looked almost squat because of his tremendous depth and breadth of torso, but actually he stood nearly six feet in height. His hatless head was covered with coarse black hair, and his freshly shaven face showed blue-black. No shave could even get close enough to conceal the color of his heavy black beard. His face was dished, and he had a mere blob of a nose. His mouth hung open in a viciously cruel smile, disclosing teeth as powerful as a gorilla's.

It was this man the girl was facing. She was still on her horse, and she was menacing the fellow with an upraised quirt. Behind her the two frightened teamsters crouched against the barbed-wire fence that enclosed that side of the lane. Out of the corner of his eye Tom saw that one of the men in the hack carried a rifle nonchalantly across his knee.

"You make another step toward those men, and I'll cut you across the face with this quirt," the girl was saying defiantly. "They're not bothering you."

"You do, an' I'll take it away from you an' wear it out on your back, woman or no woman," the giant growled.

"I warn you," Jerry cried shrilly. "You've no right to bully these men."

"Then let 'em git off this road an' let us pass," the fellow said.

The absurdity of such a demand was apparent. The road there was upon a high fill. For the lumber wagons to attempt to turn out meant that they would upset. On the other hand the men in the hack could easily hold their light rig right side up while they got around.

"No!" Jerry defied.

The giant started forward, and the girl spun her horse and swung the quirt. As the leather thong swished downward the big man dodged and threw up one arm to protect his face. He got a stinging blow across his massive forearm. He cursed with pain and made a wild grab at the quirt, but missed.

In the excitement neither of them had seen Tom Powell.

"Hey! What's goin' on here?" he demanded.

The giant swung about, his little black eyes pin-points of anger. He was evidently disposed to resent any intrusion.

"Who the hell are you?" he thundered.

"I asked my question first," Tom said curtly. "What's the trouble, Miss McConnell?"

"This bully was going to beat up these two harmless teamsters from Lon Bedford's mill because they wouldn't wreck their outfits to give him the right of way," the girl answered hotly.

"An' I'm gonna do it, too," the giant rumbled. "I'm Roarin' Hack Ringo, an' when I beller the earth shakes. Nobody stops me, an' I don't turn out of a road for nobody."

Tom saw that the man was half drunk, but that didn't make him any less dangerous. This, then, was the man who had issued a standing challenge for any two cowmen to fight him. Well, it was plain to see why nobody injured themselves with haste to accept the challenge. This slim girl was the only person who had dared defy the bully.

"Maybe I can arbitrate the matter," Tom said soothingly.

"Arbitrate hell! Keep out o' this, cowhand, or I'll pin back yore ears an' swaller you. Come on out from behind that gal, you imitation lumberjacks, an' take yore lickin'," Ringo bellowed.

"I was just goin' to suggest that if you must lick somebody you might try to lick me," Tom said evenly.

"What?" the giant roared unbelievably.

"Don't get off your horse," Jerry said pleadingly. "You don't know this man. He doesn't just whip his victims, he puts them in the hospital for months."

"Ringo, you interest me strangely," Tom said with a slow smile. "It's not polite to fight in front of a lady, an' no doubt these teamsters are in a hurry. Some day I'll accept that challenge of yore's I've been hearin' about. But right now—git back in that hack an' git off the road!"

Before they realized what was happening his gun was out and pointing straight at the bullying giant. Midnight was steady as a statue, but tensed for a quick response to his rider's slightest wish.

"Why, you—you—" Ringo mouthed in baffled fury.

The man with the rifle stealthily raised his weapon. "Look out!" yelled one of the teamsters, but before he got the words half out of his mouth Midnight had spun clear around in response to his rider's slight pressure on the reins. The rifle roared but the target had moved. The bullet zipped through the air less than six inches from the puncher's body and whined harmlessly away across a rancher's meadow.

Had the man been armed with a six-shooter instead of a rifle Tom would have fired even as he whirled his horse. But against a level rifle he could afford to take a chance. And the bellow of the rifle had not died away before Tom's six-shooter spoke.

The lumberjack's rifle fell from his hands, struck the front wheel

of the hack and clattered to the ground. The man held out a bleeding, broken arm. His comrades, apparently unarmed, sat as though paralyzed.

Not so Roarin' Hack Ringo. He forgot to roar, but he made a tremendous leap for the man on horseback; his speed utterly belying his great bulk. One hand dropped upon the leg of Tom's chaps, while he reached upward for a better hold with the other. But before that hand could close Tom Powell had struck downward with the quickness of a cat. The barrel of his six-gun struck Ringo across the temple and knocked him flat. Blood gushed from a deep cut at the edge of the hair.

Tom backed his horse to where he could command a view of all the lumberjacks.

"Two of you git out an' carry this carrion around behind these lumber wagons," he ordered. "Then you turn yore rig out around, an' when you git back on the road load up an' keep goin'."

"Yes, we will," one of them said placatingly as he leaped to the ground.

They started to help Ringo to his feet, but when they got him to his knees he roared at them, and got the remainder of the way himself. His eyes were still glassy and he tottered on his feet. Blood was running down to his neck, but he shook his fist at the cowhand.

"I'll git my hands on you, some day," he predicted. "An' when I do—" His companions guided him around the lumber wagons.

After some difficulty they got the hack around the wagons, and they all climbed aboard.

"Here, yo're forgettin' something," Tom called, and swinging down he ejected all the cartridges from the magazine of the rifle, and handed the gun to the man who came after it.

"Well, that was an experience," Jerry heaved a relieved sigh. "Tom Wood, you seem to have the habit of turning up when I need you."

Tom wanted to say that he'd be delighted always to be around in case of need, but instead he said, "I see you know my name."

"Oh, yes. I learned that from Fat Eardley yesterday. Fat is quite taken with you. But I'm afraid you've made a dangerous enemy in that man Ringo—let alone the man you shot."

"Mister," spoke up one of the teamsters, "we are shore obliged to you fer keepin' us outa the hospital. I reckon we ain't no bigger cowards than other men, but we never had no chance. That feller with the rifle made us git down, an' then Ringo was goin' to do us up when Miss McConnell arrived. If we had o' got the best o' Ringo—an' I ain't even intimatin' we could—the rest would o' ganged up on us."

"Those fellows must have been drunk," Tom said.

"Maybe they was, but this is no new thing. Bedford ain't started

a load of lumber to the lower valley for a month that somethin' ain't happened to it. Lon says if it keeps up much longer he'll have to shut clear down," the man said.

"It's just a part of the whole rotten campaign," Jerry said wearily.

"But why should they pick on another sawmill man?" Tom asked.

"Lon Bedford is only in their way. He can cut and saw timber up here, haul it clear to Boulder on wagons and make a small profit. But the company can't do that and there isn't timber enough up here to justify a railroad. They'll have to float their timber down. Their plans include getting possession of Bedford's holdings."

"Nice people, these lumbermen," Tom commented.

"Were you by any chance going my way?" Jerry asked with a smile.

"If you're going home I am," he answered boldly. "Your father, with whom I spent a very pleasant night in jail, told me to see your uncle about a job."

"Oh, yes." The girl was less enthusiastic than he liked. "How is Father? Is that hand of his, where the sheriff hit him, in bad shape?"

"It was pretty badly swollen, but he said to tell you it would soon be all right."

"I don't suppose they'll let me see him again before the trial," the girl said moodily. Then, suddenly, her dark eyes flashed fire. "That trial must never come off. He wouldn't have a chance. And once they find him guilty they'll smuggle him out to the State penitentiary for the—the execution. It isn't right! He didn't kill that man! I've been holding the boys off because he asked me to, but now I'm through. No matter what it costs I'm going to tell them to go ahead and raid that damned jail."

"When?" Tom asked softly.

"Next Sunday night," Jerry said, and then caught her lip. She suddenly realized that she had revealed secret plans to a man of whom she knew nothing save that he had twice interfered in her behalf against bullies, and had spent one night in jail with her father.

6

THE MCCONNELL RANCH WAS SOME seven or eight miles above the scene of the encounter with Ringo. It lay spread across both sides of Pine Creek like a gigantic horseshoe. It was practically the head of the creek, for it here forked three ways, and not one of the streams would carry water enough to float a log.

The ranch buildings stood back against the hill on the west side in the mouth of a canyon that at this time of the year was resplendent with a carpet of wild flowers ranging from deepest scarlet to the most delicate shades of pink and white. On the ridge above the

buildings a forest of tall straight yellow pines grew within a hundred yards of the house.

"Mighty good-looking ranch," Tom vouchsafed.

"Are you determined that you want a job here?" the girl asked.

"If I can get one."

"After what happened today you'll be a marked man by the lumber people. If that man Ringo ever catches you in a place where he can he'll make you fight. And the things he does to men are terrible."

"He may not catch me—if I see him first."

"If you're insistent I'll speak to Jack about you," Jerry promised.

"We do need some good men."

Something in her tone made him look at her quickly. She was looking straight ahead, but her pretty lips formed a straight, hard line.

Tom Powell began to understand better when he met Jack McConnell. He was at least fifteen years younger than Jim, and a great deal smaller. The calm dignity and power which distinguished the older brother was completely lacking in the younger. Jack's face was smooth-shaven, except for a small sandy moustache. His light blue eyes were small and shifty, and his face showed indubitable signs of dissipation. A weak man, physically and morally, Tom characterized him at once.

"Yes, I need a man," he said, "and from what Jerry tells me I guess you'll do. Make yourself to home in the bunkhouse. You'll find the other boys friendly."

That was true. There were eight men living in the long bunkhouse; some of them riders, some ranchhands. Just plain, ordinary fellows—with one exception. The exception was an old fellow with withered-looking bowlegs, grizzled whiskers and a hooked nose. He was a sort of savage-looking old chap until one saw his shrewd, kindly gray eyes.

"I'm old Kit Martel," he introduced himself. "Ain't much good any more except to fiddle an' fix fence, but if yo're gonna be around you'll have to put up with me."

"I think that'll be easy," Tom laughed.

"These are all double bunks, but every last one of 'em is occupied by a single feller. You'll have to double up with somebody, I reckon. If you wanta chuck your warbag under my bunk go ahead," Kit offered.

"Thanks," Tom said gratefully. He knew how men hated to have a stranger bunk with them, and he was quite likely to be resented. But there had been cordial good fellowship in Martel's invitation.

The men ate in a long dining room in the ranchhouse, served by a woman cook the men called "Crackers." She was long and angular, and possessed of a sour humor. Almost at once the men began to chaff her about Kit Martel.

"Has Kit give you the ring yit, Crackers?" a ranchhand inquired.

"Why, he ain't got it finished yit," another reproved the speaker. "He's been whittlin' it out of a sheep's shank, but he broke his knife-blade last week."

"Besides," said a youth called Luke, "he sent away for the diamond an' it ain't had time to git here yet. I he'ped him make out the order. We didn't know whether to send the dime loose or buy stamps."

"I wish they'd hurry an' git it over with," said a black, disagreeable-looking fellow called "Montan." "I ain't slept fer a month 'count o' Kit mumblin' in his sleep, 'Crackers, how I love you. Crackers, how I love you.'"

"Almost like havin' crackers in bed," another guffawed.

"I shore do feel sorry fer that stranger who'll have to lay there an' listen to Kit romancin'," Montan' said.

"I'll bet he'd rather listen to Kit all night than to you fer a quarter of an hour," Crackers retorted, and there was a general laugh.

"About that ring, Crackers," old Kit spoke up mildly, "don't you worry none about the one I'm carvin' out of a sheep bone. I'm makin' that to put around Montan's brow if his head ever shrinks to the size of his brain. The ring I buy you will have a diamond in it bigger'n a pea."

"You old loafer, you couldn't buy a piece of diamond big enough to be seen with a microscope," Crackers said grimly. "An' if you bought me one as big as a pun'kin I'd throw it right back in yore face."

The good-natured chaffing ceased abruptly as a door opened and the McConnell family came into the room. There was Jerry, and her mother, a small woman with a sweet face and prematurely gray hair, and Jack. Tom got to his feet, but the others calmly remained seated.

"Mother, this is a new man, Tom Wood," Jerry introduced.

"How do you do, Tom," Mrs. McConnell smiled. "I hope you'll like it here." From that moment Tom Powell was her devoted slave.

The men ate at a long table, and there was a smaller one joined on to the head of it. Here the family ate the same kind of food and from the same kind of dishes. Tom found himself at the foot of the long table, a long way removed. He could only look at Jerry McConnell, for it required almost a shout to make himself heard above the gustatory efforts of the hired men.

"You just came from town, stranger. What's the sentiment there about the coming trial?" Jack McConnell asked when the men leaned back to wait for their dessert of apple pie and whipped cream.

"Most of the ones I talked with thought there would be an acquittal," Tom lied gallantly. He saw Mrs. McConnell's face light up eagerly, but there was no response from Jerry, save a swift, grateful

glance. She had come from town lately herself, and she knew better.

"I'd like to know how much money Jess Westergaard is payin' Sheriff Marsh an' Verne Powell for puttin' Jim out of the way," Jack asked morosely.

"Who's Westergaard?" Tom asked his neighbor.

"Superintendent of the Teton Lumber Company; the big mogul," was the reply.

Jerry McConnell was speaking. "I don't think there's any doubt that Marsh is getting a rake-off from the lumber company. He's splurging in every direction. But I don't think for one minute that Verne Powell would accept one dollar as a bribe."

"Hell, Jerry, I thought you hated that feller's guts!" Kit exploded.

The girl flushed. "I do despise him. He's a bigoted fool. But I'm fair enough to say that he's honest."

Did the girl still love Verne, even unbeknown to herself? Tom wondered. And he was also thinking: If I had a girl like that nothing in God's world could make me give her up.

After supper Jack McConnell saddled up and rode away alone.

In the morning Tom was left pretty much alone until after breakfast, at which Mrs. McConnell did not appear. Finally Jack McConnell came over to him. "You ride with Kit today," he said. "I've given him the orders."

"Glad it's you I'm ridin' with," Tom offered as they left the ranch.

"Yeh. Well, we may git a shot took at us before the day is over."

"That so? How come?"

"A rancher told Jerry yesterday that a bunch of J Bar M yearlin's was crowdin' his fence down on Hand Creek. Boss wants us to pick 'em up an' haze 'em back where they belong. It looks like some of them nesters might have chased 'em down there with the idee o' gittin' some free beef. Anyway, Jack wants us to stop an' tell some of 'em that if we find any more of our stuff drove off that we'll come down an' slit their ears," Kit said.

"When I was a range boss," Tom said softly, "I usually delivered them kind of messages myself."

Kit looked at him quickly. "So you've been a range boss, huh? Well, I didn't figger you as no ordinary chuck-line rider. An' yo're thinkin' that mebbe Jack McConnell don't measure up. Sometimes I think the same thing myself. It ain't that he's a coward. At least he's never been proved one. But he ain't sure of himself. He never would have been made foreman if he hadn't been the owner's brother. He's been pretty wild, an' I reckon he allus was a waster. Anyway, he was down an' out when he landed here two years ago. Jim figured, I guess, that responsibility would make a man of him, but he never makes a move that he don't go to Lee Crawford first an' ask his advice."

"Seems like I've been hearin' this Crawford's name a lot of times lately," Tom hazarded. "What kind of a man is he?"

"Kind of a handsome cuss, the kind that domineers everybody. Ain't been up here more'n three years himself, but he's sorta community leader since Jim went to jail. An' I reckon Jerry is fallin' fer him, too. I don't quite like that," Kit said.

They covered almost twenty miles before they finally picked up the bunch of yearlings they were after. There were about thirty in the bunch, and they were not easy to drive.

"The devils have been inside Levi Hand's hay meadow, an' they'd starve to death on the chance of breakin' through his fence again for a little of that tame grass," Kit said. "I think them damned nesters know that. It's just like havin' 'em in a pasture."

Tom had learned many things about the country that morning from the old puncher, and one of them was that the cowmen had determined to raid the Boulder courthouse on Sunday night and take Jim McConnell out. That confirmed what Jerry had told him.

"But where will he go? If he comes home he'll only be rearrested," Tom pointed out.

"Don't you think it. There's plenty of hidin' places in these mountains, an' at least twenty men who'll help to git grub to him."

"What day is this?"

"Saturday."

Tomorrow would be the day set for the jail raid! Tom recalled what Verne had asked him to do. It was up to him someway to get word to Verne. But if he did, and these men were met with a large armed force, there might be bloodshed. But there would be bloodshed anyway. Such a large number couldn't get inside the town without being seen. If they found opposition obviously large enough to prevent them making the rescue they would probably return home without firing a shot.

"Well, right up yonder is the cabin of that nester Jack told me to cuss out," Kit was saying. "His name is Curry, an' he's a plumb cur at heart. He'll take what we tell him meek as a lamb, an' then probably take a shot at us from the brush as we're goin' away."

Curry! That was the man Verne had told him to entrust with messages. It was his duty to Verne, and perhaps to the law, to send word about the proposed raid. And yet, somehow, he knew, when it came right down to cases, that he couldn't betray these people who were fighting for what seemed a lost cause. If they could get Jim McConnell out of jail well and good.

At the same time he realized that it might be just as well for him to seize this opportunity to gain the confidence of Curry in case some future need for the fellow's services might come up. He would have to accomplish it right under old Kit's nose. And it was a mighty shrewd nose at that.

"IF THE FELLER IS DANGEROUS," Tom said judiciously, "we'd better have our plans made beforehand to cover each other."

"Oh, I ain't a-scared o' Curry," Kit scoffed. "If he ever took a shot at me I'd take his gun away from him an' kick his damned pants all over the range."

"Just the same I think we'd better proceed as though we thought he was dangerous—just for the practice of it if nothin' else," Tom argued.

Kit eyed him curiously. He had heard about the affair in the lane with Ringo and his men, else he would surely have come to the conclusion that Wood was afraid.

"All right," he agreed. "Just as you say."

They pushed the yearlings over a ridge beyond Curry's cabin; then turned and loped back. Curry, a tall, stooping fellow with a droopy moustache and a hookworm appearance, was tinkering with an old mowing machine. A slatternly looking woman, and half a dozen dirty kids with unwiped noses, were out in the yard as a sort of reception committee.

Curry got up from his knees, and eyed them with visible dislike. "What you fellers want?" he demanded ungraciously.

"Look here, Curry, you thievin' son-of-a-hookworm, you're eatin' too much J Bar M beef these days," Kit began irascibly. "We don't mind you stealin' a calf now an' then if you go to some trouble to do it. But when you drive a whole bunch off the range just because yo're too damned lazy to git 'em one at a time yo're goin' too far."

"What the hell you talkin' about?" Curry flared. "I never stole a beef in my life."

"Aw, hell, you've stole yore livin' ever since you was hatched," Kit retorted. "An' I'm here to tell you it's gotta be stopped. An' if we ever ketch another J Bar M critter this side of Stony ridge we'll come over here an' squirt tobaccer juice right square in yore eye. An' after that we'll hang you up by the heels."

"What the hell you want me to do—ride the whole damned ridge myself to see that yore cattle stay where you want 'em? Why don't McConnell hire his own riders? I ain't got time to do it for him. I got my own livin' to make."

"You've had yore warnin', Curry, an' it's the last one," Kit said. "An' we ain't takin' no chances on you shootin' us in the back neither. Got him covered, Tom?"

"I sure have," Tom said grimly. His revolver had suddenly appeared in his hand, and though he didn't vary his negligent pose the gun muzzle pointed straight at Curry's body.

"Keep him that way till I git out a ways, then I'll draw a bead on him with my rifle while you git away," Kit said.

"You got no right to draw a gun on me," Curry said weakly. "I'll have the law on ye fer this." His woman began to curse them hysterically, and the children began to howl. Kit looked toward Tom beseechingly, but the puncher waved him away.

"It's a hell of a country where damned outlaws like you kin ride up an' hold a gun on a man right in his own dooryard," Curry whined angrily.

Tom leaned forward. "Listen, Curry," he said in a low, tense voice, "I'm a detective, workin' for the county attorney, and—"

"Wha-at?" the man blurted.

"Pay attention," Tom snapped. "We've only got a minute. Verne Powell told me to send any messages I might have for him by you. So any time you see me you be on the lookout to grab a paper or take a whispered message without anybody seein' you. Do you get it?"

"How do I know you're what you say you are?" the man asked.

Hastily, while Kit's back was turned, Tom showed the man the paper Verne had given him.

"My Gawd!"

"An' don't let on to *anybody*, mind you, that I ever told you anything," Tom warned.

"All right, Tom, I got him covered," Kit yelled. "If he even wiggles I'll perforate him."

"Comin'," Tom called. He holstered his gun, spun his horse on its heels and loped away. Curry's wife and children had stopped their noise with amazing suddenness. He hoped that Kit wouldn't notice.

"Anyway, I reckon we impressed him some," Kit grinned.

By the time they had pushed the yearlings back on their proper range it was almost sundown, and time for them to high-tail for home. Once started down the country their mounts took a fast, racking trot that threw the miles behind them like an unwinding ribbon. Some three miles from the ranch they came to a fence in the timber.

"McConnell's land," Kit explained as he opened the gate. "Timber claim. Right below here is where Creed was killed. The lumber company was tryin' to prove that Jim had more land fenced in than belonged to him."

"Do we go past the place where—where the murder was committed?"

"Yeh, we can take that trail, if you're curious. It ain't much farther, an' we can git there before dark," Kit said.

"You say McConnell couldn't prove an alibi?" Tom queried.

"No; fer the reason that he took a long ride alone that evenin',

an' he swore that he didn't meet anybody. I'd think myself that Jim killed the feller, only I know that he wouldn't have lied about it if he had, an' he never would have shot an unarmed man. But it looks bad."

They stopped at the scene of the tragedy. "The body was lyin' right there," Kit pointed out. "There had been a drizzlin' rain an' a kind of fog all day. This feller was camped right down there. He had a government permit, so he wasn't no trespasser. The tracks of Jim's Selim horse could be tracked plain in the mud, though they meandered to beat hell after they left here."

"No chance of any sign bein' left around now," Tom mused. "Ain't there any other suspects a-tall?"

"Everybody else is accounted for on our outfit. All us boys were up the creek fixin' a head-gate that had washed out in the spring freshets, an' Jack was over to Crawford's. There's only one thing that sometimes makes me a heap uncertain."

"What's that?" Tom asked quickly.

"It's that dang' old maid, Crackers. Ev'ry now an' then that ole gal lets out a broad hint that she could clear up the hull thing if she was justa mind to. If I thought she could, danged if I wouldn't marry the ole gal jest to git the truth out of her. But I reckon she's just tryin' to acquire some vicarious importance, whatever that is. I heerd Verne Powell talkin' about it one day."

"You don't think she'd let McConnell go to the gallows if she could clear him, do you?"

"Her? I should say not. She's been with the McConnells ever since they got her out of an orphan asylum. She worships Jim McConnell. But sometimes them hints she throws out kinda makes ideas start crawlin' around in the back of my head. The rest o' the outfit laughs at her, but I dunno." Kit shook his head doubtfully.

"Tell me," Tom said softly, "does Jerry always carry a gun?"

"I reckon she does. Not the kind of gun that Creed was killed with, though. I see you've thought of the same thing, but it's hard to believe. You can't tell what a man would do, an' Jerry would kill any man who laid hands on her. An' her dad would shoulder the blame to save her. But Jerry wouldn't stand fer that if she did kill the feller. Moreover, it's plain that whoever done the killin' done it from ambush. Jerry wouldn't do that."

Somehow, Tom felt relieved. "Then there's no doubt that the man who killed Creed did it with McConnell's gun, an' was ridin' McConnell's horse?"

"I'm afraid there ain't."

Tom felt a wave of pessimism stealing over him. He wanted to help Verne, but he liked the McConnells, and despised the rest of their enemies. He was in a disagreeable and perilous position as a spy. He had entertained a vague hope that-ir some

miraculous manner he might prove McConnell innocent by discovering who was really guilty. But that hope promised to be a futile one. Everything pointed to the rancher's guilt. Verne was really acting heroically in refusing to be intimidated.

Tomorrow night the denizens of Pine Creek were going *en masse* to break the law and set the prisoner free. He would be going with them. One hint that he was Verne's brother would mean instant death.

It was a silent, ominous Sabbath that was spent the next day on the McConnell ranch. Some of the riders disappeared, and strange riders drifted in; but Tom and Kit remained around the bunkhouse. Tom saw little of Jerry that day, but her face was white and drawn, and she maintained a nervous, preoccupied manner.

Just before noon Jack McConnell returned with a handsome, bronzed, six-footer of a cowman of about Tom's own age. Nobody bothered to give Tom an introduction, but he knew that this was the much discussed Lee Crawford. A dominant character, surely, but Tom held his judgment in abeyance. The two went into the house, and they were still there when the rest went in to dinner.

Soon after the meal the two men appeared in the bunkhouse.

"Boys, we're goin' after Jim McConnell tonight—forty men strong," Crawford said. "We've got to start right away, because we've got to go over the Delano Canyon trail. It won't be safe to go down Pine Creek, because they may have spies out there.

"We'll go in pairs from here so as not to alarm Mrs. McConnell, an' we won't try to meet till we reach Bert Friel's place a mile out of Boulder. Everybody try to be there by midnight, an' I'll give you the rest of your instructions there."

"Jerry know about this?" Kit asked.

"She does. It's got her approval."

Tom saw the girl talking with Crawford just before they started. For some reason a spasm of jealousy shot through him. He supposed it was because of Verne. Fate had played his brother a scurvy trick in arraying him against this fine girl, and driving her into the protective arms of a man like Lee Crawford.

"We'll go together," Kit said to Tom. "It takes a man with eyes like a hoot owl to foller that Delano trail in the dark."

"Have you kissed Crackers good-by, Kit?" Montan' shouted.

"Sure he has," Luke sang out. "He won't be able to git the pucker out of his mouth for a week."

Tom and Kit were just about to follow Luke and Montan' when Jerry signalled them.

"Stay around until the others have gone," she said. "I'm going with you."

"But you shouldn't orta do that," Kit protested. "There may be shootin' an' you might git hurt."

"That's what Jack and Lee said, an' they wouldn't let me go with them; but I don't think you boys have got the authority to stop me," Jerry smiled. Her face instantly became grave. "I've simply got to be there. And I do hope there'll be no violence."

As they rode along, up through the timber, and higher and higher along a trail that must have been laid out for mountain goats, old Kit led the way, and the other two dropped back to where they could just keep him in sight. The girl talked freely, and it was evident that she liked this new puncher. There was no pretense about her; nothing but frank honesty.

But what, Tom thought guiltily, would she think if she knew who he really was?

He tried several times to bring the discussion cautiously around to Verne, but usually without result. Whenever the county attorney was mentioned her face hardened and her voice froze.

"We can't expect either justice or fair play from the county officers," she said. "They know where the majority of the votes come from."

"I heard you say the county attorney was honest," he hazarded.

"Too damned much so," she replied shortly. "A man should have a little warm blood in his veins as well as a cast-iron sense of duty."

"Amen, say I," sighed Tom.

Darkness caught them near the head of Delano Canyon, which opened into the lower valley ten miles above Boulder. From now on they had to stay close to old Kit, their guide. They continued to talk as they made their way carefully down the wild, rocky canyon, but as though with spoken agreement they carefully avoided all mention of the business of the night, or the murder. But when they finally rode into the yard of the farmer, Bert Friel, Tom felt that he was intimately acquainted with the girl by his side.

Most of the men from Pine Creek were ahead of them, and they had been joined by a few close friends of McConnell's from around Boulder.

"Jerry, what're you doin' here?" Jack McConnell demanded as he caught sight of the girl. "I told you to stay home." He was plainly under a great nervous strain.

"I couldn't stay behind," the girl declared. "I'm no better than anybody else that I shouldn't take a chance."

"But you must stay here," Crawford put in. "I'd give my right leg if you hadn't come. Why the hell didn't you fellows stop her?" He turned angrily upon Tom and Kit.

"I'd like to have seen them try," Jerry said scornfully.

"Who is this fellow anyhow?" Crawford suddenly demanded, as

he stared at Tom. "What does anybody know about him?"

"I'll vouch for him," Jerry said quickly.

"He's the man I told you had the run-in with Ringo," Jack said.

"Oh," Crawford grunted.

"And after what I saw of him I don't blame you for dodgin' him," something prompted Tom to say. He had taken an instinctive dislike to Crawford, and he couldn't resist a chance to puncture the fellow's arrogance. He knew instantly that he had made an enemy.

"Who the hell said I was dodgin' Ringo or anybody else?" Crawford demanded hotly.

"I just heard it rumored," Tom said mildly.

"Well, hombre, you might find it healthier not to repeat rumors," Crawford flashed.

"I'm good at lookin' after my own health," Tom returned evenly.

"Here, are you boys here to get my father out of jail or to fight among yourselves?" Jerry interfered.

"All right," Crawford said in a disgruntled tone, "but if I'm goin' to run this thing everybody has got to take my orders. An' the first one is for you to stay right here. Kit Martel will stay with you."

"Aw—" Kit began.

"We'll compromise," Jerry said. "You said somebody would have to stay with the horses at the edge of town. We'll do that."

The party was not long in getting away from Friel's. All of them realized now that they were in enemy territory, and discovery would mean the frustration of their plans.

Tom found the blood pounding rapidly through his veins. He was excited. So, he knew, was everyone else; though whenever anyone spoke it was in a tone that was exaggeratedly cool. Once, even, a smile flitted over Tom's face as he reflected how furious Verne would be the next morning when he discovered that McConnell was gone.

"I reckon he'll fire me for not letting him know," he ruminated.

He wanted to keep close to Jerry, but Lee Crawford had now appropriated his place at her side, and Kit Martel was riding close on the other. The best Tom could do was flank old Kit. Crawford was obviously irked at their presence and addressed the girl in a voice too low for them to overhear, whenever he spoke at all.

"Did I hear you say you were riskin' yore life?" Martel spoke up once, leaning almost in front of Jerry to address Crawford.

"Well, I certainly am," the man answered irascibly.

"What do yuh think the rest of us are doin'—goin' to a picnic?" old Kit wanted to know.

"If I thought anybody would be killed I'd say turn back right now," Jerry said bravely. "Father is not asking anybody else to lay down their lives to save his."

"That isn't what I meant," Crawford disclaimed quickly. "I mean I'm the man who is goin' to be blamed. They'll send a posse after me likely, and I don't intend to be taken alive, that's all. But I don't want you to think of me, Jerry. Getting your father out of that jail is the only thing I'm interested in."

"Hogwash," old Kit remarked loudly to Tom.

Two other men were detailed to help Kit and Jerry with the horses. One of the animals the girl had in charge had been led all the way. It was her father's Selim horse.

"Now listen, fellers"; Crawford gave his last minute instructions. "I'll take half the men an' come up behind the jail. We'll crawl forward on our bellies when we reach the public square. Jack will take the rest an' go toward the front. After you wait ten minutes to give us time to git in close you make a rush toward the front. They'll see you fellers first, an' will naturally rush that way, an' the guards will think first of sendin' for the sheriff. While that happens we'll attack the rear, break in an' git McConnell out. Understood?"

There was a chorus of assents.

"All right, let's go."

Tom found himself in Jack McConnell's party. That ten minutes wait after the parties divided seemed an eternity.

"All right," Jack McConnell said, his voice quavering, "I guess we'd better go."

A commander should never guess at his orders, Tom thought. All semblance of discipline disappeared. First one and then another got up. Finally, in a ragged line, they began to run toward the courthouse.

And then the night was shattered by a blast of gunfire from the courthouse. In cold horror Tom saw men go down on either side of him. A moment later he heard a similar volley from the other side of the jail. It was a murderous ambush.

8

IT WAS MURDER! In common decency the minions of the law should at least have demanded that the mob halt before they fired. But they hadn't. Men were gasping and cursing; screaming with pain; wanting to know what to do; and Jack McConnell seemed paralyzed. Long red streaks of fire like miniature streaks of lightning were leaping out at them from the courthouse. A few members of the mob drew their guns and returned the fire.

"Drop, you fools," Tom hissed. "Fire high. We've got to keep 'em occupied till the other boys can get back."

"Fire high, hell," somebody grated. "Shoot to kill."

"If you do it'll mean murder. We're breakin' the law anyway and we'll hang," Tom warned.

There was plenty of shooting on the other side of the courthouse, mingled with loud yells of pain and anger. Some of the defenders of the jail were barricaded on the high stone steps of the courthouse. By the flash of a rifle Tom saw one of them leap up with hands high above his head. Another rifle flashed, and Tom saw the man fall forward and roll leisurely down the steps; his body getting ahead of his legs. At each complete turn the man's boot-heels clicked upon the stone steps with a weird and hollow sound. Tom stared at that slowly rolling body in cold fascination. If that man was dead it made every member of the mob technically guilty of murder.

"Their horses are behind that canal bank, boys," roared a voice off to the side. "Cut 'em off an' we'll nab the whole bunch."

Tom could see men running toward the horses, and he thought despairingly of Jerry McConnell and Kit.

"Come on, fellows," he shouted, "we've got to git back to the horses."

He leaped to his feet and ran; thinking only of Jerry. He could now see men running on the other side, and these he knew to be Crawford's men in full retreat.

Just before he got to the canal he almost collided with another running figure from another direction—a lumberjack. The man carried a rifle. He clubbed it and made a wild swing for Tom's head. But the puncher sprang in close before the blow could fall and felled his man with a short, savage blow with the barrel of his six-gun. A half minute later he had joined Jerry and Kit.

"Oh, my God, what happened?" Jerry called.

"They were layin' for us. You've gotta get outa here, Jerry. You take her, Kit. I'll watch the horses."

"No," the girl said.

"Get on that horse," he gritted so furiously, that the girl was in the saddle before she realized it. Old Kit was only a moment behind.

"He's right, Jerry." Kit said. "We can't do no good now. They mustn't know you're here."

Already some of the cowmen were scrambling onto their horses, but there were some back in the grass who were not able to mount a horse. Tom saw Kit and Jerry join the stampede, and then he had his hands full trying to keep some of the horses from breaking away before their riders arrived.

It was a moonless night, and this was fortunate for the defeated cowmen. There were men there trying to seize the horses, but because it was so dark that they couldn't tell friend from foe nobody dared do any shooting. Tom realized that he had done all he could. He had spotted his own mount, and he rushed to it just in time to seize somebody else by the collar and jerk him out of the saddle. He was soon splitting the wind back toward Bert Friel's ranch.

Nobody was stopping there. The Pine Creek men were heading back toward Delano Canyon as fast as they could ride, though there seemed to be no pursuit. Tom had hoped to catch up with Kit and Jerry, but apparently they had a good lead, and were traveling as fast as he was. He gave it up, and turned off on a side-road.

He stopped presently and watched the last of the rout go by. It had been, he saw now, an ill-advised and worse-planned affair. It probably would not have been successful even had they not been betrayed by someone within their own ranks, or by some spy in the pay of their enemies. Tom realized, however, that if his identity ever became known he would be the man accused of the treachery. It made an already precarious situation even more dangerous. It filled him with angry resentment that the officers had not avoided a conflict instead of trying to encompass a massacre. He suddenly made up his mind to go back and tell Verne what he thought about it.

It might be dangerous for anyone wearing the regalia of a cowhand to appear in Boulder so soon after the riot, but unless somebody took a quick shot at him he could show his passport from Verne. He wasn't anxious as yet to let anyone know who he was. If possible he wanted to go back to Pine Creek, but before he went he intended to speak his little piece.

He waited for nearly an hour before he ventured back to the outskirts of the town. Late, or rather early as it was, excited men still prowled the streets, talking about the frustrated jail raid.

Tom left his horse hidden out of sight and unostentatiously joined one of the groups on the street. He had wisely left his chaps and spurs on his saddle, so he looked not unlike a farmer.

"Purty lucky for them Pine Crickers that it was dark," a man was saying. "If it had been lighter half of 'em woulda been killed."

"They gathered up two of 'em that was hurt too bad to make it to their horses, but they say none of 'em is likely to die. An' there musta been a lot more carried off some lead."

"Unless there was a hell of a lot of 'em they didn't fare much worse than the lumberjacks. There's a lot of them askin' the docs to pick lead pills outa their systems."

"Lumberjacks? Was they the fellers the sheriff had guardin' the jail?"

"Big majority of 'em. Tough eggs, them."

"Yeh, an' I reckon that Teton Company is payin' Sheriff Marsh a-plenty for fightin' its battles."

"What you reckon'll happen next? Looks like they could just about arrest every man in Pine Creek. Think they will?"

"Arrest 'em or outlaw 'em. It's a cinch now that they're beat an' Jim McConnell will hang."

Tom turned away, sickened. Through some act of treachery disaster had fallen upon those, who, whether they were right or not,

were his own kind of people. He made his way unnoticed to the house where Verne boarded. There were no lights in the house, and he sat down on the porch to think. He was sure that Verne hadn't slept through all that disturbance. He was almost certainly somewhere down town. The best plan appeared to be to wait for him. He had sat there nearly an hour, and there was already a faint, rosy suggestion of approaching dawn in the east when he saw his brother coming up the steps. It might have been imagination, but he thought that Verne's steps lagged. Certainly that was something unusual for the competent, confident young attorney.

At sight of Tom, Verne gave a sudden start. His hand moved swiftly to his hip.

"Never mind the gun, Verne," Tom said, as he drew himself erect. "I doubt if you could hit anything with it if you did get it drawn. You fellas didn't seem to be able to do much killin' to-night."

"Oh, it's you, is it?" Verne muttered. "Were you in that mob?"

"I was right in the front ranks."

"That was a crazy thing to do. The whole thing was crazy," Verne cried.

"I was right close to Miss McConnell when the shootin' began," Tom stated quietly.

"What?" Verne would have hit the ceiling had there been one. "You mean to say that you fools allowed Jerry to come with you?"

"I thought you knew that gal," Tom said dryly.

"Yes, I suppose I do. Nobody could have stopped her. Was—was she hurt?"

"I don't think she was. Kit Martel got her away." He didn't think it necessary to inform Verne that the girl hadn't actually been under fire. Her position had been perilous enough.

"Well, your friends up there have got themselves into a nice pickle now," Verne said grimly. "If a single man happens to die they'll all be technically guilty of murder, and they're in deep enough as it is."

"Yes, I imagine it'll be more disagreeable for you to prosecute Jerry than it will her dad."

"Huh? Prosecute Jerry? Why, I—why, I—"

"She's just as guilty as any of the rest of us," Tom pointed out.

"Why did they get themselves into such a scrape? Who planned that fool raid anyway?" Verne stormed.

"Now I'll speak my piece," Tom said tersely. "Those people up there believe they're getting a dirty deal, and they are. They were excited and hotheaded, but all they wanted was to save a man they believe is innocent. But what about you cold-blooded slaves to duty? You musta been warned that the raid was coming off. All you had to do was gather your men to defend the jail, and then send some-

body out to warn the mob that you were prepared. They'd have had to have gone back home. But what did you do? Let 'em walk right into a trap where they could be murdered, and where there couldn't help but be bloodshed. That was ten times more cowardly and detestable than anything they could have done. I'm telling you right now that I'm not spyin' for you, and if a single one' of them has to stand trial I'll stand trial with 'em."

"The sheriff did wrong," Verne said. "If I'd have known—How was it they got your word instead of me?"

"Got my word?" Tom exclaimed. "I didn't send any word. It was somebody else. Didn't you know about the raid?"

"Of course not. If you had sent me word by Curry, like you should have done I'd have prevented this massacre. But I knew nothing of it until after the raid was made. I've just come from a talk with Marsh. I asked him why, in the name of God, he hadn't tried to avoid the shooting, but he said he thought it would be better to teach the dirty outlaws a lesson they'd never forget. Naturally, I didn't agree with him."

"I should hope not!" Tom snorted. But he was realizing that the fault might be partly his. He had had an opportunity to send word by Curry, and if he had, Verne might have staved off the disaster which had overtaken the men from Pine Creek. But it was too late for regrets now.

It was at least a relief to know that Verne had had no hand in the affair. But his indignation had not abated.

"And now what?" he asked.

"Now I'll have to prosecute them all—Jerry included, if she was there. It's my plain duty. We can't have rioting in a law-abiding country. They broke the law and they'll have to stand trial. If you were with them you'll have to face the same charges," Verne said drearily.

Tom smiled bleakly.

"There's a brother for you," he said. "All right, I'll not argue with you. But if I have to stand trial I'll not be above lyin' a little in my own defense, and that of my friends. I'll swear that you hired me as a spy, and that you and the other county officials knew about the raid in advance, and did nothing to stop it except build a murder trap. None of you are going to look good when that comes out."

"You couldn't do that," Verne cried in alarm. "Why, those Pine Creekers would tear you limb from limb if you ever admit that you are my brother and a spy."

"Maybe so, but that's just what you can expect if you ever bring any of those fellows to trial. But I don't think the lumber company will care for any wholesale arrests anyway."

"I'd do anything I could to avoid it—on account of you and Jerry," Verne said. "Both sides were in the wrong. But nothing

can stop me from prosecuting McConnell. And I don't see how I can avoid bringing the rest of you to trial."

"Nobody was identified except the men who were wounded. If nobody dies you can let them off with a fine," Tom suggested, but his brother scarcely heard him.

Tom realized the painfulness of the situation in which Verne found himself. If he prosecuted the mistaken Pine Creek ranchers he would be accused of being a tool of the lumber company, and he would be pilloried for not having tried to stop the raid. If he didn't prosecute he would be reproached with cowardice. And his worst suffering would be from his own peculiar, iron-bound conscience. For the time Tom began to feel real pity for his ambitious brother. At the same time he was more than ever determined to stop the prosecution of the ranchers if he could.

"What are you going to do now?" Verne asked.

"Now that I've seen you I guess I'll go back to my job."

"You'd better come out openly as my brother, or else leave the country," Verne advised. "If those fellows ever found out first they'd shoot you down like a wild dog. They're plumb bad, I tell you."

"Glad you can still use a good old range word like 'plumb,'" Tom grinned. "Good night."

He was riding a McConnell horse, else he would have remained in town until the next day. He reached Delano Canyon without incident. Evidently there had been no organized attempt to stop the fugitives, or there would have been some signs of it in the canyon.

Dawn came upon him in the deep, beautiful canyon, and the sun was scarcely an hour high when he reached the summit. Since it had been almost pitch-dark when he was there before he paused to take what amounted to almost a bird's-eye view of both the upper and lower valleys. Pine Creek glistened like a silver thread off to the north and east; the whole valley looking like a crazy-quilt of gorgeous colors, which someone had thrown carelessly over a field of uneven stumps. The lower valley, on the contrary, was flat and drab in comparison; though its area of tillable land was many, many times greater.

Like most Western men Tom Powell possessed a never far submerged impulse to explore. The country was largely new to him, and he had seen from first hand only a tithe of it. If he went on home it would be too late to accomplish anything, and no doubt everything would be confusion and chaos after the raid. He didn't flatter himself that anybody would be much concerned over his failure to appear. Possibly old Kit would worry, but that would be all.

He turned to the right along the top of the high backbone, and gradually climbed higher and higher until he was far above timber line. Before many hours he began to realize that he might have to

retrace his course in order to get down, and he had already come over some hazardous places which he wasn't anxious to try again. But he kept on.

In a few hours he realized that he had left Pine Creek Basin behind him. He was in a different, and far more rugged country. To his right, and far, far below he could see at times a twisty river which gleamed like a ribbon of snow as it tore madly over submerged rocks in its frantic haste to escape from the mountains. It was a worthy parent of such a turbulent offspring as Pine Creek. This stream, he knew, was the south fork of the Snake.

Presently he came to a long, vicious-looking backbone which led into the upper and higher end of Pine Creek Basin. It was tough going, but it was the only way to get down unless he went all the way back to the head of Delano Canyon. There were places where he felt it incumbent to walk and lead his horse—not for fear of getting hurt himself, but to be in a position to keep the animal from rolling to its death if it happened to stumble.

It was long after noon when finally he got down to timber. There were no trails, except now and then a deer or elk run, but he was sure that eventually he would come out on a definite trail that would lead toward home. The pangs of hunger were gnawing at him, but he didn't pause to shoot and roast a fool hen or grouse as he would have had his need been desperate.

He was thinking that it was indeed true that Jim McConnell could easily be hidden in this vast, wild labyrinth where the forces of the law could never find him, when he suddenly heard a shout. He stopped his horse automatically and sprang to the ground as the animal lifted its head and started a nicker. A hand clapped over the horse's nose stifled the nicker at the first rumbling note. He knew well enough the danger of coming too suddenly upon some people in such surroundings.

Having temporarily quieted his horse he jerked a long hair from its tail and tied it around the animal's nose just above the nostrils. Thenceforth the animal was too busy trying to wriggle the hair off to make any outcry. But by the time he had finished that, Tom had heard other yells and noises. He knew now what they were. Somebody was driving a bunch of cattle through the timber below, evidently into a dark and timbered defile off to his right, and lower down.

It was a matter that certainly was worthy of close investigation—though not too close—until he knew more about it. He pressed his mount on through the timber, carefully gauging his course by the sounds of the men and the cattle. Presently he caught sight of sleek, red bodies gliding through the trees, and occasionally of the bland, innocent white face of a cow as it was turned in his direction. For a while he changed his course and paralleled the cattle until he

had ascertained that there were nearly two hundred head in the bunch, that they were driven by four men, who led several extra horses with blankets and supplies upon their backs, and that some at least of the cattle were branded with the McConnell J Bar M brand.

Rustlers! There could be no argument upon that point. All four men were strangers to him. In that day the usual penalty for rustlers caught red-handed was a rope—if the captors had the power to use one. And the rustlers threatened with capture acted accordingly.

Tom knew that they were good men to let alone. On the other hand he was now an employee of Jim McConnell. It was his duty to get those cattle back if possible. He loosened his six-gun in the holster and rode forward.

9

ONE MAN AGAINST FOUR. And those four men trained to protect themselves under dangerous circumstances. That was the situation Tom Powell now found himself called upon to face. He knew the type of men they probably were. They would not kill in order to steal; but they would certainly kill in order to keep from being caught stealing. It would not hurt them a bit to leave his body lying out here till the flesh rotted off his bones if he offered them molestation.

He couldn't engage in a gun battle and expect to survive all four of them. There was but one course to take. That was to try to talk them out of it, and if that failed to shoot it out with them.

He suddenly turned his horse and rode in among the cattle at a walk. He was fairly in the midst of the white-faces before the rustlers saw him. He saw their hands strike gunward as one of them cried out an alarm, but he only stopped his horse, and leaned forward in the saddle; both hands resting upon the saddle horn.

Three of the rustlers stopped, their eyes darting about suspiciously, fearing that there might be other enemies in the surrounding timber. The fourth man, evidently the leader, rode forward alone. He was a smooth, supple-looking fellow of about thirty, with dark, olive skin and keen black eyes. He was a little under medium size, and he rode with his hand frankly on the handle of his gun.

"Well, stranger, was it necessary to cut right into the middle of our cattle?" was his greeting.

"Your cattle?" Tom was smiling broadly. "I was under the impression that I'm supposed to be looking out for most of these—the ones wearin' a J Bar M."

"These happen to be my cattle," the man replied. "I bought 'em from Jack McConnell."

For an instant Tom wondered if he wasn't mistaken. But he knew that he couldn't be. These cattle had been gathered up while the Pine Creek men were rallying for the ill-starred raid on the Boulder jail. These men must have known that, too. Somebody in Pine Creek Basin was a traitor!

"There's no use for us to talk at cross-purposes," Tom said quietly. "It's my job to take these cattle back where they belong—if I can. I'm alone, and I know I can't take 'em away from you. On the other hand I can raise a posse and overtake you in less than twenty-four hours."

The man's eyes narrowed dangerously. "That is if you git away," he remarked.

"Right. I probably can't git away if you-all take it into yore heads to stop me. But I'm right good with a gun, and I'll bet you even money I can git in the first shot, even if you have got the advantage of havin' your hand on yore gun. I shouldn't wonder but what I could git a couple of you," Tom stated in a matter-of-fact tone.

For a half second it seemed that the man was about to accept the challenge. But something in Tom Powell's sea-green eyes restrained him.

"You're a cool customer anyway," he said half grudgingly. He turned and waved to his men. "Come up here, boys."

"The situation is kinda delicate," Tom reminded. "It might be a good idea for you to warn them that the slightest move toward drawing a gun will start fireworks."

"No gunplay, boys, unless this hombre makes a break," the leader said. "If he does—let him have it."

"Who is he?" one of them asked.

"He claims to be a puncher for the J Bar M an' he's askin' for these cows back," the leader said with a thin-lipped smile. "I sorta question his credentials, because we bought this stuff from McConnell, an' if this fella was a rider there he'd have known about it."

"While I'm wonderin' how McConnell could have turned 'em over to you when him an' every other man in the valley was ridin' to Boulder to git Jim McConnell outa jail. Stealin' a man's cows while he's in jail an' can't help himself seems to me to be a purty lousy trick," Tom taunted.

The faces of the outlaws flushed dangerously. Tom could tell by the leader's eyes that he was estimating their chances for getting him with no casualties among themselves. He met the leader's eyes with a mocking, quizzical light in his own. His seeming confidence shook the man's morale. He lacked the cold courage to start a gun battle when he knew that the chances were that Powell would try to get him first. On the other hand he knew that if he let Powell go there would soon be a posse on his heels. He and his men could escape

the posse, but they would almost certainly have to abandon the cattle.

"Did they git McConnell outa jail?" suddenly asked one of the outlaws, a big fellow with a dull face.

"They did not. We were tricked, and a lot of the boys shot up. It was a mess," Tom informed.

A new expression came over the leader's keen, intelligent features. "That'll just about outlaw every man in the valley, won't it?" he asked.

"You seem to know a lot about the country," Tom retorted.

"I know a lot about a lot of things," the man snapped. His brow furrowed in thought. "We're not givin' up these cattle," he said positively. "We'll let you ride up on that ridge unharmed. But stay in sight of us till we disappear."

"Thanks, I'll stay right here," Tom said.

"Shove up the drags, boys," the leader ordered. The tail-enders were already abreast so the men had only to fall in behind and keep the cattle moving. The outlaw leader remained with Tom as watchfully as a cat.

"Tell me," Tom said softly, "do you know a fellow named Jorg Jorgensen?"

The man gave a start, but composed himself instantly. "Never heard of him," he said.

"If you do happen to see him tell him that Tom Wood sends his regards."

Without a reply the outlaw turned and spurred on after his followers. As instructed, Tom remained where he was only until they were out of sight, and then he immediately plunged into the timber and got away from there as fast as he could. He knew that they would not be above sneaking back and taking a shot at him.

He had done all he could toward retrieving the cattle—far more than he could have accomplished by starting a gun battle. In that event he would now be dead. He didn't know whether he would get the cattle back, but he would have made a small bet that the rustlers would "lose" the animals before they had gone another two miles.

He was right. After waiting for over an hour he cautiously took the trail of the stolen cattle, and a half hour later he came upon them. The bunch had stopped where they had been abandoned by the outlaws, and were just now beginning to graze. But Tom was in no hurry about showing himself. He knew that it might well be a trap. But after a careful survey he concluded that the rustlers had really decided that there was too much danger of being pursued by a posse, and had abandoned their loot.

After a time he rounded up the bunch and drove them back toward their own range. Darkness had fallen upon him before he was

back to the top of the ridge which overlooked Pine Creek Basin. His flanks were gaunt, but it wasn't the first time, and sleeping out was anything but a novelty. He unsaddled and staked his horse by a forefoot, and then rolled up in the saddle blanket. He was still too suspicious of the rustlers to dare build a fire.

He was up at the first crack of day, and threw the cold saddle onto his shivering horse. He was glad when the animal decided to buck. It warmed them both. When the kinks were out of his mount's back he soon located the cattle. They were lying down, still in a bunch, and he had no trouble getting them started.

He was rather proud of himself for the bluff he had run on the rustlers; yet he knew that didn't mean that they were cowards. They had simply been sensible. They had been caught where they either had to leave the cattle or participate in a fight which was quite likely to prove fatal to one or two of them. Assuredly they would be back another time.

Tom was quite convinced, however, that he knew the approximate location of the outlaws' headquarters. Jorg Jorgensen had said that he was going to join friends in the Caribou mountains. He believed that these men knew Jorg. And that added a fresh complication. Any move he made against these outlaws would endanger his friend Jorg.

"I've got friends in far too damned many camps," he muttered ruefully.

By the time he had got the cattle back over the divide and headed down a long canyon toward their own proper range the sun had climbed high, there seemed nothing between his backbone and the saddle horn. He had gone without eating just long enough to be ravenously hungry. The cattle would find their own way now, or would at least be safe until somebody came for them. He rode around them and hit for home at a long, fast trot.

The men were just going in to eat dinner when he reached the ranch. Old Kit Martel let out a yip of joy at sight of him.

"By Gawd, Tommy, I shore thought we'd lost you," he cried out. "Where in hell have you been?"

"Just explorin' around. What's new?"

"Not much of anything, except that Jerry has been a heap worried about you and her dad."

"About me? Hell, I didn't suppose she'd even notice I was gone."

"You don't know Jerry. She likes you. An' when that gal's your friend it means something. When she heard you wasn't in the hospital with the other wounded boys she was afraid you'd been killed somewhere."

"What about her father? What else has happened?"

"Just plain nothin'. But there's plenty of talk. It was arranged, you know, for one of our friends down there to come up the next

day an' tell us how things stood. Excitement is plenty high down that way. The whole damn' population seems to be demandin' that they arrest an' hang everybody in this valley. But the sheriff and the prosecutin' attorney kinda figger it's too big a job. But while they're spoutin' about tryin' to arrest the ring-leaders that lumber company is makin' a lot of talk about takin' Jim McConnell out an' hangin' him. The feller that come up says that if one of them jail defenders happens to die—an' there's one with a bullet through his lung—Jim's life won't be worth a nickel," Kit reported at length.

"What a hell of a mistake that raid was," Tom brooded.

"Sheriff Marsh an' three, four deputies just left here a little while ago. They're looking for Jack McConnell an' Lee Crawford."

"An' didn't find 'em?"

"Hardly. They're hidin' out somewhere. Jack is scared plumb to death. But where have you been?"

"It's a long story, an' I can tell it a lot better after dinner."

"Well, come on in, come on in," Kit invited.

They were late to the table, and Jerry and her mother were already seated. An expression of pleased surprise came over the girl's pretty face.

"Why, Tom Wood! Where have you been?" she cried.

"I got separated from the bunch and in the morning I found myself navigatin' the peak of the high mountain south of Delano Canyon instead of comin' home. I kept on goin', an'——"

"You what? Why, man, nobody ever did git off that mountain except by goin' back," Kit interrupted.

"Well, I did," Tom smiled. "Maybe it was lucky all around that I did. I think I saved a couple of hundred cows for the people up here."

"Why, how was that?" Jerry asked eagerly.

He told them about meeting the rustlers.

"You mean," Kit said, speaking slowly and with painstaking care, "that you just rode out and told the big bad boys that they were stealing yore marbles, an' if they didn't give 'em back you'd tell teacher?"

Tom laughed. "Well, something like that. Anyway, they didn't like the idea of a posse on their heels so they left the cattle an' vamoosed."

"Do you reckon he fell out of bed an' lit on his head when he was a baby?" Kit asked Jerry. "Nobody but a half-wit would try stoppin' four of these Idaho-Wyoming rustlers alone. What the hell did you say to them?"

"I just pointed out the immorality of their actions, an' warned 'em of the fate that sometimes overtakes sinners."

"They could have killed you, and gone on with the cattle," Jerry said. Her voice sounded a little strained and uneven.

"They could at that," Tom acknowledged. "But they also probably realized that they were a long way from a doctor in case any of them got hurt. And it really seemed likely that they would."

Kit shook his head. "Yo're a surprisin' feller," he said. "Had any of us tried a stunt like that we'd have got our fool heads blown off."

10

AS THE MEAL WAS ABOUT FINISHED Jerry requested Tom and Kit to remain in the room.

"You go and lie down, Mother," the girl said. "I want to talk to the boys about the cattle."

"All right. I don't know anything about that, but don't any of you go to doing anything foolish," Mrs. McConnell pleaded.

"Poor Mother. She's all broken up about Father, and if she had any more worries on her mind she couldn't stand it," Jerry said. "She thinks Uncle Jack is pretty futile—and I'm inclined to agree with her."

"This rustlin' business looks bad," Kit said. "I'll bet that damned lumber company is back of it."

Tom shook his head in disbelief, but before he could express his opinion Jerry was speaking.

"A lot of things look bad," she said. "I'm nearly crazy with worry for fear something—will happen—to Father. I can see now what a ghastly mistake we made with that raid. It just gave our enemies more power. But I've got to think of other things, too."

"Who talked up that raid anyhow?" Tom demanded.

"It was Lee Crawford," Kit answered. "He's been doin' all the talkin' an' leadin' up here ever since Jim was arrested."

"I'm sure that Lee means well," Jerry averred. "Like everybody else he makes mistakes. Now he has had to go into hiding himself. But there is somebody here who doesn't mean well. Somebody who is secretly spying upon us for our enemies."

Tom felt his skin go hot and dry. He half expected to be denounced as a traitor. He was sure that his face must be a dead giveaway, though he tried hard to look expressionless.

"Is there anyone you suspect?" he asked.

It was a moment before Jerry answered. "I don't know. At any rate I wouldn't name any name until I was absolutely certain. But there has to be someone. The officers in Boulder knew about the raid in spite of our efforts to keep it secret. And this rustling now. In some way those rustlers were notified that all the men in the valley would be away from the range."

"I agree to that," Tom said. "It seems fairly certain to me that

those cattle must have been sort of worked up to an agreed place by people already in this valley."

"Hell, there's nothin' strange about that," Kit argued. "It's them damned nesters. They're in with the rustlers, an' it musta been one o' them that eavesdropped us an' found out our plans. We'd oughta hang a couple of 'em on general principles."

"I don't think we can blame everything onto the nesters, or even the lumber company," Jerry said. "The nesters wouldn't dare to associate with outside outlaws. They're too little for that, and the lumber company is too big."

While Kit was arguing the proposition Tom was admiring the clear common sense of the girl. She knew what it was all about, and she would be hard to fool. Some day she was going to find out who he was and when she did—well, it was going to be a sad day for Tom Powell. He knew right now that he could endure almost anything better than her scorn.

"Well, what I wanted to see you boys about is just this: until this trouble is settled Jack isn't going to be much good. He'll be hiding out most of the time. But somebody has got to look after things, particularly since we know now that rustlers are at work. I think you two can manage it."

"You—you mean—you're makin' us boss?" Kit blurted.

"Well, something like that. Temporarily, of course," Jerry smiled.

"But I never was a boss. Hell, I've always taken orders—when I felt like it. I've never given 'em," Kit protested in something very like panic.

"You'll get used to it," Jerry said. "Tom can usually tell you what to say, I think."

"Say, he let it out that he'd been a range boss. Why don't you just let him be foreman?" Kit wanted to know.

Tom caught Jerry looking at him curiously.

"No," he said, "that wouldn't do. I'm a new man, I don't know the country, and the men don't know me. You take the job, Kit, and I'll give you all the support of which I'm capable."

"You mean that?" Kit asked gratefully.

"I never meant anything more in my life. And the first thing we'd better do is send somebody after those cattle, and then I think we should have a line camp up that way to guard against rustlers."

"That's a dang good idee," Kit said. "I'll go right now an' send Montan' an' Luke Price up there."

The bandy-legged old fellow trudged importantly outside to start giving orders, and Tom remained in the dining room.

"Thanks for being so considerate," the girl said. "I couldn't very well offer you the job as foreman."

"I know that. You know less than nothing about me. I only want

you to know, Miss McConnell, that I'll do anything I can to help you and your father," he said earnestly.

"I wish you could do something to help my father. Somebody has determined to get him out of the way. Oh, I know he's innocent of that murder, but he'll be taken out and hanged like a dog, and the law won't even try to protect him," she cried.

"You don't believe that—that Powell and Marsh would let anything happen to him before the trial?"

"Why not? Marsh at least is taking money from the lumber company. If Father was lynched it would keep a lot of unpleasant things from coming out at the trial. As for Verne Powell, well, he's just a self-centered bigot. I wouldn't expect anything from him."

"You didn't always feel that way about him," Tom said softly.

"That was before I knew what kind of a man he is. He surely isn't a friend of yours, is he?"

"No, oh, no. I just wondered if he couldn't do something if you appealed to him yourself, and made him see the danger your father is in. If he is really in love with you—"

"That's impossible. I'll never speak to him again," she said positively.

What a fool Verne was to give up this magnificent girl for any reason at all, Tom thought again.

"Miss McConnell," he said soberly, "there never was a ball of yarn so snarled that it couldn't be unwound if you got hold of the right end. It takes a lot of time and patience sometimes. But I've got a feelin' that all your troubles here can be traced to a common source. It may be the lumber company and it may not. I don't think it will be. But with your permission I'd like to see what I can do about unravelin' your problems."

"Oh, if you only could," the girl cried eagerly. "Have you got any plan at all?"

"A more or less blind one. But I'm goin' to assume that your father is innocent, and that he was framed for that murder by somebody who either wanted to get him out of the way, or who wanted to aggravate the fight between him and the lumber company. I've got an idea that whoever it was is somebody with a soul about as big as a peanut—somebody who would think that a few stolen cows was worth a man's life."

"I believe you're right," Jerry said, "but I can't think who it would be. I'd hate to think it was—" she bit her lip on the unfinished sentence.

"You were about to name somebody you have some reason to suspect," he prodded.

"No. No. I don't suspect anybody," she asserted more forcefully than the circumstances seemed to require.

"My idea," Tom said quietly, "is to begin at the other end. If

I can find out more about those rustlers I may find out who the man is here that we want."

"But how will you go about that?"

"I don't quite know yet. But the first thing I'd like to do is get your father out of that jail."

"What?"

"If there's any real danger of him being lynched, and it seems that there is, he should be got out of there. Now is the time to do it. The other attempt was such a terrific bust that they won't be expectin' another attempt."

"I doubt if you could get any of the boys to go back there again, and much as I love Father I couldn't ask them," she said.

"I don't want any help, or at least much help. I think Kit will go with me, and I believe that we can get your father out."

"If you could succeed in that," she said, "I'd do anything in the world for you."

"I'll talk to Kit, and if he agrees we'll start tonight," he promised.

His proposition took Kit Martel all of a heap. "You're crazy enough to believe that the two of us kin do what forty of us failed to do?" he demanded.

"We can try. Two men won't make as much noise as forty. Nobody knows about this but you an' me, an' Jerry. They won't be expectin' us this time."

As he had known, Kit wasn't hard to persuade to make the attempt, though doubtful of its success.

Again they took the Delano Canyon route, and because they started earlier they arrived in Boulder at a much earlier hour than the other time. They led a saddled horse behind them, and they left their animals concealed behind the same brush that had sheltered their mounts the other time.

It was futile to make elaborate plans, but Tom felt that he had a card in reserve if worst came to worst. Or rather a paper in his hat—that pass from the county attorney.

"You stay here with the horses, Kit," he said, "while I scout around. I'll be back in half an hour. If I ain't you'd just as well call it a day an' head for home."

"Hell, is that all I rode all this distance for—just to hold your horse?" Kit asked disgustedly.

Tom laughed. "You may have all you want to do before it's all over. But if McConnell should come out you be ready to high-tail it for the hills. Don't wait for me. If I don't show up at all don't worry."

His first business was to circle the jail cautiously. The few scattered shrubs aided his endeavors. He had just reached one directly under the window nearest Jim McConnell's cell when he saw the glow of a cigarette close under the courthouse wall. There was

a closer shrub and he crawled rapidly toward it. He had reached its shadow, not two rods from the man with the cigarette, when he heard somebody else walking rapidly along the gravelled path.

The man by the wall hastily dropped his cigarette and ground it into the dirt with his heel. "Stop!" he challenged. "Who are you?"

"It's Curly, Bob," came the reply. "Got orders from the sheriff for you."

"Oh!" Apparently the guard knew the other man well. "What is it?" he asked as the fellow who called himself Curly joined him.

"I'm to tie you up," the other laughed.

"Wha-at?"

"Orders. McConnell gits his neck stretched tonight. The mob is beginnin' to form. Marsh will get here ahead of 'em just in time to be overpowered and his keys taken away from him, but it'll look better if you've been overpowered."

"How long will I have to lay here?" the guard demanded.

"Not long. Not more'n an hour or two."

"This is a hell of a job. They really aim to hang him?"

"Right. Somebody is gettin' scared. McConnell didn't kill that timber cruiser, and if he goes to trial the truth might come out."

Tom's blood was racing through his veins like that of a race horse's under the whip. It was lucky that he hadn't delayed his attempted rescue of the cowman, but certainly no time was to be lost. Yet he had to wait while Curly tied Bob up and gagged him.

"There you are," the former chuckled at last. "Nobody can say you didn't try to do your duty."

The man on the ground gave an unintelligent grunt, and the other man went away. Tom waited only until the man was out of sight before hastening around to the front of the building. Not a minute was to be lost. He thought of waiting for the sheriff, but the mob might be too close at hand to give him leeway.

Tom was glad now that he knew the interior of the jail. The prisoner would be guarded by special deputies, but he believed their vigilance would be considerably relaxed. His immediate worry was getting inside the courthouse.

He walked boldly and unchallenged up the courthouse steps. The front door, leading into a small rotunda from which opened off the offices of the various county officials, was unlocked. A single, dim, smoky light hung from the ceiling. He walked swiftly to the end of the corridor which led to the cells in the back, but the door there was locked. And then he got the lucky break he had not even dared hope for.

Even as he was standing there by the door, wondering whether to force it or to knock loudly and try to get inside on the strength of his credentials, the door was opened from the other side, and a shabby, rusty-whiskered old swamper with a mop in one hand and

a broom in the other peered up at him in open-mouthed surprise. "Hello, Dad, I was just goin' to knock," Tom smiled. "I'll go in before you shut the door."

"You can't go in there, the old man said.

"Why, sure I can," Tom asserted confidently. "I'm from the lumber company. I've got a pass from the sheriff and the county attorney if you'd like to read it." He took off his hat and held out the paper.

"Heck, I can't read the dang thing," the old man said. "I ain't got my glasses."

"It says, 'Pass the bearer, Bill Lewis, anywhere he may want to go. Signed, Sheriff George Marsh, Attorney Vernon Powell,'" Tom improvised as he pretended to read.

"Well, I reckon it's all right," the old swamper said. "But if anything is said don't tell 'em I let you in."

As the old man started to step aside Tom's hand was suddenly thrust over his mouth, and the old fellow was easily subdued.

"Don't make a sound or I'll kill you," Tom threatened. He thrust the old man back inside the corridor, and jerking the bandanna from around his neck tied it tightly around the old man's mouth as a gag. Taking a red cotton handkerchief from his hip pocket he tied the old man's hands behind his back. He hated to mistreat the old fellow, but he had to have his keys.

He pushed the old man down a stairway to the basement and toward the wood room. As they entered the basement he saw that the cell tier was lighted up, and he caught sight of two men playing cards. Fortunately for him they didn't look up. He got the old man out of sight and found a piece of wire with which he tied his legs and anchored him to a pillar.

The really dangerous task still lay before him. Two tough, armed men were between him and the end of the corridor that led to McConnell's cell. He moved over to the point nearest them where he could still keep out of sight, and then stepped out in full view.

"Don't move, boys," he spoke in a cool, steely voice.

The startled faces turned toward him were those of the two special deputies, Dode James and Brig Ferry, with whom he had had the run-in in front of the New Era saloon. Disobeying his command they sprang to their feet and reached for their guns.

II

TOM POWELL TOOK A STEP FORWARD, and the two special officers saw the glint of his gray gun-barrel. Their hands were upon the handle of their weapons, but they slowly came away. To persist, they knew very well, would be the height of folly when they were already covered.

"That's better," Tom approved, "but git 'em plumb up." Slowly the hands of the men went up even with their heads.

"How did you git in here?" Dode James mouthed.

"Never mind that. Just keep yore eyes on the ceilin' till I git them guns." He lifted the weapons from their holsters and tossed them away. "Now open that door," he commanded.

"With what?" Ferry taunted. "We ain't got no keys."

To Tom's consternation they appeared keyless. Watching them carefully he tried the bunch of keys he had taken from the swamper, but evidently that part of the building was not in the old man's precincts. None of the keys would fit.

"If you aimed to take McConnell out I reckon you'll have to take the jail down, mug," James taunted.

"I'll do just that if I have to," Tom gritted. "Somebody around here has got keys to git in here an' I know it." He recalled that there had been a light under one of the office doors in the rotunda. Undoubtedly the sheriff's office, for there could be no reason for any of the others keeping open.

He was looking at the door, pondering if it could be forced, when Ferry said, "Here comes the sheriff now."

Tom spun around quickly on his heel, and for a moment his gaze left the two deputies. Even as he realized that Ferry had worked an old, but almost infallible trick one of the men was upon his back, jerking his head backwards.

Once they got him down he would have no chance, and the last thing he wanted to do was fire a gun and attract attention. With instantaneous co-ordination of hand and brain he thrust his six-gun into the holster, reached back between his own legs and grabbed both of his assailant's ankles so quickly that when he fell the other man was underneath. The whole thing had happened in half a second.

Both men were upon their backs, though Tom was on top of Ferry. Dode James hadn't yet had time to get into action, although now he launched himself headlong at Tom in an attempt to help his partner. Tom's knee bent and then straightened with terrific force, and the heel of his boot caught James squarely on the point of the chin and stopped his plunge in mid-air. The officer uttered a peculiar sound, and struck the floor completely cold.

In the meantime Ferry pinioned Tom's arms, and let out an ear-splitting screech for help. The yell wouldn't carry far outside, but if there was anybody else in the building it would certainly bring him. Tom realized that he must score a victory quickly or not at all.

He rolled over on his side and tried desperately to free his arms, but Ferry was a powerful man, and a schooled rough-and-tumble fighter. For a moment they struggled like a pair of wildcats, then some sixth sense seemed to tell Tom just where his antagonist's head

was. He brought his own head down, and then threw it backward with all the strength of his body. The back of his head collided violently with something—he quickly found that it was Ferry's nose. He heard a cry of pain, and felt the arms about him relax. He shot out of that awkward embrace like an arrow.

In a flash Powell was on his feet. Ferry was sitting on the floor, blood gushing from his injured proboscis. The man started to get up, but Tom stopped him.

"Stay where you are, both of you," he ordered tersely. James was now bewilderingly shaking his head.

Tom had drawn his gun, and he had just time to turn as he heard someone reach the bottom of the basement stairs. It was a deputy sheriff.

"What's goin' on h—" the officer blurted.

"Shut up," Tom Powell shot out violently. "Keep yore hands away from that gun and come forward."

The six-gun in Powell's steady hand was a powerful persuader. The deputy came reluctantly across the floor.

"I don't understand—" he began helplessly.

"You don't need to. Unlock this door."

Under the compulsion of the gun the door was unlocked, and Tom herded the three men down the corridor ahead of him. Jim McConnell who had, of course, heard the commotion, had been frantically dressing. He had retired for the night, and no matter what impended, or what might happen to him, he wanted to have his clothes on.

"Ready to travel, Mr. McConnell?" Tom asked.

"Oh, it's you!" the cowman exclaimed. "Who's with you?"

"Nobody. I know that this lumber outfit and your other enemies are plannin' a lynchin' party. They may be here any minute. Better get out of here."

"I'm r'arin' to go," McConnell said simply.

The deputy was compelled to open McConnell's cell, and then the three officers were forced to take the prisoner's place. Tom took the regular deputy's bunch of keys, and locked the men in.

"We'll git you for this, fellow," Brig Ferry threatened. "Don't think that this business is finished."

"Better take one of their guns, Mr. McConnell; you may need it," Tom said when they had locked the second door.

"I still don't sec how you could have managed this alone," the rancher said. "I'm damned glad to git away, but I'd have give my right arm if the boys hadn't tried it the other night. That was a foolish thing to do."

They reached the outside of the courthouse unchallenged. "Right over there," Tom said, "is Kit Martel with the horses. You two had better git goin' as quick as possible. You'll have time for a brief visit with yore family before you have to hide out. I'll stay be-

hind for a while to keep your release from bein' discovered too quick."

Jim McConnell extended his hand. "I can't express my gratitude for what you've done, Wood," he said. "But if you ever need a friend, and I'm alive, just come to me."

"I'll remember that," Tom said drily.

He watched while the cowman swung off across the square toward the horses. He could tell that McConnell was having difficulty trying not to break into a run. But a man just escaping from the gallows couldn't be blamed for being in a hurry.

Tom had waited on the courthouse steps for perhaps half an hour when he saw a man striding along the path toward the courthouse. For all that the man seemed in a hurry his movements were somehow guiltily furtive. Tom crouched down out of sight and waited. When he was twenty feet away Tom recognized Sheriff George Marsh. He quietly drew his gun, and waited where he was until the officer was less than six feet from him.

"Evenin', Sheriff," he said then.

"Ugh!" The sheriff gave a violent start, and his hand started to move toward the gun suspended at his thigh.

"I wouldn't go for to do that," Tom advised mildly. "You see I've already got you plumb covered."

"Who are you, an' how dare you try to hold up an officer?"

"Don't you recognize me, Sheriff? I used to be your prisoner."

"Oh, it's *you*," the sheriff said bitterly as he peered under the puncher's hat. "What're you doin' here?"

"Sheriff, I've been quite reliably informed that a mob plans to take Jim McConnell out of jail tonight an' hang him."

"Nonsense. If a mob comes I'll defend the jail like I did when his friends tried to git him."

"You'll forgive me, Sheriff, for callin' you a liar," Tom remarked. "But you'll defend him all right. You an' me are gonna set right here on these steps till that mob comes. When they do you'll tell 'em that if they don't disband that the first man to git hurt will be you. An' you'll be tellin' the Gawd's truth, Sheriff."

"If you know the mob is comin' let me go so I can gather men to defend the jail."

"The men who are comin' are the same men you called to defend it before. No. You intended to clear the way for his enemies to murder Jim McConnell tonight. We'll wait for the mob. Toss that gun away an' sit down."

Under the deadly compulsion of the puncher's six-shooter Sheriff Marsh was forced to obey. For some time they sat in silence. It was a chilly evening, but from time to time Marsh drew his handkerchief to wipe sweat from his brow. For perhaps an hour nothing happened, and then they began to hear whoops and hollers from

the main street of the town. Presently the noises began to concentrate around the New Era saloon.

"Sounds likc the wolves were beginnin' to gather," Tom remarked. "They seem to need some inward fortifyin' before they can murder an innocent man."

The yells rapidly became more fierce and more maudlin, but another hour passed before it became certain that the mob was bearing down upon the jail.

"I got the rope," a voice bellowed loudly above the rest, "an' I'm the old he-strangler himself."

"We'll hang Jim McConnell to a sour apple tree," drunkenly paraphrased another voice. But most of the brutal, animal cries of the mob were incoherent.

Had he not been able to liberate McConnell, Tom knew that there would have been no hope for the cowman. He had never felt quite such a feeling of exultation in his life. What a surprise that mob was going to get! And if things didn't go wrong he intended some more surprises before the night was over.

He had noticed the sheriff looking over his shoulder toward the door many times. Marsh, he knew, was wondering why none of his deputies appeared. Finally Marsh could stand the suspense no longer.

"There they come!" he cried. "I can't stop 'em. They're drunk. They'll just laugh at me an' come on. If you shoot me because I can't stop 'em it'll be murder."

"Suicide would be a better name," Tom grated. "This business you planned is murder. But I guess you're right about not bein' able to stop that mob. They sound pretty crazy. Come on, I think we'd better have a talk with the county attorney."

"What?" Marsh cried. He could scarcely credit his own ears.

"Never mind. Get moving. The more hell that mob raises the better it'll suit me."

He hustled the sheriff along too fast for the man to ask the questions with which he was bursting. They left on the side of the jail opposite the approaching mob, and soon gained the street unseen. It was only a short distance to Verne's boarding house.

"Who is it?" Verne called when Tom knocked on the door.

"The sheriff," Tom replied.

The door opened instantly. Verne had been just on the verge of going out. His hair was rumpled, and he was plainly a very nervous man.

"What do you mean saying the sheriff was here?" he demanded. "I recognized your—" He stopped with mouth agape as he identified the sheriff in the gloom.

"Better go on in, Sheriff," Tom purred, and for the first time Verne saw the six-gun against the sheriff's back.

"What—what is the meaning of this?" he quavered.

"It means that damn outlaw you were so tender with has held me up and kidnapped me at the point of a gun," Marsh roared. "I don't know why he's brought me up here, but I ought to be down at the jail. There's a mob coming to hang Jim McConnell."

Verne's face went white. "They woke me up," he said. "I was afraid something of the kind was in the wind. Put that gun up, for God's sake, and let's do something to stop them."

"It's too late for that," Tom said. "They're already inside the courthouse, and probably have smashed half the furniture by this time. They're pretty drunk. You did a right good job of organizing that mob, Marsh."

"It's a lie!" the sheriff bellowed.

"This is awful," Verne moaned. "I certainly never thought anything like this would happen. If McConnell is lynched it will give this county a black eye it will never get over. I'd sooner have let him get scot free than to have had this happen."

"I'm glad you feel that way about it," Tom said coolly. "But don't worry about McConnell. He is halfway to Pine Creek by this time."

12

FOR A MOMENT THE TWO county officials could only gape at the puncher in stunned silence. Then they chorused shrilly:

"What did you say?"

"What I said was that McConnell has gone," Tom said patiently, as though addressing little children. "Knowing that it was planned to lynch him tonight, and that the sheriff here was entirely cognizant, if not actually conniving at the crime, I came down here early and—er—liberated the prisoner."

Sheriff Marsh was little less stunned by the manner of the cowpuncher's speech than he was by the nature of the accusation against him, and the amazing announcement of the prisoner's escape. For although Tom Powell had chosen to become a cowpuncher he, as well as Verne, had had the advantage of a fair education in his boyhood. He was by no means illiterate, and could rise above the vernacular when he chose.

"You—liberated—the prisoner?" Marsh stammered.

"I did. You'll find your three deputies locked in McConnell's old cell, and the swamper tied up in the wood room."

"Thank God," Verne breathed.

The sheriff turfed upon his brother official in fury. "Don't you realize what it means? McConnell has escaped. I—I'll be in a devil of a jackpot."

"Escaped from a lynching," Verne said. "I meant to do every-

thing I could to hang McConnell, because I think he's guilty, but, by God, I'm no mobocrat."

Tom slapped his brother on the back. "Thataboy," he applauded.

Marsh glared at them in surprise and hatred. "I'll have you behind the bars for this, Wood," he grated.

"Now that's why I brought you up here to discuss matters," Tom said equably. "If you arrest me and the whole story comes out how I singlehandedly overpowered you and your whole force of deputies and took McConnell out of jail you're goin' to be the laughingstock of the county. When it's further known that you fully intended to let the mob have McConnell, you'll be on the spot for fair."

"You can't prove that," the sheriff squalled.

"The hell I can't. A fellow named Curly came down and tied up another fellow named Bob who was on guard, nearly two hours ago. Curly told Bob the whole story. Furthermore, he said McConnell was to be hung because you knew he was innocent and you were afraid somebody might weaken at the trial."

"It's a lie," Marsh said hoarsely, but the flush in his cheeks was that of fear rather than indignation.

Verne's face, too, was a study in perplexity. "Is that true, Tom?"

"I'll take my solemn oath on it."

"You try proving anything like that and you won't get far with it—not in this country," Marsh declared as he regained a measure of his assurance.

"If that is true, Marsh, and I've been fooled, I'll see that McConnell gets justice, and likewise some other people," Verne declared.

"You won't see to nothing," the sheriff said contemptuously. "You and your highfalutin' ideas. We play practical politics in this county."

Verne started to say something, but Marsh cut him off, and addressed his next remarks to Tom. "Look here: assumin' that you are right, which I emphatically deny, what will you take to keep your mouth shut?"

"I'm not takin' bribes," Tom said curtly. "I'll keep shut about what I know on just one condition. That is—"

"No; there'll be no conditions," Verne interrupted: "I've guessed for some time that you were taking money from the lumber company. Now I'm sure of it. If Tom has got the evidence it's just what I want."

"All right, if it's a fight you want you'll git it," Marsh said. "I'll start right now by jailin' this fellow for breaking into the jail. An' I'll let the country know that you've been double-crossin' us all along because you're still secretly engaged to the McConnell girl, and intend to get him acquitted by withholdin' evidence when he comes to trial."

"Why, you dirty, damned—" Verne started toward his fellow official with clenched fists, and Marsh raised his hands defensively. Before they could clash, however, Tom stepped between them.

"Here, you'll be bustin' the county wide open," he said. "Look here, both of you: I'm not honin' to git onto anybody's damn' witness stand for reasons of my own. I won't unless I'm forced to it. You do as I say, Marsh; and I'll keep shut about what I heard."

"But—" Verne began.

"What do you want?" Marsh growled.

"You can save your face, and put the blame on the mob," Tom told him. "The story will sound lots better if you instruct your deputies to say that the mob overpowered them, and then let McConnell get away. They'll be all over the place. Nobody can say for sure what happened. Keep me out of it and save your face. Drag me in and I'll have your political scalp. I wasn't alone, remember."

"All right," the sheriff gritted. "You got me this time, but I'll get back at you if you stay around here. As for you, Powell, I'll yank your job out from under you so fast it'll make your head swim." He flung from the room and dog-trotted down the street toward the courthouse.

"Tom, if what you said was true we never should have let him go," Verne began.

"It was true all right, but how far would we have got? My word against Curly's and Bob's, whoever they are, to say nothing of the sheriff. It would come out who I am, and we'd both be discredited. It's a lot better to make him lay off while he's scared," Tom advised.

"I suppose you're right," Verne agreed presently. "I—I—wonder if McConnell got away? Are you *sure* they said he was *innocent*?"

"Absolutely sure. And I'm sure he got away. Kit Martel was with me."

"I reckon I've made a fool of myself. Marsh is high man with Jess Westergaard, the boss of the Teton Company. They'll knife me from now on, and Jerry will despise me worse than ever."

"I don't think so, Verne," Tom said, placing his hand kindly on his brother's shoulder. "Own your mistake frankly, and I'm sure she'll be plenty generous."

For a moment the eyes of the young attorney gleamed; then he shook his head. "Not until I'm sure. McConnell *must* be guilty. I've got to see it through to the finish."

"Well, it's *your* conscience," Tom laughed. "Good night."

He circled around and got his horse. Most of the mob had by this time gone back uptown, though a few still lingered around the jail. Tom made another wide circle and eventually stopped in front of the Lone Star saloon. Most of the excitement was farther up the street, but there was considerable of a crowd at the Lone Star. Tom wondered if most of them were friends of McConnell's.

His entrance created considerable of a stir. Fat Eardley was off duty, but was still in the saloon, wearing a black derby hat and a checkered suit.

"My God, man, what're you doin' here?" Fat demanded. "I should think you'd be ridin' hell-fer-leather up Pine Creek right now."

"But I just got in. Why should I be ridin' back?"

"We just heard that you had come in an' lone-handed took Jim McConnell outa jail three, four hours ago."

"Why, who would say a thing like that?" Tom demanded in pained surprise. "I just had a talk with the sheriff and he said that the mob overpowered all his deputies an' took McConnell out to hang him, but some way they let him escape."

"Well, I'll be damned," Fat said. "But no matter what happened we're for you here. We'd have tried to help Jim if there'd been enough of us to do any good. I'm damned glad he got away."

"So am I," Tom said. "I'd like to have a talk with you, alone, Fat."

"Why, sure." Neither of them noticed a furtive-looking fellow who slid inconspicuously through the door, and raced up the street toward the New Era saloon like a shadow.

Fat led the way to a private room in the rear. "Between you an' me," the saloon man said, "you did git Jim out of jail, didn't you? And it's a fact, ain't it, they was aimin' to lynch Jim tonight?"

"Yes. But the sheriff an' his deputies are goin' to deny it, an' try to blame the mob in order to save their faces."

"Yo're a cool customer, Wood, but if you did take McConnell outa jail yore life won't be worth four-bits around here. These lumberjacks are tough hombres, an' the man Jim killed was popular. I'd be gittin' out if I was you," Fat advised.

"Yeh, I must be gittin' back," Tom agreed. "Rustlers have started workin' up our way."

"There'll be red hell poured out on this county before this business is through with," Fat predicted gloomily. "Have a drink before you go."

They walked to the bar, and Fat produced a bottle of what he declared was the best whisky in the county, and poured two glasses.

"Here's to you," Tom said as he raised his glass.

"Here's to Jim McConnell and Pine Creek," Fat responded.

They touched their glasses and drank. As they started to set them down the swinging doors of the saloon burst violently open and the ugly face of Roarin' Hack Ringo appeared. A mass of thickly packed bodies followed him inside. Most of them were dressed in the usual heavy garb and heavy, bradded boots of the lumberjack. The saloon filled like water into a can. When Ringo stopped within five feet of the bar, directly in front of Tom, who had turned with

his back against the bar, that short distance between them was almost the only unfilled space in the saloon.

There was a great red, raw welt across the giant's temple where Tom's six-gun had cut a gash, in their other encounter. Ringo stopped and a hideous smile that was meant to be sardonic contorted his face. It was plain that he had come looking for trouble, and Tom didn't doubt that he had been sent.

"Heard you was here, so I come right along," he said menacingly.

"And brought yore friends, I see," Tom returned coolly.

"I shore did. Wanted 'em to see the fun."

"Cut out the palaver, Ringo. Take him apart," a lumberjack shouted.

"Didn't you get enough of me that last time we met," Tom queried.

"This time it'll be different. You'll either fight me fair, man to man, or we'll wreck this whole damn' joint."

A sawed-off shotgun in the hands of Fat Eardley appeared above the bar. "Any time you start wreckin' you'll also start pickin' buck-shot out o' yore carcasses," Fat said. At the other end of the bar a similar weapon appeared in the hands of his bartender.

"You may be a roarin' devil to some people, Ringo, but yo're only a pain in the neck to me," Tom said quietly.

"Hell, don't let him bluff you, Ringo," a lumberjack shouted. "Make him take off that gun an' fight."

"You watch me," Ringo answered. It was part of the lumberjack code that a bully must maintain his position by his fists or suffer complete loss of caste. "Fight, or I'll lead you out of here by the nose."

"An' you hold yore distance or I'll blow you to hell with this shotgun," Fat Eardley warned.

"It's all right, Fat," Tom said quietly. "I'm not tryin' to dodge a fight with him. But it's got to be in the street where we have room."

"Don't be a fool," Fat said earnestly. "You can't do anything against a giant like him. If you did have a chance he'd play dirty, or his crowd would."

"The crowd'll stay back," Ringo promised, "though they should string him up by the heels after I git done with him. It's him who's responsible for the yarn that we took McConnell outa jail, an' then let him git away."

There was a roar of rage from the crowd at this.

"Well, take yore thugs outside if nothin' will do you but fight," Tom said. "I don't want to fight you, Ringo, but I'm only doin' it as a personal accommodation."

"My Gawd, he thinks he's doin' you a favor, Ringo," somebody laughed.

"By God, he is," the huge lumberjack crooned. He turned and stomped his way through the crowd.

"Don't go out there," Fat Eardley pleaded with Tom. "He'll cripple you for life. Git in the back room—I'll hold 'em off with this shotgun."

Tom shook his head and peeled off his gun belt, which he handed over the bar to Fat. He followed the crowd outside, where a small space in the center of the hoodlums had been cleared. Already Ringo had stripped to his red flannel undershirt, and the sleeves of that were rolled above his massive elbows.

Tom Powell slid out of his coat and stepped in. Instantly the great, hairy lumberjack bore down. Before Ringo knew what had happened to him he was rocking back on his heels and bleeding from the mouth. Out of nowhere two hard fists had come to set his head ringing.

Then, like an enraged animal, Ringo rushed. Tom gave ground, then ducked a wild swing and was back in the center of the open space. Again Ringo came on, and the weight of his huge arms were like clubs as he sought to beat down the smaller man's guard.

Tom Powell did not appear to be a big man, and he wasn't particularly smoothly built. He was rawboned, long-backed and long-armed. He had long, sloping shoulders like a prize fighter, and the muscles were on his back where they didn't interfere with a free swing. And he could hit like the kick of a horse. In speed and reach he easily had the advantage of his antagonist; and perhaps in skill. Though, no doubt, there were dozens of dirty tricks up Ringo's sleeve of which Tom knew nothing.

Tom knew that the bully's vulnerable point was that raw sore on his temple. He maneuvered to hit it, but he got in half a dozen swift, hard punches to the face—which scarcely stopped the big man—before he finally whipped a hook to the wound. His knuckles opened the wound, and Ringo emitted an involuntary howl of pain. Quick as a flash Tom drove a terrific short right to the giant's bread-basket. Ringo exploded a grunt, and then charged like an insane elephant.

Tom retreated, blocking and dodging as best he might. Swinging, half-blocked blows caught his head, shoulders and arms with enough force to make him dizzy. Then, suddenly, Ringo reversed his tactics, and his huge, heavily bradded and caulked shoe shot through the air aimed at the puncher's jaw. Tom fairly threw himself backward to keep from having his head kicked off, and the giant's toe whizzed past within two inches of his face.

Before he could recover, someone had seized him from behind, and then he was propelled violently straight into Ringo's arms. Something had struck him in the face, and then he felt himself drawn close against his foe's vile-smelling undershirt. He tried to get a crotch hold, but before he could do it he felt himself lifted high into the air, and then he was flung to the ground with stunning force. He felt as if every muscle in his body had been bruised.

"Give it to him, Ringo," a dozen men yelled like maniacs.

Tom looked up dully, and saw his red-shirted adversary leap high into the air above him. He knew what it meant, that lumberjacks "give him the boot." He tried to roll over, but he wasn't quite fast enough. He felt a stunning, burning pain in his side, and then everything mercifully went black.

13

VERY MUCH THE FOOL Sheriff George Marsh felt as he stormed away from Verne Powell's boarding house. To have to go down and order his deputies to swear to an obvious lie went against his grain. But in no other way could he save his face.

When he arrived at the courthouse the drunken mob was beginning to disband. He slipped into the jail unnoticed and found his three deputies gathered in the sheriff's office. They were trying to tell half a dozen or so citizens who had been involved in the mob what had happened.

"Don't talk!" Marsh shouted. "I'll do the talking here. You fellows want to know what become of McConnell? He got away. A lot of drunken bums come in here, got these dumbbell deputies of mine drunk, an' took the prisoner out. And then the fools let him get away from them."

"Why, that's not—" the regular deputy began.

"Shut up!" Marsh yelled. "It's just what happened. Now the rest of you git out of here. I wanta talk to these sugarplums who call themselves officers."

"Why, you—you—" Dode James gabbled incoherently.

"I'll talk to you later," Marsh said, and fairly thrust the last member of the mob outside. There was perspiration streaming down his face when he locked the door and slumped into a chair.

"What's the idee of makin' a play like that?" Brig Ferry demanded. "That didn't fool nobody. Hell, the mob found us tied up, an' we told 'em what happened. That feller Wood got the drop on us."

"You fellers ain't goin' to look very heroic either way," the sheriff said. "But we've got to say that the mob got McConnell away, for if we don't they'll pin it on us that we knew the mob was comin' an' planned to let 'em have McConnell. That fool, Curly Layton, spilled the whole story where Wood heard it. We don't dare bring Wood to trial."

"You mean we've got to deny that Wood was here?" demanded "Slim" Arco, the regular deputy.

"We have to, whether anybody believes it or not. That fellow Wood is poison. He's played us for suckers right from the start. You fellows played right into his hands by lettin' him get into the jail to spend a night with McConnell when he first hit town. Now

he's wised that cocky county attorney up to us," Marsh raved angrily.

"Ye gods!" Arco ejaculated.

"Here's the point," the sheriff said. "Verne Powell is the tack in our shoe. Got high an' mighty ideas about civic righteousness. He won't play ball. Westergaard has offered him a good thing, but he won't take it. He'll prosecute McConnell because he thinks he's guilty, but he won't take any timber money, even though everybody already thinks he's Westergaard's man as much as the rest of us."

"And he's the one who got McConnell out of the way tonight, through this feller Wood," Ferry said.

"No. But because of him we've got to stick to the story I told," Marsh said.

"Then why don't we get rid of him?" Dode James inquired.

"We've got to—him an' Wood both. But we've got to be careful how we do it. If anything should happen to Verne Powell, the Pine Crickers must be blamed. As for Wood, I'll take care of him myself. I'm going to spread the report that he's sold out to us and some of those hotheads up there will ventilate his innards."

"I had planned to git my hooks in that bozo myself," James said, "but it might be more fun to let them eggs up there settle his hash. Say, did you hear about the way he smacked down Roarin' Hack Ringo?" He went on to relate the details of Tom's first encounter with the boss bully of the lumber camps.

"Ringo was the first man in the jail tonight," Ferry said. "You should have seen his face when we told him Wood had got McConnell. Ringo had his orders to be sure that McConnell's neck got stretched."

"Well, McConnell's gone, an' I've got to report it to Westergaard," the sheriff said gloomily. "I'd just as will git it over with."

Just before the sheriff started to leave, the small, rat-like fellow who had scuttled out of the Lone Star saloon burst into the office. He was breathing hard from his run.

"Well, what is it?" Marsh growled.

"It's that feller Wood. He's up in the Lone Star."

"Know where Hack Ringo is?" the sheriff asked excitedly.

"Yes, him an' the crowd of lumberjacks who come down from Pine Creek with him are in the Bonanza. Hack's lookin' for trouble again."

"Good. Go tell him where Wood is," the sheriff ordered. "An' tell him Wood is makin' wise cracks about gittin' the best of him."

A delighted grin sped over the face of the small spy, and he scuttled out. The deputies looked at each other and grinned.

An hour later the sheriff was perched uneasily on the edge of a chair in the old ranchhouse which Jess Westergaard had obtained for his headquarters. It was located close to the site of the proposed sawmill.

"Well, a fine bunch of turtledoves you and your deputies are," the superintendent was saying scornfully. "Let one man outwit and outfight the bunch of you. I must see this fellow Wood and hire him instead of a dozen other fellows."

Westergaard was a handsome figure of a man, about forty, with the rosy flush of health on his cheeks. Just now he wore striped silk pajamas, and his bare feet were thrust into bedroom slippers. His rumpled black hair couldn't destroy his good looks, but the grim, hard lines of his mouth and the expression in his cold blue eyes could.

"I know how to take care of Wood," the sheriff said. "But Powell is the man you'll have to silence. Maybe he put Wood up to what he done tonight."

"H—m, Powell is a fool. We must ditch him. But that man Wood—he interests me. If he survives this last encounter with Hack Ringo, I want him working for me."

"What are yore plans now, Jess?" the sheriff asked sullenly.

"We're going ahead with the mill and some logging operations. We've started court action to obtain a right of way across McConnell's land, but we can't afford to wait for the case to drag through the courts, even if we were sure we'd win. We've got to haul our logs to Pine Creek if we have to station armed guards all along the way. But the only way to be sure is to break that outfit up there, and do it in a hurry."

"McConnell is out now. He'll fight," Marsh warned.

"He's got to stay hidden or we'll arrest him. If you hadn't juggled things we might have that whole lay-out up there under lock and key. Are you doing anything about arresting Crawford and Jack McConnell?"

"No. You'd as well hunt for a needle in a haystack as anybody up there. And there Wood comes in again. If we arrest them he'll swear we knew of the raid in advance and could have stopped it."

"Sheriff, what about this rustling talk I've heard?" Westergaard said.

The sheriff looked at the other man slyly. "There has been some rustling, to be sure," he said dubiously. "I ain't done much about it, because the more cattle they lose the more it helps our cause."

"Yes, of course," Westergaard mused. "Look here, Marsh. You haven't been altogether frank with me. How much do you know about that rustling anyway?"

"A lot," the sheriff shot out. "It's been penny ante stuff up till now, but recently I've had a proposition made to me that you may be interested in."

"Yes?"

"I was some surprised to find out who was doin' it, but it includes men right there in the basin. And they want to strike a deal with

you. In short, if you'll pay 'em a bonus for the cattle they can drive out, an' give 'em what protection you can they'll agree to bust McConnell and the rest of the ones who are givin' us trouble up there a damned sight quicker than we can do it ourselves."

"Just how did they come to make you that proposition?" Westergaard asked warily.

"For one thing because they realized that it's a payin' proposition. But as a matter of fact there was a threat thrown in with it."

"A threat?"

"Yes. It happens that the man who made me the proposition is able to prove that Jim McConnell is innocent of that murder. If we don't pay him that bonus and give him our help he threatens to tell all he knows," the sheriff stated.

"I see."

"The fellow has been workin' on some of our men, too, and they know the facts. Two of the fools let Tom Wood overhear 'em talkin' tonight. If you'll take my advice, Jess, and you really want to win, we'll throw in with that bunch and meet their terms. If we don't, they can make us plenty of trouble," the sheriff said.

Westergaard was silent for a long time. "All right," he said finally, "go ahead. Anything to win. If you get a chance to put me in personal contact with the leader of the rustlers I wish you'd do it."

"I can do it," Marsh said. "But there's something else, Jess. I—"

"More money? All right. But don't make a show of it like you have been doing. Put it in some outside bank."

"It's not money. I was only goin' to say that I've found out that McConnell's girl was in the first raid. You said you wanted to provoke them Pine Creekers to violence. If we arrested her I reckon it would git 'em to a boil right now."

"How do you know that, Marsh?"

"I've got a spy. It's really rich. Do you know Bert Friel?"

"No."

"Well, he's a young farmer out here who works his mother-in-law's farm. He don't like the job at all. Used to work for McConnell, an' thinks there's nobody like him. He wants to give up the farm an' go back to work for McConnell, but his wife won't let him. McConnell is a bone of contention between 'em. The Pine Creekers use Friel's ranch as a gatherin' place down here, because they know they can trust Friel. But his wife has got no use for that country or the people, and she tells me everything that happens," Marsh chuckled.

"Was it her—"

"Who tipped me off about that first raid to free McConnell? It was. They'd sent word to Friel several days before of what they intended to do. Friel's wife overheard the plan, an' dusted right down

to tell me. I promised her if she'd keep quiet about it I'd see that her husband was protected."

"Good. About the girl, I'll think it over. It may be a good thing to scare 'em with. You'd better raise a posse and get up there tomorrow to look for McConnell. It'll look bad if you don't. Good night."

Thus summarily dismissed the sheriff took his departure.

Meanwhile, while Boulder seethed with activity, Jim McConnell and Kit Martel were making record time getting back to the J Bar M.

"I wish to hell Tom had come with us," Kit repeated for the tenth time. "I'm worried about him gittin' into trouble back there."

"I'm not worryin' much—after seein' the way he handled them deputies," McConnell said. "It was a lucky break for me that you two arrived tonight. I had a feeling all day that there was to be a lynchin' party tonight, an' I knew what part I'd play in it."

"You'll have to be mighty careful, Jim, that they don't pick you up again."

"They'll not get me again," McConnell said grimly. "If I could get a fair trial it would be different. But I know now that I can't."

Their horses were exhausted, but the day was still young when they arrived at the home ranch. As they rode up Jerry came flying out of the house.

"Oh, Dad, you're here!" she cried. "I haven't slept a wink all night. I just didn't dare let myself hope that you'd get out. It would have broken my heart if you hadn't."

McConnell took her in his arms and kissed her tenderly. Old Kit turned away, and pretended to have a cinder in his eye.

"It's mighty good to be back home again," McConnell said, "even if I can't stay."

"How did you get away?" the girl asked. "But where is Tom Wood? Did—did—anything happen to him?"

"I don't think so. He was all right when we left. He insisted on stayin' behind."

"He walked right into the jail alone an' brought yore dad out, Jerry. He's some man," Kit said. "All just in time, too. They meant to lynch Jim tonight."

The girl shuddered, and grasped her father's arm.

"I'd hate to have anything happen to him," she worried.

"Better ketch me a fresh horse, an' throw some supplies together, Kit," McConnell said. "I won't be here long."

There was a tender greeting between the rancher and his wife.

"I'm so frightened," Mrs. McConnell said. "Can't you make terms with that lumber company and get them to drop that awful charge?"

"Sorry, Mother, there's not a chance of that. You can't drop murder charges if you wanted to," McConnell said.

"But who did kill that poor man?"

"We'll probably never know."

At the door the lean, tall, old-maid cook, Crackers, vented an audible snort. "If it don't come out it's because certain people who know won't let it out," she said.

"Crackers, you talk too much," McConnell told her with evident displeasure.

"It will come out some day, I'm sure of it," Jerry said. "And it won't be long either. Tom Wood has promised to produce the real killer, and I believe he can do it."

"Wood had better lay off of that if he knows what's good for him," McConnell growled. "I've got to go now. I'll see Jack and Lee, and then I'll go into retirement."

"But we must see you again," Jerry pleaded.

"You'll hear from me from time to time," he promised. "I'll keep in touch with Kit and some of the other boys."

He kissed both women, and finally left them, with Mrs. McConnell almost in a state of collapse.

"It's all right, Mother," Jerry consoled. "He's out of danger now. They can't get him up here."

But Jerry herself was deeply worried over more things than the possibility of her father being recaptured.

That afternoon Sheriff Marsh arrived with a posse.

"I'm lookin' for your father, Miss," Marsh said. "He escaped from jail last night. an' I know he came here. If he don't surrender we'll have to search the premises."

"My father escaped!" Jerry cried. "Oh, I'm so glad. How did he do it?"

"Yo're not foolin' anybody, Miss," the sheriff said. "You know exactly how he got away. Your man, Wood, is hurt so bad that I can lay my hand on him any time I want to, and I've got plenty of evidence to incriminate you. I'm puttin' it up to you flat; either tell me where I can git yore dad, or I take you back to jail."

Marsh was bluffing, but the girl didn't know it.

"How did Tom get hurt?" she cried, forgetful of the threat to her own liberty.

"He made the mistake of tryin' to lick Roarin' Hack Ringo, an' got his ribs caved in," Marsh chuckled. "But where is your dad?"

"I don't know, and I wouldn't tell you if I did," Jerry flamed. "You can take me to jail if you want to. I'm not afraid."

"Well, I'll hunt around for yore old man first," the sheriff backed down.

Jerry placed a trembling hand to her heart as she watched the sheriff and his men ride away. She had never known such passionate joy as when her father had clasped her in his arms after his narrow escape from a horrible, ignominious death. Now she was

knowing the counterpart of that joy in her anxiety lest he be found again and taken back to Boulder.

But she knew instinctively that he would never again be taken alive. He was among friends and well hidden. She was sure that the gross, blundering sheriff would never be able to find him. And her thoughts were now almost as much concerned with the drifting cowboy, for such only she still conceived Tom Wood to be, who had risked his life to get her father out of the Boulder jail.

Ever since that encounter on the highway with Roaring Hack Ringo she had been afraid that he would again meet up with the bully, and be crippled like some of the other men whom Ringo had had beaten up. Now it had happened. But she was realizing that her concern now was vastly more than it had been then. And it was not only because she had come to depend upon him so much.

"Jerry," she heard her mother call, and hastened into the house.

"That was the sheriff, wasn't it?" her mother asked tremulously.

Jerry forced a confident smile. This frail, delicate woman must be protected in any event.

"It was," she replied, "but there's nothing to worry about. He knows he can't find Father. He's had no success arresting Uncle Jack and Lee, and Father knows the country much better than they do."

"You know, Jerry," Mrs. McConnell smiled, "I feel more hopeful than I have any time since this terrible trouble started. I really believe that Tom Wood will find out who really killed Mr. Creed. Somehow that man inspires confidence."

"Yes, he does," Jerry answered hurriedly and left the room. She dared not risk dashing her mother's hopes by letting slip the fact that Tom had been badly injured.

The girl saddled her favorite mount and went for a ride. If she were going to be arrested she wanted to enjoy one more gallop across the land that she loved so well. She was following a familiar trail when she heard her name suddenly called out from the rocks above. She halted, and a moment later Lee Crawford came bounding down the rocks to join her.

"Lee! What on earth are you doing here?" she cried. "Aren't you in danger? The sheriff is up here looking for Father. He just left our place."

She saw that he had not yet heard that her father was at liberty. His expression became incredulous, almost blank.

"You mean—your father escaped?" he intoned.

"Yes. And not half an hour before a mob was going to lynch him. Isn't that glorious?"

"Why, yes. But I don't understand—"

"It was Tom Wood—Tom and Kit Martel. Tom went into the jail alone, held up the deputies and got him out."

"If he did there's something fishy about it," the rancher stated.

"Fishy? What do you mean?"

"I mean it couldn't have been done unless the officers down there were in collusion with him. I've never trusted that hombre."

"Why, Lee! You act like you were displeased that Father got away. He would have been lynched, I tell you," she protested.

He smiled cynically. "Of course I'm pleased—if there really was any danger. But I think they let Wood get him out for some purpose, and they knew he would be gone when they raised their mob."

An angry flush was creeping to the roots of Jerry's hair. "What possible purpose could Father's enemies have in letting him escape?" she demanded.

"I couldn't say, but here's one possibility: They knew Jim would get in touch with me and Jack, and if there was a spy—this same Tom Wood for instance—they could gather us all in," he said.

"That is absolutely unfair," she declared. "And for your benefit I'll tell you that Tom was badly hurt in a fight with Roaring Hack Ringo before he got out of Boulder."

"Who told you that?"

"The sheriff."

"That," he grinned, "is what I thought."

Dismay and doubt chased across the girl's face.

"I have every confidence in Tom Wood," she asserted. "You just don't happen to like him."

"I'll admit that," he laughed. "Now look here, Jerry: I know things have been tough, and you've got a lot on your mind; but why don't you let me help carry the load? Why don't you marry me?"

She was so long in answering that he became impatient.

"You're surely not moonin' over that skunk of a lawyer yet, are you?" he demanded.

She flushed. "I don't 'moon'," she retorted. "There's nothing between me and Verne Powell and never will be, but I'm still not small enough to go around calling him names. As for marrying you, do you think I'd be any happier to have a husband as well as a father hiding out from the law?"

"Don't worry about me. I can take care of you and keep clear of the law too," he boasted. "What about it; will you marry me?"

"No," she answered slowly, "I appreciate the offer, Lee, but I just couldn't marry you. At least not now."

She gave him her hand, but somehow she had lost all zest for the ride, and she quickly returned home.

14

WHEN TOM POWELL REVIVED after his fight with Roarin' Hack Ringo he was flat on his back on one of the Lone Star's pool tables. Fat Eardley and another man were bending over him. He tried

to sit up, but desisted with a groan as a pain shot through him like a knife-thrust.

"Take it easy," Fat said. "You've got you a cluster of cracked ribs."

"Yeh, I remember," the puncher said. "Ringo sorta done me up."

"But you was lickin' him fair an' square till some dirty whelp of a lumberjack grabbed you from behind an' throwed you into Ringo's arms," a man said indignantly.

"What I'm wonderin' is what stopped him at all?"

"I reckon them sawed-off shotguns me an' Pinky carried was some persuasive," Fat said dryly. "Come damn' near bein' another riot like that one up at the jail."

Presently a doctor bustled in and wrapped Tom's body tightly with bandages to hold the broken ribs in place. Every time a rib snapped back the cold sweat stood out on the puncher's face, but he made no sound.

"There, young fellow, that'll hold you for a while, but you'll have to stay in bed a couple of weeks," the doctor said.

"He can have my room here in the back, an' we'll git somebody to take care of him," Fat Eardley said, and despite his protests Tom was carried into Fat's room. "I'll put me a cot in here, an' you won't lack for a thing."

Thought of lying bed-bound for two weeks was gall and wormwood to the fighting puncher. There was so much to be done, and also so much danger of things turning out wrong.

He had a vistor almost the first thing in the morning—the county attorney.

"That damned whelp has got the nerve to demand that he see you alone," Fat said. "But if he tries any funny business you just whistle an' I'll be in there."

"It's all right, Fat—I can take care of myself," Tom said. "I suppose under the law he's got the right to question me, but he ain't got a thing on me."

Fat went out as Verne appeared. Tom greeted him with a grin.

Verne crossed hastily to the bed, and bending over spoke in a low voice. "Why did you have to get tangled up with Ringo?" he demanded. "There isn't a man in this county can cope with him."

"Not even you?" Tom asked. "You used to be pretty good in a rough-and-tumble yourself. Quite some coper, I'd say."

"I've quit that sort of thing," Verne said shortly. "I'm sorry you got hurt. I'll see that you don't want for anything."

"You'll bloody well do nothing of the sort. Do you want to cook my goose as well as your own? You'll go out of here as my worst enemy."

"I guess you're right. And I'm glad you saved McConnell's life. But I'll come back in here to question you once in a while. Tom, I don't like the way things are going."

When Verne departed he paused at the bar to speak with Eardley. "I'm not arresting that fellow back there—yet," he said. "But I want him where I can get at him if I need him."

"Go on, shyster. There's somethin' about the air we don't like when you're around," Fat said.

Verne flushed angrily and walked out.

"That cuss been pickin' on you?" Fat demanded of Tom.

"No; I can stand him all right. He's just wind. He wants me to sign some kind of a statement about that fight with Ringo. Seems he's gittin' kinda tired himself of Ringo's bulldozin'."

"Well, you be careful what you sign," Fat advised. "Powell is a skunk."

Tom flushed, and then pretended he had been struck by a severe pain. "Don't worry about me signin' anything I hadn't ought to."

How long, he wondered, could he keep on without it being found out that he was Verne's brother?"

It was nearly noon the next day when Verne returned. There was a big crowd in the saloon, and Tom guessed at his brother's arrival by the sudden lull in the noise.

"Want any witnesses to your talk with this feller, Tom?" Eardley asked.

"Why don't you fellows try to get it through your head that I'm not your enemy? I'm only trying to uphold the law," Verne said.

Verne was still sitting upon the edge of the bed fifteen minutes later when the door to the room opened and Fat Eardley appeared.

"Visitor to see you, Tom," he said, and then noticed Verne. "Hell, I thought you'd gone," he told the lawyer.

"I was just going," Verne said.

"Come in," Tom called cordially. But his eyes bugged from his head when he saw his visitor. It was Jerry McConnell!

"I hope I'm not intruding," she said. "I came as quickly as I could after I learned you had been hurt." She ignored Verne.

"That's mighty nice of you," Tom said. "Did your father get home all right?"

"He did." The girl's eyes swung to the lawyer's face; her cheeks were red from something besides having come from the outdoors.

"Jerry, I want to say how glad I am that you father escaped," the lawyer said. "I had no idea that they would try to lynch him. I hope you know I certainly don't approve of lawlessness."

"Indeed not," she said. "I know you're a great stickler for the letter of the law."

Again he flushed. "I believed your father was guilty," he defended. "I still think he is, though I admit now I may be mistaken. Tom here says he heard a man say so. I've tried to find that man, one Curly Layton, but I can't get hold of him."

"If you really want to make the law respected why don't you

stop those rustlers who are stealing our cattle?"

"Bring me some real evidence and I'll do what I can," Verne said sulkily.

"Tom, have you told him what you know about that?" Jerry asked.

"Sure. But who am I?" Tom shrugged. "There really ain't any evidence yet, Jerry. That's why I'm sorry I was fool enough to let Hack Ringo cripple me up."

"Well, the other boys are on the lookout, but they're pretty much handicapped. The sheriff and a posse are up there hunting for my father, Uncle Jack, and Lee Crawford. If we lose enough cattle they know the lumber company will win. So, naturally, we don't accept any help from *any* county official."

Verne flushed and rose. "I'll be going," he said stiffly.

They watched him take his departure.

"I'd like to crack that big head of his with a bungstarter," Fat Eardley said.

"Verne is all right," Jerry said surprisingly. "He's honest—the only one in the whole bunch who is. Tell me, Tom—just how badly are you hurt?"

"Bad enough that I want to get out of here as quick as I can and have another try at that bird, Ringo," Tom smiled.

"Three ribs broke, an' mebbe internal injuries, the doc says. Hardly worth mentionin'," Fat said.

"I'm so sorry. Why didn't you come back with Father and Kit?" Jerry queried.

"I hoped to find out something that would help you folks. My error was in tangling with Ringo."

"Have you learned anything—about those rustlers, I mean?" the girl asked eagerly.

"Not a thing yet, but I hope to. How does your father feel being free again?"

"Oh, it's wonderful. He loves the open country so much. But I'm worried sick whenever I think of him being hunted down like an animal. The sheriff was at our place yesterday."

"What?" Tom and Fat asked in unison.

"They know I was present at the first raid on the jail. I've just heard that one of the men who was so badly wounded then has just died. It does make me an accessory—to—to—murder."

"And all the rest of us," Tom said. "But I don't believe they'll have the nerve to arrest anybody for it. Don't let them bluff you."

"I won't. They can keep me in jail the rest of my life before I'll betray my father."

Now Tom knew what it was that his brother lacked. It was warm, human, sympathetic loyalty. Verne's loyalty could only be to a cold idea. He had disrupted all of Tom's plans because he wanted to practice law. That was all right. But he had proceeded

to lose the finest girl in the world because people meant less to him than an idea.

"I wonder how Kit'll make out as foreman?" Tom mused.

"I'm afraid he'll need help, and you must get well right away," the girl said. "I'm still hoping that you will find out who really murdered Mr. Creed."

"I'll sure give it the old gas alley try," Tom smiled.

The girl had risen. "I must be going now, but I'll drop in to see you before I start home this evening—if they let me start," she said with a smile.

"Do you mean that you rode all the way down here just to see me?" he asked.

"To see if you were being taken care of, and to see if I could do anything for you," she corrected. And then, as if to make amends for her remarks sounding a little too impersonal, she stooped swiftly and kissed him. She stepped rapidly across to the door, flashed him a smile, waved her hand, and disappeared.

"Gosh!" the puncher said wonderingly.

"Feller, I'd let Hack Ringo beat me up twice just to get kissed by a girl like that," Fat Eardley said.

"It was shore worth a few busted ribs," Tom Powell agreed.

15

IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO KEEP a man of Tom Powell's immense vitality flat on his back. In a week he was up and walking around the Lone Star saloon, though his steps were short and unsteady.

The Lone Star these days was well-nigh deserted. Most of its patronage came from the Pine Creek country, and the denizens of that basin were now busily engaged in keeping out of the hands of the law.

The officers had been unable to find the three men they wanted, the two McConnells and Lee Crawford, but they were still holding most of the half-dozen men who had been wounded in the first jail raid. There was now talk that the grand jury was going to investigate the two raids on the jail, and there were frequent reports that Jerry McConnell herself was to be the next person arrested.

Tom realized that it might go through in spite of the counter-charges that could be made. The heads of the lumber company were getting desperate. They had their mill ready for operation, and a quantity of logs cut. Every day's delay was costing them money. Westergaard was not a man to be easily balked. Wholesale arrests of the cowmen might give him a free hand.

The first day Tom ventured out on the sidewalk, walking with the short, stiff steps that his injury made imperative, he ran smack into something that called for action. As he neared the New Era

saloon two men came out a couple of rods from him and turned toward the livery stable. Tom stopped in his tracks. One of the men was Dode James, the special deputy with whom he had already had a run-in. But it was the other man who interested Tim. He had seen the fellow just once before in his life, but under circumstances which neither of them were likely to forget. It was the dark-skinned, black-eyed leader of the rustlers whom he had encountered driving away J Bar M cattle.

Fortunately, the fellow hadn't noticed Tom, or if he had cast a casual glance in his direction he hadn't recognized him, for Tom was now wearing a cheap, gray suit, and a different hat from the one he had been wearing. James hadn't glanced in his direction.

What were these two doing together? One was reputedly an officer of the law; the other a certain rustler. Tom walked on to where he could watch the livery stable unobserved, and presently he saw them ride away in the direction of the Teton Company's mills. He believed that they were going to see Jess Westergaard. If true, it meant that the lumber company was really mixed up with the cattle stealing. If that fact could be established it would change the whole tide of affairs.

He turned and walked back to the Lone Star faster than was good for him. He had a terrific pain in the side when he arrived.

"There, I knew you'd overdo it," Fat charged. "Now into that bed with ye, an' don't git out till the doc says you kin."

"I'll be all right in a few minutes," Tom said. "But I wish you'd have my horse brought around."

"What the hell? You can't ride a horse."

"I've got to."

"Say, is them damned officers after you? If they are I'll—"

"No, it's not that. But I've stumbled onto something that may be pretty important; something that may link the lumber company and the sheriff's office with the rustlers who are operatin' in Pine Creek Basin," Tom said. "There's a man in town that I've got to follow."

"But can't somebody else do it for you?" Fat demanded. "You're not able—"

"No; I've got to do it myself. Be a good fellow, Fat, an' have my horse brought up. You might fix up enough grub to last me a couple or three days, too. An' have somebody keep watch for a tall, black-headed hombre ridin' a mighty good bay horse. He left here with Dode James a few minutes ago, but I figger he'll be back. He's wearin' black pants under bat-wing chaps, and he's got Texas-style tapideros on his stirrups," Tom described.

"Say, I know just the man to help you on this job. It's Bert Friel. I've told you about him before. He used to punch cows for McConnell. He only farms a small piece of ground out here an' he's always

ready to take a few days work when he can git it. Let him go with you, an' I'll pay his wages," Fat offered.

"Well, if he's dependable I might take him along. I know I'm in purty poor shape," Tom agreed. "But I'll stand the wages."

"I'll send a man right out for Bert, an' meanwhile I'll have somebody else keep an eye out for this gent you want to trail."

By the time Bert Friel arrived Tom was feeling better again. His body was tightly wrapped with bandages, and he would suffer; but he was at last on the trail he had wanted to find.

He liked Bert Friel. He had met the young rancher the night of the first raid on the jail, but hadn't had much chance to notice him. He was a slender young fellow with a pleasant face and an agreeable manner.

"I saw you fight Hack Ringo the other night," the puncher said with admiration in his eyes. "I figger you'll do to ride the river with. An' if I kin do anything to help the McConnell family I'll shore be pleased to do it."

"Reckon you'd like to be there yet, wouldn't you, Bert?" Fat Eardley said.

"I shore would," Friel grinned. "But my wife wouldn't stand for it. She thinks cowpunchers all have a through ticket to hell. It's the way she was raised."

It was after dark before Fat's man returned with the information that the black-headed man and Dode James had returned to town.

"They put their horses in the livery stable an' grained 'em before they went to the saloon," the man informed. "But I sneaked into the stable an' I saw that James had unsaddled his horse, but this other hombre hadn't."

"That means that he's leavin' town in the night," Fat said. "Ike, you hustle back to that stable an' keep watch."

It was nearly three hours before Ike burst breathlessly into the back room of the saloon where Tom, Bert, and the proprietor waited.

"He's gone," the man reported. "Headed toward Pine Creek."

Tom and Bert were all ready to go. Their horses waited at the back of the saloon, and the men promptly swung into their saddles.

It hurt him to ride, but Tom had known that it would, and he was prepared for it. He gritted his teeth and stuck tight. The main thing was to trail the black-headed rustler without being seen.

"We've got to be careful, Bert," he warned. "I have a feeling that this fellow isn't goin' far the way he left town."

The moon had recently risen above the eastern hills, and the slopes of the mountains were covered with huge slumberous shadows.

"Hey, look!" Tom exclaimed suddenly. "Ain't that a rider out there in the sage?"

"It shore is," Burt said. "It must be our man doublin' back."

"Right. An' that means he's headin' toward the upper end of the

valley. There's only one trail he can take. It makes our job easier. We can ride for twenty miles before we'll need to look for him again."

They rode on for half a mile so as not to excite the suspicions of the man they were trailing. Then they turned around and rode back, nearly to the town before they detoured and struck the road they meant to follow; nearly a mile south of Boulder.

By that time the acute pain in Tom's side had subsided to a dull, steady ache. Fortunately for him, Midnight was easy-gaited and a fast walker.

They passed within a mile of Bert Friel's ranch. "I told my old lady I was doin' a few days work for the sheriff." Bert chuckled. "Otherwise, she'd have raised a holler."

But Bert would have been greatly amazed could he have known that already his wife had questioned the sheriff about her husband's activities, and that later the two had ascertained that he had left town with the man known as Tom Wood.

They were averaging, Tom estimated, about five miles an hour. They paused, and by the light of matches made sure that a single horseman had passed that way only a little while before. Tom breathed easier. He knew now, for sure, that he was on his trail.

"Gotta watch out now," Tom cautioned. "Might bump onto a camp any time. I fancy they wouldn't like midnight visitors."

"This is a heap likely to be dangerous, ain't it?" Bert asked.

"It is. An' if you wanta turn back it'll be all right with me, an' there'll be no talk. You've got a family. I won't blame you in the least."

"I'm stickin'," Bert said simply.

They had been in the saddle nearly six hours when they suddenly came upon a bunch of saddle horses grazing beside the trail. They saw the horses in time to stop in the timber.

"If those were range horses they'd run," Tom said. "We're darn near their camp."

"You stay here an' let me scout around a little on foot," Bert suggested.

Because he couldn't get around briskly Tom agreed. It was half an hour before the puncher returned.

"It's a camp all right," he reported breathlessly. "I got close enough to hear their voices, an' to see some of 'em stretched out on the ground around the embers of a campfire."

"If they was talkin' then our man has just waked 'em up," Tom said. "Hear what they said?"

"All I heard was one of 'em say, 'Fer Christ's sake, Monk, why don't you wait till mornin' to talk, an' let us sleep.'"

"Monk, huh? Say, Bert, didn't you ever hear of Monk Heaton, the outlaw?"

"Why, shore I have. Hell, he's one of Butch Cassidy's old gang. But I thought he'd went to South America with Butch."

"Mebbe he did, but I've got a hunch he's back," Tom said.

In fact he was certain that he was not mistaken, though he didn't tell Bert Friel all he knew. He had never known any of the famous Wild Bunch, but Jorg Jørgensen had. And Jorg had told him in so many words that he was going to join a set of tough characters in the Caribou Mountains.

A delicate situation presented itself. There was a chance that Jorg Jørgensen was even now in this camp. Jorg might be able to tell Tom what he wanted to know—and he might not. But Monk Heaton would resent bitterly being followed by the mar. against whom he already had a grudge.

"The best thing we can do," Tom said, "is to go back the trail a ways an' make a cold camp till mornin'."

It was like walking on ground that might explode under their feet at any moment. Even the nicker of a horse might bring discovery, and discovery was pretty, likely to mean sudden death.

16

IT WAS SCARCELY DAYLIGHT when Tom and Bert heard the ringing of an ax below them in the canyon. The sound carried easily in that clear, thin air. It meant that the outlaws were preparing breakfast.

"Hadn't I better sneak down there an' find out what I can?" Bert asked. "There's lots of timber an' I won't be in any danger."

"Bring up the horses first," Tom said. "Can't take any chances on 'em nickerin' if the rustlers' horses have worked up this way."

The horses had been staked only a short distance beyond the camp. The grass was good and both animals were lying down. Bert led them down and threw on the saddles.

Once they heard a man yelling at the horses. The outlaws were getting ready to move.

"You wait here," Tom said. "I'm going to have a look at that camp myself." His body was stiff and sore, but the excitement of danger had caused him to forget aches and pains.

He had to move with the utmost care, for his injuries prevented him from stooping and crawling as Bert might have done. But he wanted to know if Jorg Jørgensen was with the outlaws. Even as he was stalking the outlaw camp he smiled at the many-sided character of his friendships. His only brother was a lawyer and a stern stickler for the law. Jorg Jørgensen was a born outlaw; a man who hated any kind of discipline, and considered anything that stood in the path of his own wants as a mere obstacle to be swept aside, like one would brush away a fly. But even Jorg had his virtues. Tom had come into the country honestly seeking to help Verne, but at

once he had become aligned with the people Verne was opposing. "It sure looks like I'm in the wrong camp here," he mused. "I'd ought to be with these outlaws. And yet, I'm really a pretty decent sort of a cuss. It's just my sympathetic nature, I reckon."

Presently he caught sight of a small fire through the trees. Guided by it he reached a small clump of pines beyond which he dared go no farther. But from there he could see four men eating around the campfire.

Saddled horses were standing near by.

The men were about finished. They began to get up, pack their few pieces of camp utensils and their grub supply and blankets on the back of their saddles and were soon ready to travel.

When Tom and Bert finally ventured to inspect the camp which the others had just deserted there were plain signs that the men had been there at least two nights.

"Waitin' for Monk to come back and make his report," Tom diagnosed.

He considered the advisability of sending Bert back, but could find no good excuse. The rancher was handy, too, to perform the chores which Tom found difficult to do because of the necessity of making a walking ramrod of himself.

Following the outlaws now was dangerous, tricky business. They had to keep far enough behind to avoid being seen, for the mere presence of any man in this wild country was enough to make an explanation necessary.

They had to depend upon following the tracks, but because of the number in the party ahead it was comparatively easy.

The trail ended at a cabin. Tom dismounted and concealed himself in the brush where he could watch it. Bert took the horses and withdrew into the timber to make camp. Tom had been there less than twenty minutes when a new party of horsemen galloped up to the cabin. They were seven in number, and somehow their actions indicated that this place had been their headquarters for some time and they had only been out somewhere on a short ride.

Tom needed but one glance to identify the broad shoulders and square head of Jorg Jorgensen. His suspicion that his erstwhile friend was associated with Heaton's band was now confirmed.

The two groups of outlaws mingled, and apparently carried on an eager, somewhat excited conversation. It was now growing dusk and Tom waited in a dither of impatience and excitement for it to get dark enough for him to creep in and try to hear something.

Jorg's presence bothered him. Not willingly would he get the big Dane into trouble, even though he knew that Jorg was by nature utterly lawless. If he could only get to talk to the big fellow he might persuade him to withdraw, though it was doubtful.

Once it was dark enough to make movements obscure Tom slipped

in toward the cabin. The rattle of tin dishes as he got close informed him that the men were eating supper. The single door was open.

But they were not talking business. He was not surprised to find that loud-mouthed, talkative Jorg held the floor.

"Yes, sir," Jorg was saying, "he goes out there to the corral fence and turns over that beef hide. There was his own brand starin' him right in the face. 'Where'd this hide come from?' he asks. 'I dunno where it come from, but I know where it's goin'," I says, an' I outs with my knife an' cuts the brand out right before his eyes. 'Eat it,' I says, an' I'm a Dutchman's uncle if he didn't wolf her down—hair an' all."

"That's one way of gittin' rid of evidence," a man laughed. "But didn't it make him sick?"

"Hell, no," Jorg said. "He just shut his eyes and imagined he was eatin' one of his wife's pancakes. It tasted about the same."

"She musta been the one who learned you to cook, Jorgensen." came Monk Heaton's cool voice, and the laugh seemed to be turned on Jorg.

"Aw, hell, you fellers don't appreciate good cookin' or nothin' else," Jorg grunted. "I'm gonna git my blankets an' turn in."

"What about a poker game, Jorgie? You still got yore shirt to lose," a man laughed.

"No poker tonight," came Heaton's voice. "We wanta be in the saddle at the crack o' dawn, so everybody roll in early."

Tom drew back and crouched against the wall. He realized his danger. He hadn't expected them to retire so early, and evidently the most of them slept out under the stars in preference to the dingy overcrowded cabin. If somebody happened to come behind the cabin he would almost surely be discovered.

He heard a man come out, and a minute later he saw him walking over to a cluster of aspens where three or four night horses had been tied. Dark as it was he recognized Jorg's broad back.

Though every tick of his watch might be bringing him closer and closer to disaster and eternity Tom waited until Jorg reached the horses. Then he stepped boldly away from the cabin and sauntered over to the horses. Four or five other men were now outside the cabin. They couldn't help seeing him. Jorg, too, would be sure to see him coming. It was as nerve-tingling a spot as the puncher had ever been in.

He had banked everything on the hope that the men at the cabin would think he was Jorg going out to look at the horses, and that Jorg would think it was one of the others coming out to join him. What happened after he got there would depend altogether upon Jorg.

He had reached the horses before he realized that he must have been holding his breath for upward of a minute. He let it out with

an explosive gasp, and at the same time found his brow damp with perspiration.

"Damned if I like to see horses tied up all night," remarked Jorg, and Tom remembered that the Dane was almost a fanatic about having fat horses. "If it was me—Say, who the hell—" He had turned and suddenly recognized a stray sheep in the fold.

Tom thrust his hat back. "Pipe down, unless you wanta get me killed," he whispered.

"Good God! What're you doin' here?" Jorg gasped.

"I'll be gettin' myself shot if Heaton finds out I'm here," Tom said. "Let's go some place an' talk."

"I dunno," Jorg grunted. His hand had fallen to the handle of his gun the moment he knew there was an interloper.

"For God's sake go ahead an' holler at Heaton if you ain't the kind of a friend a man can depend on," Tom rasped.

He had gauged his man well. Jorg could stand anything better than the charge that he would go back on a friend.

"Come along before somebody else comes this way," Jorg said. "If you're spyin' on us yore life wouldn't be worth two-bits if you got caught, or mine either if I tried to help you."

In silence Tom followed the broad-backed young outlaw until they were well beyond earshot in the timber.

"Well, let's have it," he said gruffly.

17

"I SEE YOU FOUND YOUR FRIENDS all right," Tom remarked.

"If you've got a sermon on honesty up yore sleeve you can save it," Jorg said coldly. "I had enough damned sermons when I was a kid. I do what I damned please, an' nobody stops me."

"An' I don't give a damn about your morals," Tom said with equal curtness. "If you wanta git yourself hung or sent to the pen that's your business. I'm playing my game an' you're playin' yours. But we can help each other if you want to play ball."

"Dammit, Tom, you're the one straight-shooter in the whole damned world that I'd let interfere with me," the outlaw said with a swift change of mood. "Yore business here, I take it, is to stop our little operations?"

"Partly, yes. It happens that the people you mean to raid are my friends."

"I heard about you takin' a bunch of cattle away from Monk and three of his men, and I had to talk like hell to make 'em believe you wasn't a friend of mine, because you mentioned my name. But they'll be harder to stop this time."

"Maybe. On the other hand they may be ridin' right into a trap."

"How's that?" the outlaw blurted.

"I didn't stumble onto this place accidentally," Tom smiled. "We followed Heaton from Boulder. I know everything he did there. I know who he was with, an' who he talked to. And the biggest fool thing he ever did in his life was to throw in with Jess Westergaard and the Teton Lumber Company."

Jorg's eyes had narrowed. "What do you mean?" he demanded.

"He thinks Sheriff Marsh will give him protection, but he's wrong. If you fellows go on you'll ram yore necks square into a noose. The Pine Creek men know everything you do. They're waitin' for you right now."

Jorg licked at suddenly dry lips. "Why did you take a chance on tellin' me this, if you're on the other side?" he asked.

"Because you're my friend, Jorg," Tom said earnestly. "I didn't want to see you get caught in such a damned mess. Look: It would mean a lot to me to have Heaton trapped. It would prove that the Teton Lumber Company was in league with outlaws. They'd have to give up their fight to steal the timber in Pine Creek Basin, and it would free a man who is charged with a murder he didn't commit."

"I know how the game is operated, and I know that Heaton is on one end and Westergaard on the other. But what I don't know, Jorg, is who is in the middle. I know there is a middle man, somebody who gives Heaton information and who secretly gathers up cattle an' leaves 'em where you boys can git 'em. But I don't know who he is."

"I don't quite git this," Jorg said. "You come back here to help your brother. He's fightin' McConnell, but you seem to be on McConnell's side. How come?"

"Verne is in the wrong. Moreover, because he's straight, the timber company is out to get him."

"Well, I dunno what to do," Jorg worried. "You wouldn't come into the cabin an' tell Monk what you know?"

"Not on yore life."

"He may not believe me."

"You can pull out yoreself, an' let them go on. That would suit me better than anything."

"No," Jorg shook his head stubbornly, "I won't let 'em down. I'll tell the boys what you told me, only I won't tell 'em yore name."

"An' what about givin' me the information I want?" Tom asked.

"There's a hell of a lot I don't know, an' what I do know won't do you much good. I've never been up there yet. Me an' my friends just work with Monk on certain jobs, an' he's a close-mouthed cuss. The only thing I can tell you sure is the name of an old Wild Bunch outlaw who helps to plant the cattle where Monk can git 'em."

"That's just what I want to know."

"All right. But I want your promise not to tell where you got yore information."

"Right."

"The feller's name is Jack McConnell," Jorg said with a faint suggestion of a grin.

Tom's mouth fell open with amazement, but he made no sound. What he had heard sounded incredible. But a moment's thought made him realize that it was not so incredible as it seemed. Jack McConnell had been away from Pine Creek Basin for years. He had been a waster and a rounder. Finally he had come back in the prodigal brother act, and Jim had made him foreman. Perhaps Monk Heaton had put the screws on him. Anyway, it was easy to see how smooth McConnell could make the path for the outlaws.

"Tell me this," Tom said. "Did Jack McConnell have anything to do with framing his brother on a murder charge?"

"I couldn't say," Jorg drawled. "But it seems some likely. With Jim out of the way Jack could pull anything he wanted."

"Or anything he had to," Tom said, and for a moment hatred against Monk Heaton also raged in his heart.

"Well, Tom, ole boy, you'd better git' goin' before somebody gits suspicious," Jorg said. "You say you're not alone?"

"No."

"Before you go tell me just what Monk did when he was in Boulder so's I can convince him I'm not talkin' through my hat."

Tom gave him the hour of the day when Heaton had left Boulder with Dode James, and the hour of his return; with the length of time he had spent in the New Era saloon, and the route he had taken when he left there. Then he hurried back to the camp.

"You been gone so dang long I was a'most shore they'd nabbed you," Bert said.

"Not quite. But I found out things. Let's eat as quick as we can, an' then we've got to ramble."

They wolfed down their food with dispatch and hurriedly saddled their surprised mounts. Jorg had promised not to say anything until morning, when he was to pretend that he had met his informant while out wrangling in the outlaws' cavvy.

He had decided not to take Bert Friel entirely into his confidence; not because he didn't trust the puncher, but because he thought it would complicate matters less if he kept his plans to himself.

"Are they really plannin' to make a raid on the Pine Creek Basin cattle?" Bert queried.

"That's what they planned. We've got to git back over there ahead of them and warn the men."

He didn't believe the outlaws would attempt to steal any cattle after Jorg's warning, but if the basin men expected them to they would take action which would cause Jack McConnell to act. And that was what Tom wanted.

But there were things happening in Pine Creek Basin of which Tom and Bert did not know. Thanks to Bert Friel's wife their enemies knew they were spying upon Heaton, and had acted accordingly. What Bert hadn't told his wife she had gleaned from one of his friends who was in the confidence of Fat Eardley.

It had been too late for Marsh to attempt to follow Tom and Bert had he wanted to, but a man had at once been dispatched up to Pine Creek Basin with an important message. And Tom had enemies there who were already preparing for his reception.

The two punchers rode steadily toward the distant line of high, serrated peaks which marked the southern boundary of Pine Creek Basin for several hours before they decided it was safe to stop and make camp. They were careful to keep well away from the trail.

The country grew rougher and rougher. Deep, ominous canyons, timbered and banked by mighty gray ledges slanted off toward the distant Snake far to their left. Brooding mountains opposed their progress with sullen, invulnerable shoulders or treacherous unexpected talus slides.

Tom's broken ribs, now just beginning to knit, caused him endless agony, but he gritted his teeth and refrained from complaint. At two o'clock that afternoon they rode into the yard at the McConnell ranch. Tom went at once to the house, and the door was opened by the lean old-maid housekeeper, Crackers.

"Well, fer the love of Mike where did you come from?" she blurted out.

"You'd be surprised. Is Jerry here?"

"That girl is gittin' so she don't know what the inside of a house looks like," the woman answered. "Lee Crawford was here at day-break this mornin' an' got her all excited. She went into the hills to see her father. Seems like them lumber company ruffians are about to raise old Ned, an' Jerry is scared her father will git himself captured again."

"What did they say might happen?"

"I dunno. You might ask Mrs. McConnell."

Tom turned as he heard a light step on the threshold. Mrs. McConnell had entered the room. Days before she had compelled her daughter to tell her about Tom's fight with Ringo.

"How are you, Tom?" she asked with genuine interest. "We thought you were too badly hurt to do any riding."

"Sometimes a fellow has to do more than he wants to," Tom said.

"I found out something that made me get up an' travel. I heard, too, that there was likely to be some trouble out here. I hope it's not serious."

"Come in, Tom, and rest yourself," Mrs. McConnell invited sweetly. "I am worried about Jerry and her father. I wish they would

give up this fight, if we could only get away. Of course now that my husband is falsely accused we can't give up."

"I know that," Tom said, much moved. "But he's into it now, and it looks like he couldn't quit. You wouldn't want to tell me where I could find him and Jerry?"

"You have learned something?"

"A little. It may be important. I don't want to raise false hopes."

"I understand. I'd tell you gladly where to find them if I knew, but I don't. I don't know the range like Jerry does, and they claim they don't want me bothered by having information which our enemies might try to get."

"I see. Do you happen to know what has become of Kit—or Montan?"

"I only know this: there is some threat to destroy Lon Bedford's mill because he has refused to sell out to the Teton Company. If they could get Bedford's property they could use the road across our land that Jim let Lon have ten years ago."

"Thanks," Tom said. "I think I'll go down there. I might find Kit."

"But are you able? You look sick."

"I'm mebbe not feelin' so chipper, but Bert Friel is with me."

"You'd better let Emily get you something to eat first," Mrs. McConnell suggested.

"I believe I will at that," Tom agreed, and Mrs. McConnell instructed Crackers to get dinner for the two men. Mrs. McConnell was the only person who ever called the cook by her right name.

From the two women Tom learned that the situation at Bedford's mill was really serious. Under some thin color of law the tough lumberjack's, led by Roaring Hack Ringo, had attempted to take forcible possession of the strategic mill. Once in possession of Bedford's ground and mill the Teton Company could claim the right of proscriptive user under which Bedford had long hauled logs across McConnell's land.

"Lee Crawford was here," Mrs. McConnell said, "and urged the boys to hold the mill at any cost. Practically every man in the basin is down there. They swore they would not allow the sheriff to arrest Lee or any of the others if they had to fight to prevent it. Oh, I'm so frightened. That is why Jerry went to find her father. We—we thought, dangerous as it might be for Jim, that he could do something about it. He has great influence with the men."

"Is Jack McConnell at the mill?" Tom queried.

"Not him," Crackers answered with considerable bitterness. "He's never around where there's real danger."

"Emily!" Mrs. McConnell reproved. "Jack is usually with my husband. We thought, Jerry and I, that Jim might send Jack down to quiet the men. Lee Crawford is so hotheaded."

"Maybe he will," Tom said. "Anyway, I believe we'll ride down there and see."

"Please do, Tom," the gray-haired ranch woman beseeched. "I know Jerry has lots of confidence in you. Try to keep them from doing anything rash."

Tom hurriedly finished his meal. From time to time he gazed speculatively at Crackers. Just how much, he wondered, did she know about Jack McConnell?

It now seemed evident to him that the supposed attempt to seize Bedford's mill was merely a ruse to draw the residents of the basin down there while the rustlers looted the range.

It suddenly occurred to Tom that the rustlers might come, despite his warning to Jorg. Monk Heaton had the reputation of being a daring fellow, and he might depend upon his friends in the basin protecting him.

The Bedford mill was four miles from the McConnell ranchhouse. The mill shed was built over a small tributary of Pine Creek; there was a great mound of sawdust close below the mill, and a considerable quantity of unsawed logs on the gentle slope just above. When Tom and Bert arrived it certainly seemed that war had been declared. The residents of the basin were entrenched back of the logs and skidways and in the mill itself, while the Teton Company had moved its camp just off the road beside the creek, and the most of its crew were gathered behind the huge sawdust pile as though about to attempt to rush the mill.

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TOM AND BERT WERE CAREFUL to announce their presence before getting too close. It was old Kit Martel who welcomed them.

"By gosh I knowed you two would be out here just as soon as you heard what these critters are tryin' to do," he shouted. "By Gawd, this is one time we stopped 'em. They was gonna move right in, but when they found they'd be rammin' themselves plumb slam against a flock o' bullets they drawed in their horns pronto."

The old purcher was plainly excited.

"Yeh. Where's Jerry?" Tom asked. "Not here, is she?"

"No, an' I'm glad she ain't. Jerry's all right, but she's a woman. This business got her kind o' scared an' she went to see Jim to see if he could stop it. But he won't."

"Jack ain't here either?"

"No. He's kinda outside man. Scoutin' around, he calls it."

When they reached the mill Lee Crawford came over to them. Always before he had been openly unfriendly to Tom, but now his manner changed.

"We may be in for some pretty tough times here," he said. "We're glad to have all the reinforcements we can git."

"It looks to me like using force to grab another man's property was the worst thing they could do," Tom said. "Has Westergaard lost his head completely, do you think? What right have they got?"

"Oh, it's legal enough, I guess," Crawford intoned glumly, "but from here on we say to hell with their damned law."

"You mean they've got a legal right to seize this mill?" Tom queried in amazement.

"It's some more crooked law business," Lon Bedford spoke up. He was a tall, thin man whose hair and mustache were prematurely white. "Years ago I made a contract with a merchant down in Boulder by the name of Burns to furnish him a hundred thousand feet of lumber. I sawed him ten thousand feet an' then he notified me that he didn't want any more. Hell, I didn't want to make him take more than he wanted an' I told him all right. Now he claims he's got a judgment against my mill for breach of contract."

"But it looks like you would have the action against him. Did he pay you for what he got?"

"Shore he paid me. That's what they claim is proof that I broke the contract. It proves I orlly supplied part that I agreed to."

"But didn't you get a release?" Tom demanded.

"Hell, no. I thought Burns was all right. I didn't even ask him to destroy the contracts. In fact I told him that if he ever wanted the rest that I'd sell it to him. But instead of askin' for the lumber he sold the contract to this Teton Company an' they claim they've got a judgment against me," Bedford said.

Tom knew that the old timers were notoriously careless in their business methods.

"If they got a judgment how come that you wasn't notified?" he asked.

"One of them lumber company deputies named Brig Ferry claims he served the papers on me, but he's a damned liar," Bedford said.

"Well, what's holdin' up the proceedin's?" Tom queried.

"We are," Lee Crawford said curtly. "If they get possession of this mill we've lost our fight. Law or no law we mean to hold it until Bedford's case can be appealed."

There was a roaring chorus of assent from the others.

"This Roarin' Hack Ringo an' his gang was gonna walk right in an' take everything over till we stopped 'em," Kit volunteered.

"This Ringo has been claimin' what a fighter he is," Crawford went on. "Says he's whipped every man that dared to fight him." His gaze rested meaningly upon Tom. "Well, I called his bluff. I told him that before he pulled anything here he had me to whip."

"The sheriff wouldn't let 'em fight, but it was because Ringo was scared of Lee," a man spoke up.

Having seen something of Roarin' Hack Ringo, Tom found that hard to believe.

"The sheriff is down there?" he queried. "I thought he was after you, Crawford?"

"He is. I told him to go ahead and arrest me—if he dared. But I told him there were thirty damned good men right here who'd see that he had a sweet time gettin' me to Boulder. When he got a look at this bunch he lost his sand."

"That's right," Kit Martel said. "Marsh backed down, but it shore looked like hell was gonna pop for a while. Marsh is still down there blusterin', but he claims he's waitin' for an order from Judge Peterson for him to use force in takin' this mill."

"He'll get the order and there's bound to be fightin'," Crawford said grimly. "Are you boys with us?"

"Of course—if there is to be fighting," Tom said. "But me and Bert have been ridin' around some ourselves, and I've got a small doubt about there bein' any real attack. Their pretended claim against Bedford is too thin. My belief is that this is a bluff to hold you men here while a crew of outlaws run off your cattle."

"What's that?" Crawford cried sharply, and others echoed his words.

"Just this: Monk Heaton was in Boulder the other day. He was there to see Jess Westergaard, and he rode around as big as life with Dode James. Well, Bert an' me followed him through the hills till he met his gang. I managed to overhear some of their talk and I learned that they planned to make a raid up here on your stock."

He had created a sensation. For the time being the men behind the sawdust pile had been forgotten. Questions volleyed in upon him.

"Did you find out who the damned traitors are who're workin' with 'em?" Kit Martel finally asked above the clamor.

Tom had decided not to mention Jack McConnell's name. He was almost certain that the man had accomplices in the crowd who would warn him. And it was McConnell he wanted to get.

"I heard names mentioned, but that's not evidence," he said. "But I do believe that if you hustle you'll find the cattle have been gathered before the outlaws come."

"And then, by God, we deal with the damned rustlers," a rancher named Lew Macy gritted.

"But don't forget," Tom warned, "the big thing is to prove that there is a connection between the rustlers and the Teton Company."

"Well, what're we waitin' for?" Kit demanded. "It's plumb plain that this is all a bluff. Let's go git 'em."

"I'm not so sure," Lee Crawford said hesitatntly. "It sounds reasonable, but I happen to know that my two punchers, Shad Hoyne an' Rusty Bacon, as well as Jack McConnell, have been ridin' that country pretty close on purpose to watch for rustlers, and they

ain't seen nothin' out of the way."

"There may be a reason for that," Tom said evenly.

"What?" Crawford suddenly laughed unpleasantly. "Hell, you'll be sayin' next that Jim McConnell is a rustler. Well, there's just one way to find out. Let's ride."

There was a yell of approval.

"What about my mill?" Bedford asked. "What if they do move in?"

"If Wood here is tellin' the truth it's all a bluff anyway," Crawford said. "It's just as you men say, whether we act on his tip or not."

"Of course we'll act on it," Kit Martel said.

The ranchers had left their horses back out of danger, and now they ran toward them in little groups of twos and threes. Since Tom and Bert had left their horses closer at hand they were mounted before the others. Bert went on, while Kit Martel stayed with Tom.

"This may be a mess, Tom, if we don't happen to find out anything, and the lumber company grabs the mill," Kit volunteered.

"Don't I know it? It's quite possible the rustlers may have changed their plans, too. But we've got to gamble on this thing, and you are the only one I could really trust. I want you to do something."

"Anything you say, Tom."

"Do you know where Jack McConnell can be found?"

"Of course. Good God, Tom, are you really meanin' that Jack McConnell may be the traitor?" Kit blurted.

"I know he is. I didn't tell Bert so because I was afraid he might spill the beans, and because I didn't want to answer questions?"

"Anybody else?"

"Yes, but I don't know who. There's a whole crew."

"Crawford?" Kit asked in a low tone.

"It don't seem likely. He's been the leader here ever since McConnell was arrested. He's makin' a play for Jerry, and he's a property man. But his men are a different proposition. All the evidence I've got against him really is that I don't like him," Tom said.

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to take me to Jack McConnell's hideaway. Somebody is sure to try to get word to him that we know about the rustlers and that he may be under suspicion."

"All right, Tom. As a matter of fact Jack and Jim McConnell have been stayin' together in a little cabin away up in what we call Bitch Creek Canyon. I can't savvy how Jack could be crooked without Jim findin' it out," Kit said.

"Can we git there before dark?"

Kit looked at the sun with an experienced eye. "No can do," he said. "But we can make it by bedtime."

"All right then, let's go."

19

IT WAS A TREMENDOUSLY ROUGH CANYON up which Tom was conducted by his tough old guide. Old Kit chattered almost incessantly, but Tom had few words to say in reply. He didn't want to tell Kit that he was on the verge of physical exhaustion as a result of the way he had abused those broken ribs.

Just a few hours ago, Tom was thinking, Jerry McConnell must have ridden over this trail. For the first time it occurred to him that the girl, capable though she was, might be in grave danger.

At last Kit stopped and emitted a shrill whistle. There was no reply. Three times Kit repeated the whistle.

"That's funny," he declared. "That's our signal. If Jim was there he'd have answered it."

Kit led on, winding a precarious way through a jungle of willows, birch and tag elder over swampy ground from which arose a faint, foggy smell of rotting vegetable matter like the heated breath of a victim of miasma, or tick fever.

"Fine place they picked out, I must say," Tom remarked.

"Wait," was all Kit would vouchsafe.

They reached the edge of the swamp, and followed a short steep trail which made their ponies scramble like cats. Directly behind a screen of thick lodge-poles they came upon a tiny cabin.

"Well, by Joe, I can't figger where Jim coulda got," he murmured. "Oh, I got it! He musta went back with Jerry to talk to the boys an' we missed him on the way. Prob'ly he was out ridin' till dark an' she waited fer him."

"What about Jack?" Tom wondered.

"I dunno. What'll we do now?"

"I hate to admit it, Kit, but I'm all in," Tom said. "These ribs have been givin' me hell. It's too dark to accomplish anything to-night. What say we stop here till mornin'?"

"Of course," Kit agreed instantly, all contrition. "I should have knowed better than brought you up here. Hell, you should be in the hospital instead of cavortin' around over these mountains. You go in; I'll look after the horses an' cook supper when I git through."

The inside of the cabin was plainly furnished, but it showed signs of recent occupancy, and it was scrupulously clean. Scarcely had Tom lighted the lamp before he saw a note on the plain, home-made table. He read it without hesitation.

"Dear Dad: I waited as long as I could for you. Things are very threatening around Bedford's mill. If there is fighting, men will be killed, and we'll be worse off than ever. Please, Dad, either come down and talk to the men quietly or send Uncle Jack, before it's too late. But don't let yourself be caught. Love,
JERRY."

He showed the note to Kit when he came in.

"It relieves me a heap about Jerry, but I can't figger out why Jim would leave, unless he decided this place wasn't safe."

There were thoughts in Tom's mind which he didn't voice, but he had grave fears for Jim McConnell's safety. No man, no matter how gallant a fighter, could cope with treachery within his own ranks; particularly if the traitor was his own brother.

In the morning Tom had a better view of the rugged canyon, and he understood better why the creek which flowed down its tortuous course was called Bitch Creek.

At Tom's suggestion they veered around toward the upper end of the basin where the ranchers had gone to look for rustlers. It was just past the middle of the forenoon when they saw a group of men riding across one of the numerous small mountain parks.

"It's our friends," Kit said. "Let's join 'em." Without awaiting a reply he fired three shots into the air, and rode out in sight, waving his hat. The men saw him and stopped.

There was something about the way the men spread out, and the grim look upon their faces which breathed a hostility that Tom could feel. Almost instinctively his nerves went taut, and he covertly felt to see that his gun was where it belonged.

There were nine men in all in the group. Luke Price and Montan' were from the J Bar M. Lew Macy was a near-by rancher who had been quite friendly toward Tom. The others represented the group that had always been inclined to be hostile because they followed the lead of Lee Crawford. Right now it appeared that the puncher, Montan', was more vengeful about something than the others.

"Well, where have you fellows been?" Lee Crawford challenged.

"We've been up Bitch Creek, huntin' for the McConnells," Kit replied. "They wasn't there. You fellows seen anything of 'em?"

"Not a thing," Crawford said shortly. The man made a gesture with his hand, and the men started to move their horses around to encircle Tom and Kit.

"Hey, what's bitin' you birds?" Kit demanded.

"Yo're all right, Kit, but we're demandin' that Mr. Wood there do a little explainin'," Crawford said coldly. "Keep yore hands away from that gun, Wood."

"Say, what is this?" Kit cried angrily. "Tom is my friend, an' if anybody starts anything with him they got me to reckon with."

"Wait a minute, Kit," Tom said coolly. "Suppose you speak yore little piece, Crawford, before you-all git to crowdin' in too close." His hand dropped to the handle of his gun, but he didn't draw.

"I reckon I don't need to say a thing, boys," Crawford said. "He's convicted himself by makin' a play before he even knew the charge."

"I'm waitin' for that charge, Crawford, and I'm tellin' all of you to stay put, right where you are," Tom said tensely.

"Yes, an' by Gawd, I'm waitin' for it," Kit cursed. "You fellers are crazy bristlin' up against Tom like that."

"Maybe we can change your mind, old timer, when you hear what's happened," the beetled-browed Montan' enunciated. "This buzzard is the spy for the lumber company."

"That's a lie," Kit mouthed.

"Take it easy, Kit, and keep out of this," Tom said. "It's my funeral, an' I'm still waitin' to hear what such a crazy charge is based upon."

"Do you deny that you were the man who sent word to the Boulder officers about that first raid we made?" Crawford demanded.

"I do," Tom said steadily.

"It don't matter," Crawford said. "It won't do you any good to deny it anyway because my two hired men caught Claude Curry killin' a calf with a J Bar M brand on it and to keep from bein' strung up he admitted that he knew you were a detective."

"I don't believe it," Kit said.

"We'll damned soon find out," Crawford said. "Curry claims that Wood carries a passport from the county attorney inside his hat-band. *Give me that hat.*"

"I'm keepin' my hat," Tom said coolly. "It's true enough that I carry a paper signed by Verne Powell. But Powell ain't workin' for the lumber company or against you people. He's got your interests at heart—"

He was interrupted by a raucous laugh.

"This morning the Teton Lumber Company has got possession of Bedford's mill," Crawford said. "Why? Because this fellow came back with a cock-and-bull story about rustlers to draw us away. Rustlers have been workin', but he's the man in cahoots with them. Do you know who he really is, boys? He's a member of Monk Heaton's gang of outlaws. He came into this country with Jorg Jorgensen, a horse-thief of Heaton's gang."

The look on Kit Martel's face was ludicrous. "Tell 'em it ain't so, Tom," he pleaded. "You say it ain't, an' by Gawd I'll make Crawford eat his words."

Tom sized the men up quickly. Macy and Luke Price were still neutral. The other seven were openly antagonistic, but they were doubtful about old Kit's attitude, and not yet quite sure how to act.

"I'm not denyin' comin' into the country with Jorg Jorgensen," he said. "But I am askin' Crawford to tell us how he knows that."

Crawford colored, and fumbled for words before he answered.

"Because, fellow, I always was suspicious of you and I took the trouble to have you back-tracked."

"By Gawd, we know he's a dirty spy, so let's string him up," Montan' howled.

The men were not joking about hanging him. It was enough for

them to know that he carried a paper signed by their enemies, and that they believed he had lured them away from the mill so that the lumber company's roughnecks could take possession. They were willing to take it for granted that the remainder of Crawford's charges were true.

"Git him, fellers," Lee Crawford spoke from the corner of his mouth. He looked down toward his rope, but he didn't move.

Montan' was at one flank, and a man named Twitchell at the other. At Crawford's signal both started forward.

Tom's had had never left the butt of his gun. He was intensely conscious of everything, even aware of the taint of ammonia from the horses that tingled faintly in his nostrils; knew that a fat ground-squirrel was sitting up at the mouth of his hole forty feet away regarding the horsemen with beady-eyed wonder. Most of all he seemed to actually know a split second in advance just what each of his foes meant to do.

His gun came up with a swift, but easy and natural circular motion of his right arm, and its muzzle pointed straight at Lee Crawford.

"Call off yore dogs—" he began, but suddenly realized that the thing had gone beyond Crawford's control. A deathlike pallor spread over Crawford's face as he found himself covered, and saw that his two henchmen on the flanks were going for their guns anyway.

"Don't shoot," Crawford yelled, but Montan' was fast on the draw, and his gun was coming up on a line with Tom's body. Without knowing that he had done it Tom's heels drove the rowels into Midnight's sides, and the horse leaped ahead, just as Montan's gun roared. A flick of the reins spun the well-trained gelding on his hind legs. Tom felt the hot air in the bullet's wake as it ploughed within an inch of the back of his neck. Then his own gun spoke, and he saw a surprised look come over Montan's face as the puncher looked down at his chest where a forty-five slug had just struck him.

Midnight took the bit and made a long leap forward. A shot from Bill Twitchell's gun tugged at Tom's shirt sleeve. With iron hand he spun Midnight back to face his foes. He fired again, knowing that the only way to stop Twitchell now was to shoot him. His bullet struck the man on the gun hand.

Tom's eyes swept to Lee Crawford, but again he had been conscious of all that went on even though his attention had been centered first on Montan' and then on Twitchell. He was not surprised to see that though Crawford had drawn his gun he wasn't using it for the simple reason that he was covered by old Kit Martel.

"Hold it," old Kit yelled. "If there's any more shootin' I'll do it."

Four of the other men would have taken a hand had they dared, but they were not sure of Macy and Price, who were inclined to follow Kit Martel's lead.

"Right," Tom said. "I didn't want to shoot anybody, but I'm not bein' hung today."

Montan' had been clinging to the saddle, but now he let go and collapsed to the ground. Tom moved his horse to a position where nobody could take an unexpected shot at him.

"So you're throwin' in with the outlaws are you, Martel?" Crawford asked with a thin-lipped, sardonic smile.

"No sech a damned thing," Kit denied. "But I'm askin' that Tom git a fair trial. What if he did show Claude Curry some paper? He got Jim out afterward an' saved him from a mob, didn't he? What about his fight with Hack Ringo? That was goin' to a hell of a lot of trouble to show he wasn't in with 'em, wasn't it?"

"It's trickery," Crawford charged. "He knew he could tell Marsh where to lay hands on McConnell any time."

"What about it, Tom, are you willin' to go to the ranch an' have this whole thing thrashed out?" Kit demanded.

Tom hesitated but a moment. He knew that the cards were stacked against him, and there would be few besides Kit who would take his word, but he couldn't let the old man down.

"Sure I'll go," he agreed.

20

ALL HIS LIFE VERNE POWELL had been sure of himself. Even as a youngster he had resented anyone trying to give him advice. He and Tom had come to the parting of the ways, not because the elder brother had tried to dictate his life, but because Verne was intolerant of any suggestion. He had been sure then that he was doing what was best, and he had been just as sure that he was doing the right thing when he had determined to prosecute Jim McConnell, even at the expense of giving up the woman he loved.

Circumstances had combined to make him a martyr, he thought, and he found compensation in the belief that he had a higher brand of courage and conviction than other men.

The first real shock to that ego came the night of Jim McConnell's liberation, when his brother told him that he had overheard one of Marsh's special deputies admit that he knew Jim McConnell was innocent. He knew that Tom would not lie about the matter. It was true that the statement of itself meant little, for the man who had made it might be mistaken.

He could not doubt that the attempt to lynch McConnell had been inspired by the lumber company, and actively participated in by Sheriff Marsh. Only the resourcefulness and courage of his brother Tom had prevented the tragedy. Up until that time Verne had resented Tom's presence in Boulder. But he was grateful enough then

that Tom had been there to prevent the ghastly travesty upon justice.

But the day after that affair found Verne Powell by far the loneliest figure in Boulder. He despised his former associates for what they had tried to do, and for their lack of ideals; and he knew that they no longer had any use for him. He had gone to see Tom, and though his brother held no malice the men surrounding him had let him know plainly that they held him in loathing and contempt.

Meeting Jerry in the back room of Fat Eardley's saloon had been a painful and unexpected encounter. Her scorn had cut him like a knife. Foolishly, he had expected that he would get over his love for her, but he had realized when he saw her bending sympathetically over his brother's bed, that he never would.

Heretofore, he had had the performance of his duty to fall back upon. Now there was nothing he could do. Jim McConnell had escaped, and he was not certainly sure that he wanted him back.

His first action was to try to locate Curly Layton for questioning, but the man had disappeared. It seemed pretty strong evidence that the man could have told a sensational story if he wanted to.

In desperation Verne had gone to Jess Westergaard.

"Well, well, Verne, glad to see you," the superintendent had greeted cordially. "Haven't been seeing much of you around lately. What's on your mind?"

"Plenty," Verne answered.

"Well, sit down and let's talk it over," Westergaard said pleasantly. "Have a cigar."

"No, thanks," Verne refused curtly. "Westergaard, I want to know just how much your company had to do with framing Jim McConnell on that murder charge?"

"Framing? Why, my dear boy, you are more familiar with the evidence than I am. You can't possibly entertain a doubt as to McConnell's guilt. Or do you?"

"I certainly do. I'll admit the evidence is just as strong as it ever was, and I thought it was an open and shut case. If I've got any doubts, and I have got plenty of them, the actions of you and your associates are responsible."

Westergaard's manner had begun to grow chilly. "I don't follow you," he said.

"If you were so convinced of his guilt, why did you try to lynch him?" Verne shot out.

"Now look here: That's going too—"

"Don't try to tell me you didn't know anything about it. I'm not entirely blind. I only pretended to misunderstand your tentative offers of easy money if I'd take your orders. If I had taken it I'd have been in the know about that lynching the same as Marsh was. But now I know that the whole deal is a contemptible plot to break those cattlemen up yonder, and I'm telling you now I intend to fight

you," Verne proclaimed his personal declaration of independence.

Westergaard, however, seemed unimpressed.

"And just what do you think you can accomplish?" he sneered.

"I'm still county attorney, and I'm going to dig out evidence enough to prove that you've offered and Sheriff Marsh has accepted bribes. And I'll clean out this county of the thugs and gunmen you've imported. I'll let you know that the law is not to be sneered at."

"Very pretty," Westergaard said. "It's too bad you're such a fool. I could have used you, and given you a real start in life. Now, after the next election, you'll be a bum. And I'll tell you something else: If you want to keep your health you'll not cross my trail before the next election. Now get out, and stay out."

Suddenly Verne saw red. To be talked to like this was more than he could stand. A second later he had Westergaard by the collar, and dragged him across the desk. The superintendent was a powerful man, and knew how to handle himself; but he let out a bellow for assistance, which brought, however, only a badly scared clerk.

Verne dragged the man upright, and still holding him by the collar, smashed his fist twice into the man's face. When he released his hold the man staggered against the wall, shaken, and bleeding.

"All right, my friend," the manager breathed furiously. "Just for that I'll get you before your term of office is out—and I'll get you plenty."

"Maybe you will, but I'm through being a sucker," Verne told him.

The man who left the lumberman's office was certainly more Powell the former cowhand, than Powell the brass-bound slave to duty. It would have done his brother Tom good to have seen him.

But Verne's best efforts to dig up evidence of the conspiracy in the days that followed were futile. No matter which way he turned he found that the men who had brought political corruption to Boulder had their tracks covered. And, meantime, he found himself the most unpopular man in Boulder. He could no longer win the most trivial case.

If he could have taken his troubles to Tom he would have felt better, but they had to maintain avowed enmity. Then Tom disappeared, and Verne's worries increased.

He was inspecting the docket of the county court one day when he suddenly ran across a freshly filed suit which he knew was of paramount importance to the ranchers of Pine Creek Basin. He was thoroughly familiar with the country, and he knew that the McConnells and others were dependent upon the friendship and loyalty of the sawmill man, Lon Bedford. The suit that had been filed against Bedford would, if successful, give the lumber company control of the right of way they sought.

Now, for the first time, he felt able to at least show his impartiality toward the people of the basin. He could warn them of the suit,

and give them advice that might help the situation. The next morning he saddled his horse and headed for the McConnell ranch.

He was doubtful of the kind of reception he would get, and knew that he must first convince Jerry. If there was any possibility of a reconciliation he meant to bring it about.

He was lucky in finding Jerry at home. She met him on the porch; her eyes wide with questioning wonder.

"Hello, Jerry," he greeted. "If you don't hate me too bad I'd like to talk to you."

"I've never hated you," she said slowly. "At least not much. But I don't see what we can possibly have to talk about."

"We might have a great deal. I suppose you think I took money from the Teton Lumber Company to prosecute your father—"

"I never thought that," she denied.

"Thanks."

"But I do think you might have been a little less hasty to believe that my father was guilty," she shot out.

"I don't wish to argue that," he said. "I still think it was my duty to prosecute on the evidence in my possession. If you could only have understood that it was entirely without malice—"

Her cheeks were beginning to color. "I'm no longer concerned with your motives," she said. "If you've come to tell me that my father has been arrested—"

"Has he?"

"I was afraid," she replied, and seemed ready to collapse from relief. "He isn't where—and I thought— Why did you come here?"

"You're not going to ask me to come in?"

"I thought the officers of this county went anywhere they pleased," she jibed bitterly. "But come in if you wish."

He followed her into the living room, and inquired about her mother's health. Jerry answered his questions civilly, but wondered why he had come. At last he came to the point.

"I don't expect you to believe it, but I am having my private fight with the Teton Lumber Company," he told her. "But you should be interested in this." He told her then of the suit that had been filed against Bedford.

"It was good of you to ride up here to tell us about it," she said, softening a little, "but I don't see what we can do about it."

"I do," he returned promptly. "I believe it can be beaten, because I think it's based on fraud. But you people must cancel Bedford's right of way before the papers can be served. Then you can apply for an injunction and at least delay them a year or so."

"I still can't understand why you should have gone to all this trouble to tell us," Jerry said.

"You ought to know, Jerry," he said quietly. "It's because I'm

still in love with you. I've been a fool. I know that now. All I want is a chance to show you that I'm sincere."

Jerry gazed at him wonderingly. This was hardly the arrogant young lawyer to whom she had once been engaged. She could see that he had suffered, and a look of pity came over her face.

"Poor Verne," she murmured. Then happening to glance out of the window she shot to her feet, her eyes open with astonishment.

"What is it?" he asked quickly.

"Something is wrong," she cried. "Here come Tom and Kit, and some other men. Something is the matter."

She was thinking of her father, and neither she nor Verne were prepared for the actual fact; which was that Tom Wood was a prisoner, accused of the most heinous of all crimes—that of being a spy and a traitor. Nor did they realize that he was at that moment in more danger of being hanged than Jim McConnell had ever been.

21

TOM FOUND HIMSELF IN THE CENTER of a group formed by Kit Martel, Lew Macy, and Luke Price. Thus backed there was no danger of him again being attacked.

"By God I can't figure you fellows throwin' in with a damned spy right after he's shot two of your friends," Crawford said bitterly.

"It's hard to tell just who a man's friends are these days," Kit said. "We'll meet you at the ranch an' try to figger this thing out."

"Somebody's got to stay here with Montan' till he can get help," Crawford said. "I'll do that. Ray, you go with these birds just to see if they have the guts to show up at the ranch. Bill, you better get that hand dressed. The rest of you gather the rest of the boys."

Ray Dusek, the puncher who had been deputized to accompany Tom and Kit, was a squat, somewhat dull-looking fellow; but with the look of one who could not be turned aside from anything he started to do. As Tom and Kit started forward he dropped in behind. Lew and Luke paired off behind him.

"I believe in you, Tom, but this looks mighty bad unless we kin git the goods on Jack McConnell," Kit said. "You'll have to come out in the open against him now."

Tom nodded. "An' it'll probably turn Jerry McConnell against me."

They saw that Ray Dusek had pushed his horse right up against theirs, and they couldn't talk without his hearing what was said.

"Don't you think it would be well for somebody to notify the sheriff about that shootin' up here?" Tom suggested.

"An' give him a chance to take you away from us, huh?" Dusek contributed. "Nothin' doin'."

"Don't be a damned fool, Ray," Kit said irritably. "Tom ain't got nothin' to be afraid of."

"I say leave the sheriff out of it," Lew Macy said, and Tom realized that he had made a tactical blunder.

Only one thing yet remained to come out on him; that was his real name. If it became known that he was Verne Powell's brother, even Kit's loyalty would be severely strained. Kit had always despised Verne bitterly. Yet Tom could see no way now to clear things up except by making a clean breast of the whole business. He considered it quite likely that before the sun went down that day his body would be swinging loosely at the end of a rope.

It was exactly twelve o'clock when they reached the McConnell ranch. The two or three men who had to do the irrigating no matter what else happened were trooping in; queer-looking fellows mounted on good saddle horses, with their legs encased in hip-high gum-boots, and carrying shovels over their backs. One horse was already tied to the corral fence, but it didn't belong to the ranch. It was neither a strawberry roan nor a flea-bitten gray. It carried a plain stock saddle, but there was no lasso rope visible.

"Wonder who that outfit belongs to?" Kit remarked. "It don't belong up here."

At first glance Tom thought there was something familiar about both saddle and horse. Suddenly it dawned upon him. It was the animal Verne had been riding that day when they had met in the Pine Creek narrows. Was it possible that Verne was at the McConnell ranch? Tom wished heartily that his brother was anywhere but there.

Tom and the others saw a party of more than a dozen men coming in fast from the range. Obviously it was a party which one of the men sent out by Crawford had intercepted.

As they were dismounting, Jerry McConnell came out on the long wide veranda of the ranchhouse. Tom could see the look of strained anxiety and inquiry on her face. Seeing that they were all coming toward her she remained where she was; the knuckles of her hands showing white where they gripped the railing of the veranda.

Then Verne Powell appeared in the open doorway behind the girl. "God God, what's that cuss doin' here?" Kit exploded.

"Kit, where have you been?" Jerry cried. "What's happened? Why are all the men coming here?"

"Well, er, I—you see, Jerry—I—" Kit stammered.

"Maybe I'd better tell it, Jerry," Lew Macy spoke up. He was a man a little under middle age who ran perhaps two hundred head of cattle and did most of his own work. But even he seemed none too sure of himself.

"Better let me," Tom said. "You see, Miss McConnell, there was trouble on the range this morning. I had to shoot Montan'—"

"Montan'? Why he is one of our men."

"I'm sorry, but I had no choice. I'd just been accused of being a spy for the Teton Lumber Company, and I was charged with draw-

ing the men away from Bedford's mill so that Ringo and his men could take possession. Lee Crawford and some others wanted to give me an impromptu hanging, and I had to shoot. Kit here stuck by me, and now I'm here, it seems, to stand trial."

"But I don't understand," Jerry said. "You? A spy? It sounds incredible."

"There's plenty evidence, Miss," Ray Dusek said stubbornly. "He practically admitted it himself. He carries a pass in his hat right now signed by that skunk standin' there behind you."

"Is that true?" Jerry demanded. She looked from Tom to Verne, and back again.

Tom saw that Verne had turned pale.

"That much is true, Jerry," Tom said steadily. "I did come here to represent Verne, and I did it because Verne, even though he felt it was his duty to prosecute your father, wanted, if possible, to get some evidence that would clear him."

Jerry turned to Verne. "Is that true, Verne?" she asked.

"Yes, but—"

The other party had now reined up in front of the veranda. Some of them were recklessly trampling out the flowers in the yard with their horses' feet. Their clamor drowned Verne's voice.

"It's a lie," one of them shouted above the rest. He was Rusty Bacon, one of Lee Crawford's punchers; one of the men alleged to have caught Claude Curry stealing a calf. The others subsided while he poured out the charges against Tom. "He's a dirty spy and a rustler," the fellow wound up, "and we mean to make an example of him."

"You won't hang anybody on *this* ranch," Jerry said. "There's been enough evil things happened here already. And how do you know that Tom isn't just what he says he is? He said there was a gang of rustlers coming. How do you know that isn't true?"

"Because we can't find a sign of 'em, an' if there is any they are his friends," Dusek shouted. "He's a friend of Monk Heaton's. Lee Crawford found it out."

"Why isn't Crawford here to tell where he got the information?" Tom demanded.

"He will be here. Just as soon as somebody relieves him with Montan'."

"By golly, here he comes now!" a man cried. Two minutes later Crawford pulled his horse to a sliding stop almost in front of the veranda steps. The animal was breathing hard; sweat rolled from under the saddle blanket in great lathery gobs.

"Who's with Montan'?" Lew Macy asked.

"Nobody," Crawford answered curtly. "He's dead. This man Wood is a murderer, an' we're going to deal with him."

Verne suddenly came forward. "If there's any charges against this man, the law will handle it," he said. "The sheriff is down at Bedford's. I want somebody to go for him."

"Nobody will go, and nothing will save your pet, you skunk," Crawford said. "I don't see how you had the nerve to come here and face Jerry anyway. But now you're here, you're going to stay."

Kit Martel had stepped beside Tom, and the old puncher's face was grim. Macy and Price were beside him, but their attitude was full of doubt. In the doorway where Verne had stood now leaned the grim old maid, Crackers. Mrs. McConnell now appeared, but Jerry went to her at once and urged her back indoors.

"I'm sorry about this, Jerry, but we've got the goods on this fellow, and he's got to swing," Crawford said.

"I tell you he won't," the girl said. "Even if what you say is true it still doesn't prove he isn't our friend. He saved my father's life. And he did follow those rustlers. Bert Friel was with him, and Bert doesn't lie."

"Now we're getting places," Crawford sneered. "Prepare for a jolt, Jerry, because you've got one comin' to you. He did get your father out of jail—with help. Probably from that lousy county attorney there and the sheriff. He did follow the rustlers with Friel. But he left Friel behind when he went to talk to Monk Heaton. And now here's the stinger. He knew where McConnell was all the time. He drew us away from Bedford's mill so that the lumber company could grab it. But to make sure that his rustler friends still could git away with our cattle he betrayed your father to 'em."

"I can't believe it," Jerry whispered.

"Read this: It's a note which Jack McConnell brought to my place last night. No; I'll read it. I want everybody here to hear it.

"To the McConnells: We have Jim McConnell in our hands. The only reason we are not taking you, Jack McConnell, is that we want you to send this message to the remainder of the McConnell family. We want everybody in the basin to stay north of a line running directly east from the end of Stony Ridge for a period of seventy-two hours. If there is any interference with our plans Jim McConnell will be turned over to the sheriff—dead. We are not fooling. We have our spies in the basin. If anybody else feels like getting rash let them consider how they would feel if they came home and found their houses burned down and maybe their wives and kids killed. Better call a meeting of the basin folks and read this to all of them. The Jorgensen gang."

There was a moment of silence; then Jerry breathed, "The in-

human beasts!"

Wood. His gang is holed up over in the Caribous," Crawford said. "Wood, do you deny bein' a friend of Jorgensen's?"

Half truths again. He wouldn't deny knowing Jorg, but it would do him no good to assert that Jorg was not the leader of any gang.

"Crawford, I'm not denying anything or admitting anything for your benefit," Tom said with quiet dignity. "I haven't got any positive proof that you yourself are one of the men who have sold out to Jess Westergaard, but I believe now that you are. There's a crew of men in here who have been working cattle up where the rustlers can get them. I thought until a short time ago that another man was the leader of them. Now I believe you are the man."

Jerry's voice was drowned in the snarl that issued from Crawford's lips. "Why, you dirty, thievin' spy, I'll have your life for that," the man rasped. "Boys, could there be any plainer evidence of his guilt than him tryin' to blame it onto me? What do you say?"

"Hang him!" they yelled in unison.

The mob surged forward. Tom still had his gun, but he didn't draw it. He planted his back against the veranda, determined to use his fists as long as he could. But Kit Martel appeared to have no such scruples. The thin-legged old puncher jerked his hog-leg and leaped in front of Tom with quivering wrath.

"Stay back there, or I'll shoot the first cuss who makes a move," he cried shrilly.

Two other people had moved at the same time—Jerry and Verne.

"Boys," Jerry pleaded, but again her voice was drowned, this time by Verne's stentorian voice.

"Men, listen," he cried. "You can't do this. If this man is an outlaw, let him be tried by the law. The sheriff is close. Send for him."

"So he kin bring his gang up from Bedford's," roared Ray Dusek.

"We would git a break—lettin' *you* prosecute him," Crawford sneered at Verne. "We'll settle this bird right here—an' you, too, if you try to interfere."

"You'll not touch him while I live," Verne said, springing forward.

Again the mob surged forward. Tom had been watching the men while the others were talking. He had noticed Rusty Bacon maneuvering for position. Now Tom saw the fellow draw, and instantly he reached out with his left hand and jerked old Kit backward, while his other hand streaked forward.

But before his gun was clear of the holster the air was shattered by the sound of Rusty Bacon's shot. Tom had jerked old Kit, for whom the bullet was intended, out of the way, but Verne Powell had leaped straight into its path. He collapsed on the grass in front of Tom, just as the latter's gun roared, and Rusty Bacon pitched forward on his face.

Now that the battle had started Tom could see no other way than

to go through with it. "Please, Jerry, get back," he begged, and his eyes sought Lee Crawford as a target for his next shot. Crawford, however, had managed to get into the circle of his followers. And Jerry had ignored his plea. The girl was in front of him again. Not only she, but her mother and Crackers had now rushed into the yard. Kit Martel, Luke Price, and Lew Macy had ranged themselves alongside Tom. For one moment it looked as if the pretty McConnell yard was about to become a bloody shambles.

"Hold it," bellowed a cowman named Levi Hand. "We don't want Tom Wood bad enough to hurt Jim McConnell's women folks."

22

FOR THE MOMENT LEE CRAWFORD'S efforts to hang Tom Powell were halted. Two lines were drawn; those with Tom had their backs against the veranda, and the others lined up two or three rods distant, facing them. By far the greater number were with Crawford. But white-haired Mrs. McConnell had placed herself fearlessly between the two parties, and not even Lee Crawford was ruthless enough to endanger her life.

Jerry knelt beside Verne. He had struggled to raise himself up, and now his head was resting in the girl's lap. Blood was gushing from a nasty wound in his thigh, and the girl's eyes were full of mingled pity and fright. This Tom saw and a stab of pain went through him. He had hoped to see Verne and Jerry reconciled, but now that it seemed to have come to pass he was smitten with jealousy.

But only for a moment. His gaze turned back to the men who still wanted his life. Rusty Bacon was lying there on his face, handfuls of lawn grass gripped in each dead fist.

"Men," Jerry said, a desperate note in her voice, "we've got to get Verne inside and stop this bleeding. He'll die if we don't. Won't you please go away now?"

"And let this damned traitor escape?" Crawford retorted harshly. "What do you think we are, Jerry? We're your real friends. And what about your father?"

It was Mrs. McConnell who answered that. "Men of Pine Creek," she said sternly, "if rustlers are driving off cattle you men will be losing stock as well as us. They seem to have my husband, and they may kill him. But I know the code of the McConnells. He'd rather lose his life than have you surrender your rights and principles on his account. Go after the outlaws."

Tears came into Tom Powell's eyes. The woman's mouth was quivering pitifully, and she seemed about to faint; yet her voice rang true. It was the sublimest exhibition of courage he'd ever known.

"But we can't," Lee Crawford blurted. "It—it would be murder."

"It would be cowardice not to go," Jerry spoke up. "My father would want you to."

"But Jack doesn't think so. I saw him this mornin'. He told me to urge you not to do anything about it."

"Why shouldn't he?" Kit Martel yelled out. "Hell, he's one of the rustlers himself."

Tom tried to shut the old puncher off but he couldn't. His words struck the crowd momentarily dumb with astonishment.

"What—what was that you said?" Jerry demanded then.

"It's simple," Kit said. "Jack McConnell was a member of the old Wild Buch. So was Monk Heaton. Jack come back here and has been workin' in with 'em all the time. He still is."

"Prove that," Crawford shouted.

Old Kit could only look helplessly toward Tom. The latter had been afraid of that. With only his unsupported word, and he already accused, an accusation against Jack McConnell would sound ridiculous. But he had to go through with it now.

"I know," he saw, "because Jorg Jorgensen told me. Jack has been the go-between for Monk Heaton and Jess Westergaard. One of 'em. I'm sure now that others are Lee Crawford and his men."

"By God, no damned spy can stand there and make charges like that against me," Crawford gritted, but Levi Hand and others rode in and grabbed him.

"I'd like to be yore friend, Wood, but them charges are too plumb ridiculous," Lew Macy said, and Tom realized that thanks to Kit's outburst he had lost such small support as he had. And then assistance came from an entirely unlooked-for source.

"What Kit said about Jack McConnell is true," suddenly screamed a harsh feminine voice. The crowd gazed in surprise at the thin, excited figure of Crackers on the veranda steps. "I know it's true," she went on. "I know somethin' else. It was Jack McConnell who murdered than man Creed."

"Why, Crackers!" Jerry gasped.

"I've known it all the time," the woman went on. "The only reason I ain't told it is because Jim ordered me not to. I saw Jim ride away that day after the stockmen's meetin'. His Selim horse was gone from the stable, and he couldn't find his gun. When he came back Jack was with him. But Jim was ridin' Selim an' Jack was ridin' the horse Jim rode away. Jack killed that man Creed, and Jim met him on the way back. I wanted to tell but Jim wouldn't let me. Said it wouldn't do any good."

"My husband would give his own life to save Jack's," Mrs. McConnell murmured.

"That's an old maid's pipe dream," Crawford howled.

"Old maid, am I?" Crackers screamed. "Well, what I'd like to

know is why you claimed Jack McConnell was at yore place that day, when I know he was around here."

"Why, I—that's easy," the cowman said. "The McConnells both asked me to say that." The man suddenly realized that he was on the defensive. Tom's unsupported charges hadn't worried him, but the sudden revelation of Jack McConnell's crimes, and his own connection with the man placed him in an embarrassing position.

"By Gawd, Tom's been right all along," Kit said. "I betcha that Jack McConnell an' Lee Crawford have been workin' for the damn' lumber company all the way."

"Jerry, I protest against that old man and that spy makin' charges against your friends," Lee Crawford said. He had ridden out in front of the others now, and was but a few feet from the girl. "It's true that Jack did kill Creed, but he done it because he thought he was helpin' your father in this fight to save the timber of Pine Creek Basin. But he never was an outlaw or a rustler. He's just as loyal to the folks here as I am."

"Egg-zackly," Kit Martel remarked.

"Take a stand, Jerry," Crawford went on. "If you think I'm a crook I'll surrender my gun right now. It just depends on who you believe—a man you've known for years, or a self-confessed spy and associate of outlaws like Jorg Jorgensen."

"Oh, I don't know," the girl cried. "I only know that Verne here is bleeding to death while you're all quarreling. Help me get him into the house. Then go after the rustlers."

"All right, Jerry," Crawford said. "We'll go after the rustlers. It'll cost your father's life, but we'll find out the truth. And then, if this fellow Wood is still here, we'll settle with him. Come on, boys."

The man wheeled his horse and dashed out of the yard, with Ray Dusek and Shad Hoyne at his heels. Most of the others who had been aligned with him hesitated a moment, then galloped after him.

Mrs. McConnell fell in a dead faint. Only a fast leap by Tom saved her from striking her head on the steps. He caught her and carried her into the house, followed by Crackers. Leaving her to Crackers he rushed back to Verne. With the aid of Lew and Luke he carried his brother into the house.

"Never mind me," Verne protested. "If that man Crawford is what you say he is don't let him get away."

"Never mind him. This bleedin' has to be stopped," Tom said.

Tom saw at once that an artery had been cut by Rusty Bacon's bullet, and drastic means had to be taken at once if Verne's life was to be saved. The nearest doctor was in Boulder. Tom had only to look at the faces of the men who remained to know that they would be of little help. It was up to him. As rancher and cowhand he had many times had occasion to treat animals and even men that were grievously hurt. With such means as were at his command he set to work.

"I've been a fool, Tom," Verne said. "You can't do anything for me. Go on and catch those outlaws. No matter how you do it get proof that Westergaard is paying those outlaws to steal stock here. It'll save the basin timber."

"Never mind that; we'll get them. Right now you take it easy."

"If I could get well, I'd resign my office and I'd take Bedford's case. I could prove that the Teton company had no right to his mill."

"All right, you'll have your chance," Tom said. "Now, keep still. I'm going to work."

Lew Macy proved the most helpful of the men in the task of stopping the spurting geysers of blood. With tourniquets, cold packs, and antiseptics and even spider webs for weapons they battled for over an hour before they had their first signs of victory. And by that time Verne lay in a coma. His ruddy cheeks were white, and Tom realized that his brother's chances were not one in ten.

He had never loved Verne so much as now, he thought; and he dared not yet let the others know of the relationship between them. It could only make a bad matter worse.

When he finished, Jerry was in the room. He realized suddenly the strain the girl must be under. Apparently the love she had denied for Verne was still very much in existence, and her father was in as much danger as he had ever been inside the Boulder jail. Moreover, she and her mother had sent the men after the rustlers knowing that it would probably mean McConnell's death, because they knew it was what he would want them to do.

"Verne will be all right, I'm sure, if he has good care," he said. "I think we'll need a doctor though."

"I sent one of the ranch hands to Boulder after one," she said.

He closed the door of the room where Verne lay and followed Jerry into the living room. Kit, Lew, Luke, and the three or four others who had stayed behind were out on the veranda. Mrs. McConnell and Crackers were somewhere else in the house.

"Jerry, I know this looks bad for me," he said frankly. "I did come into the country with Jorg Jorgensen, and Jorg is an outlaw—not the leader, but merely one of Monk Heaton's gang. I was sent up here by Verne to help you folks, but I never betrayed you in any way. I followed Heaton, and at the cabin which I told you about I had a talk with Jorg Jorgensen. He told me about Jack McConnell. I tried to scare the outlaws into going back, but it looks like they didn't scare. Kit and I tried to catch Jack McConnell, but all we found in your father's cabin was the note you left for him. That's about all of my story. You can believe it or not, but I'm asking for a chance now to try to save your father's life."

"I do believe you, Tom," the girl said steadily. "It—it was a shock to learn about Uncle Jack, though I have wondered about him at times. I trusted Lee Crawford implicitly. I still can't believe that

he's an outlaw. But I'd sooner think he was than that you are."

"Thank you, Jerry. Before this business is settled I hope to get that point completely settled."

"Where are you going now?"

"I don't know what may happen if the ranchers and Heaton's gang clash, but I'm afraid of treachery. I don't know how to help that, but I have got a hunch that your father will be sent to a safe place somewhere out of the basin. Maybe to the very cabin where I saw the outlaws. I have an idea we may be able to find out where he is before the outlaws become alarmed."

"If he hasn't already been murdered," the girl said drearily.

"I don't believe that. In fact I doubt very much if the outlaws ever intended to murder him. At the worst they'd turn him over to the sheriff. I know there are men among them who won't stand for murder," he asserted.

He did know that Jorg Jorgensen, tough as he was, would never be a party to any cold-blooded killing, but he didn't know how many other there might be like Jorgie.

"You saved my father once; you may be able to do it again," she said. "If it wasn't for taking care of Verne I'd go with you. But you must take all the men there are here."

A suspicion that she wanted the men along to watch him darted through his mind, but he dismissed it as entirely unworthy.

"I'll take as many as I can," he agreed, "but somebody has got to stay here. You women folks must not be left here unprotected."

"But we'll be all right. They wouldn't dare try anything here. And if they do I can use a gun."

They went out on the veranda and Tom briefly explained his plan. He could read doubt on the faces of every man there except old Kit Martel. When he tried to get some of them to remain at the ranch they all agreed with Jerry that it was not necessary.

There were seven men in all in the party that rode away, leaving only three women and a wounded man at the ranch. The dead man, Rusty Bacon, had been wrapped in canvas and laid on a bunk in the bunkhouse. Tom had the feeling that leaving the ranch unguarded was a very foolish thing to do.

23

RIDING WITH MEN WHO WERE FAR from being convinced in their own minds that he wasn't himself an outlaw and a traitor was not a pleasant experience for Tom. He knew that he could do much better if he were free from them. He hoped that the other party would be as watchful over Lee Crawford.

"Where first, Tom?" Kit asked.

"I've got an idea I'd like to go back to where we had that trouble this morning. Kinda like to see Montan' again."

"But he's dead."

"I know," Tom nodded.

They found the beetle-browed Montan' only a few yards from where they had left him. He was indubitably dead.

"Well, Crawford didn't lie about that," Macy said.

"Right," Tom said succinctly. "But I'd like to have a look at him. He didn't look like a dyin' man to me when we left here."

"My Gawd, you mean—" Kit blurted.

"I mean there's a good chance Montan' was one of Crawford's men. He was badly hurt. He might have confessed. Crawford stayed here alone with him—but not long. Remember, he got to the ranch almost as quick as we did."

He dismounted and looked the dead man over carefully. He had been obliged to fire the shot that felled Montan', but he couldn't believe that it was fatal. He examined the wound now. The bullet had entered the man's lungs. With care Montan' might have lived. Certainly the wound should not have terminated fatally so soon.

It was an ugly-looking wound right enough. Rigor mortis had set in. The eyes were bulged as though the man had died in terrible agony; his tongue was black and thick, and protruded. Tom paid particular attention to the man's neck.

"Look," he said quietly. "See the reddish line around his throat. Then look at this bruise on the back of his neck. Look at his face; you can see he was strangled. He was garroted by something; probably a silk handkerchief or bandana twisted from behind with a stick; the bruise shows where the knot dug in."

He glanced around and his eyes rested upon a short stick about fifty feet away. He went and picked it up, and found a number of fine yellow silk threads still upon it.

"What do you think, men?" he asked.

"Lee Crawford wore a yellow silk bandanna," Luke Price answered, "an' Montan' didn't wear any."

"I guess that settles it," Lee Macy said slowly. "Wood, we're damned glad we stuck with you. Anything you say goes with us now."

"That's fine, boys," Tom said heartily. "Under the circumstances it seems like it might be a good idea to kinda acquaint the other men with what we found here before Crawford leads them into a trap."

They remounted and headed on toward the upper end of the basin. It was apparent that they stood a small chance of finding the other party unless they separated. It was Macy who made the suggestion, much to Tom's satisfaction. Soon Tom and Kit were left alone; the others had taken five different directions.

"Well, damned if it ain't been a stren-you-us day," Kit said. "Seemed like you was due to git hanged on some several occasions."

"I still have to feel of my windpipe once in a while to see if it's still workin'," Tom admitted.

"That damn' Crawford. I wish I'd have shot the cuss."

"He may have caused some trouble before this," Tom said. "What he's probably done is lead the boys on a false scent till he can get away and warn Heaton. Or he may slip the word to one of his men who are with him, and there are at least two."

"It's not the cattle, but Jim McConnell we want," Kit growled.

"Exactly. But it's the outlaws we've got to find. If I can see Jorg Jorgensen again I can find out where McConnell is. Jorg won't stand for murder."

"There's a dozen passes they might take cattle over, and it'll be a hell of a job nabbin' 'em once they git over."

They were following a dim trail up a small creek when they heard a horseman coming down the other way. Instantly they spurred into the brush. The precaution was unnecessary, for the rider turned out to be Bert Friel. Some of the men who had started riding the range that morning had not been back to the J Bar M ranch and knew nothing of the developments there. Bert was one of them.

The man from Boulder Valley was startled by their unexpected appearance, and he grinned sheepishly when he saw who it was.

"We wasn't givin' you a start on purpose, Bert," Tom apologized. "We didn't know who we might be meeting. Where have you been?"

"I've been lookin' for rustler signs all day, but I ain't found none," Bert said. "I saw Jack McConnell this mornin' an' he told me I'd better ride the country west of Stony Ridge."

"You saw Jack McConnell. Where?" Tom and Kit said together.

"Up toward the white rocks," Bert said. "Why all the excitement about that?"

They told him hurriedly what had happened. Bert's eyes goggled out as he listened.

"My Gawd," he said. "If I'd only known."

"Did Jack say what he was going to do?"

"Why, yes, he did. Said he was goin' up there in the white rocks where he could see purty much all over the basin with them high-powered glasses of his, an' keep watch."

"Know where that is?" Tom asked Kit.

"Hell, yes; they're the only white rocks in the hull basin. They loom up like frogs on a mud fence. Above timber line, an' the best place in the whole valley to keep a lookout. What're we waitin' fer?"

"Just a minute," Tom remonstrated. "I'm not just plumb easy in my mind about nobody being left to guard the ranch. Bert, I wish you'd go back an' make sure that Jerry and the others are all right."

"Just as you say, but if you're goin' after them outlaws I'd like to be along," the young rancher said, rather wistfully.

"You're married. You should think of your wife. If anything

happened to me or Kit it wouldn't matter much, except to ourselves."

Bert rode on down the creek and they changed their direction toward the white rocks. It was impossible to ascend from in front of the huge rocks which from there resembled a series of mighty fortresses crowning a mountain, and they were obliged to get high up on the ridge and come along its top from the rear.

There was a sort of pass where they would strike the top of the ridge, and the trail that led up to it was a mere cow-track through the thick timber.

"Trails fork on top of the pass," Kit said. "One goes back to the white rocks, t'other on to the high croppin's."

They were within two hundred yards of the edge of the timber just below the pass when Tom saw his horse's ears prick ahead with curiosity. He stopped instantly.

"Midnight sees something. It's not a cow because he only waggles one ear at a cow. He's got his 'I-see-a-horse' look on right now. Wait here, Kit, and don't let your horse nicker."

He rode forward cautiously, but he had gone only a short distance until he caught sight of a lone horseman to his left, and much higher up on the ridge. The man's back was to him, and he had but a glimpse, not nearly enough to identify the fellow. But the man was surely heading toward the white rocks.

A low call brought Kit plunging after him. They reached the pass, and again Tom's keen eyesight caught a glimpse of another man on the other fork of the trail. The fellow was just disappearing into the timber, but the look Tom got at him was long enough for him to be reasonably sure who it was. The man was Monk Heaton!

"One went each way," he murmured. "I'd like to follow them."

"We kin split up," Kit suggested.

"No. One fellow has gone to warn Jack McConnell of what's up, and Heaton already knows. The best chance we have is to get the drop on McConnell and this other fellow. When McConnell realizes that his game is up he'll surely to God tell us the truth. He won't want to see his own brother murdered."

"I dunno. I ain't got no use for that skunk."

"If he won't confess voluntarily we'll drag it out of him," Tom said. "Let's follow this other fellow. Heaton will keep."

It was nearly two miles along the hogback of the ridge to the grotesque but beautiful clusters of white rock, which Tom soon saw were of almost pure, though non-mineral bearing quartz. Bathed in the slanting rays of the evening sun they glistened like crystal.

Lest the man they were following see them they kept below the crest of the ridge wherever possible, though the going was rough and the tall pine grass slippery. They finally reached a place near the base of the first white outcropping which barred their progress and

decided to leave their horses. The top of the ridge just above them was narrow and there was too much danger of being seen.

They had climbed almost to the top of the ridge when they were startled by the sound of a single shot. Instinctively they both ducked, but instantly realized that no bullet had come near them.

"What the hell could have happened?" Kit blurted.

"I don't know," Tom said. "Wait here, Kit, where you can stop anybody who tries to get away. I'll see what happened."

Kit grumbled but obeyed. They had not brought their rifles, but it was too late to go back to the horses after them.

Hurriedly Tom made his way toward the labyrinth of shining white columns. Presently finding himself among them he moved cautiously from one gigantic, white pillar to another until he suddenly came upon two saddled horses tied to a scrub cedar. One, he knew, was the horse he had recently seen; the other he was positive belonged to Jack McConnell. But he still couldn't account for the shot.

Gun in hand he moved cat-footedly forward, peering cautiously around the corner of each mighty white citadel until he was almost at the very brow of the mountain. Then suddenly, he halted, and despite the many thrills and chills of that day his blood ran cold. A man lay there on his face across a rock, with both arms outstretched in front of him where he had fallen. His awkward posture told that he was dead. His hat had fallen to one side, and the thin red hair on his head identified him to Tom. It was Jack McConnell.

24

FOR A MOMENT TOM WAS STUNNED. He had counted heavily upon taking Jack McConnell alive. Then he realized that the shot he had just heard must have been the one that had finished McConnell, and the assassin must be close around.

Suddenly he heard a man clear his throat, and he jerked back out of sight. Removing his hat he stuck his head around a corner of the rock and watched. A moment later a man stepped out in sight and looked at McConnell with an ugly leer on his face. The man was Shad Hoyne, one of Lee Crawford's riders who had left the McConnell ranch with Crawford and the others not so long ago.

Hoyne kicked the body of the dead man contemptuously. "If you hadn't been a damned weaklin' you wouldn't be layin' there now," he said. "But they found you out an' you'd have squawked like a chicken."

The fellow gave the corpse another boot of contempt and started on toward the horses. Tom Powell stepped out into the open.

"Hold it, Hoyne," he called. He was directly behind the outlaw.

Hoyne stopped, and his figure visibly stiffened. The hair along the back of his neck lifted with fear at the cold implacability of that

voice. He had just murdered a man, and he knew that he had been caught. His hand dropped to the handle of his gun, but he dared not draw it.

"Make one move to draw that gun and I'll drop you like you did McConnell," Tom warned.

Hoynes lifted both hands high, one of them still holding the field glass, and turned around. There was a sickly smile on his face.

"Oh, it's you is it, Wood? I'm glad of that. I know now you was right about Jack McConnell bein' an outlaw. I guessed he was up here, an' I slipped away an' come after him. I ordered him to raise his hands, an' when he went for his gun I got him."

The effrontery of the man in claiming that he had switched sides was so bold that Tom might have been half convinced had he not known that Hoynes had recently talked with Monk Heaton. But he decided to play along with him for a while.

"But I thought you were Crawford's man," he said, making his voice sound doubtful. "I know that Crawford is as much of an outlaw as McConnell."

"That's right," Hoynes admitted. "I know it, too, now. But he had me fooled."

"Do you know that Crawford murdered Montan' after I shot him?"

"You don't say! How did you find that out?"

"Bert Friel saw him," Tom prevaricated. "The game is up for Crawford and all his associates."

"I'm damn' glad of it."

"What do you know about his dealin's with Jess Westergaard?" Tom asked. "You must've known they worked together."

"All I know is what Rusty Bacon told me. He was tryin' to git me in with 'em, I guess. He said that Westergaard would pay ten dollars a head bonus for all Pine Creek cattle that were drove out of the country, and said we'd just as well git our share."

"But you, bein' plumb virtuous and honest thataway, would have none of it," Tom said sardonically.

Hoynes smiled and shook his head. He had lowered his hands, and now he started toward Tom as though assuming that cordial relations between them had been established. He was thinking, Tom knew, that if he could just catch Tom off guard for a single second he could deal with him as he had with McConnell.

"Wait a minute," Tom said curtly. He put the fingers of his left hand to his lips and blew a whistle blast that made the rocks ring. It was his signal for Kit to come on.

"What's that for?" Hoynes asked. Tom saw he had turned pale.

"Just to call in Kit Martel," Tom said casually. "And, by the way, what were you talking to Monk Heaton about a few minutes ago back there in the pass?"

"Wha-what's that? I—I—never saw Monk Heaton in my life."

"Don't lie," Tom snapped. "We saw you. And I know you murdered McConnell for fear he would talk. You shouldn't taunt a dead man, Hoyne. I heard every word you said."

"By Gawd, I—"

"Just for fear you might lose your temper and get hurt, unbuckle that gun belt and back away from it."

The outlaw's face had gone haggard and hopeless. His bluff had failed to work, and he realized that he had made admissions which he couldn't withdraw. He obeyed the order and Tom made him back up until he stood beside Jack McConnell's dead body. He was standing there when Kit Martel arrived.

"Holy Joe! What's happened here?" Kit blurted out.

"Hoyne here murdered Jack McConnell just before I got here," Tom explained. "He's just made a confession to me that implicates Jess Westergaard, and he's goin' to tell us a few more things before he's through."

"I ain't confessed nothin'," the outlaw whined.

"It would be too bad if you went back on it now," Tom said gently. "Me an' Kit both could swear that we saw you shoot McConnell in the back in cold blood. But if you was to turn state's evidence we might admit that we didn't actually see the shot fired, and you might get off with life imprisonment."

"You've got me," the fellow surrendered. "I'll talk."

"That's better. Who was the real boss in here, Crawford or McConnell?"

"Crawford."

"Was he hired to come in here by Westergaard?"

"No. We didn't have anything to do with Westergaard till just lately. Monk Heaton sent us over here to buy Crawford's ranch, and we stocked it with cattle the gang had rustled from down in Utah. It never belonged to Crawford at all. Jack McConnell had been one of the Wild Bunch a long time, and it was planned to use him as a blind."

"Go on, tell us how it was worked."

"Jim McConnell was in the road. He was too tough to deal with. Then this timber row came up and Crawford saw a chance to clean up big in a hurry. He was stuck on Jerry McConnell, but he knew that Monk an' the gang wouldn't let him quit, so he planned to have that man Creed murdered. Jack McConnell did it so Jim would be suspected, but Crawford had promised him that me an' Rusty would find the body an' report Creed had been killed at the very time McConnell was at home talkin' with the other cattlemen, which would give Jim a perfect alibi.

"Lee made Jack believe that though Jim would be suspected me an' Rusty would prove his innocence. Jack believed that Jim would go broke anyhow, so he figgered it was better to get him out of the

way for a little while till the J Bar M cattle could be run off. He said it was better for the Wild Bunch to git 'em than for the Teton company to force Jim into bankruptcy."

"And you and Rusty failed to find the body," Tom said.

"Right. It left both McConnells in a hole. Jim found out that Jack had killed Creed, and was willin' to take the rap for him, but Jack kept thinkin' that we'd git Jim out of it."

"And instead of that Crawford made a deal with Westergaard," Tom prompted.

"Yes. You see we already had a sort of understandin' with Sheriff Marsh long before that, an' he was the middle man who got Monk Heaton and Westergaard together," Hoyne explained. "They made a deal by which Westergaard was to give us ten dollars a head for all the J Bar M cattle we could run off."

"And that raid on Bedford's mill—that was a ruse to give Heaton a free hand?"

"Yes."

"One thing more, Hoyne," Tom said. "Who captured Jim McConnell this last time, and where is he now?"

Hoyne seemed to hesitate, and Kit Martel stepped forward and jabbed a gun barrel viciously into his ribs. "You answer that, damn you, or I'll paint these white rocks red with yore gore," Kit snarled.

"Well, Jack McConnell had been ridin' the country where we was shovin' the cattle, an' Jim was ridin' the other way. Finally Jim begun to git suspicious, an' he had to be got rid of, so a couple of the boys, Smoke McGill an' Dutch Myers, who'd been camped in here for three weeks helpin' with the cattle, hid themselves in the cabin an' when he come in they nabbed him. You'd been raisin' hell, so Lee hit on the idee of writin' that note."

"Where is Jim McConnell now?" Tom demanded.

"I don't know—honest to Gawd I don't. Smoke an' Dutch took him over the hill into the badlands."

There was something about the man's manner that puzzled Tom; something that made him think Hoyne was holding out.

"Just what were Crawford's plans?" Tom asked. "An' you'd better not forgit any details."

"By Gawd, yes," Kit added. "You let yore mem'ry slip jest once, an' so does my finger on this trigger. Git down to business. What they aim to do with Jim?"

"You don't think they'd let him go, do you?" Hoyne sneered. "Hell, the minute they nabbed him he knew that Jack had been doin' him dirt, after him standin' a murder charge in this critter's place." He paused to gaze with disgust at the man he had murdered.

"My Gawd," Kit gasped. "Prob'ly Jim's dead, too. Come on, Tom. Let's take this snake down there an' let the boys know the truth. We've gotta git that damned Crawford before he gits away."

"It may be too late for that now," Tom said. "How did you get away from the bunch? Were there any other of Crawford's men there besides you an' Dusek?"

"It was easy to slip away. Lee told me to come up here an' git Jack. Then I was to keep watch. I don't know what else Lee had up his sleeve, but I know that him an' Ray Dusek expected to give them farmers the slip some time this evenin'. You mussed up his plans. If he could have got you strung up he'd have stuck it out, but now I think he figgers to git clear out of the country as soon as that bunch of cattle is safe."

"How many have they got, and where are they?" Tom asked.

"We've got better than twelve hundred head in a blocked-off canyon not five miles from here. An old landslide has choked it with rocks in the middle so nobody can git up or down, and the sides are steep and covered with chaparral. But we found a trail through the chaparral, and we've been hustlin' cattle in there for days. They won't come back through the brush, and the only way they could get out is over the pass at the top—the way we want 'em to go," the outlaw volunteered.

"We know things, Kit," Tom said, "but the big problem is to use our information. There's a good chance the boys will have grabbed Crawford before this. We've got the goods on Westergaard and the sheriff if Hoyne doesn't change his story, an' if he does that he'll certainly hang. The important thing right now is to save Jim McConnell if we can."

"But we don't know where he is," Kit objected.

"I can't believe that many men, even though they are rustlers, are cold-blooded murderers. They may be holding Jim, but they'll wait for somebody like Crawford or Hoyne here to come along and finish the dirty work. I'm going after him."

"But what'll we do with this varmint?" Kit wailed.

"He's yore cross now, an' you've got to bear him," Tom grinned. "Take him back to the ranch, an' be sure he don't git away."

"He'll find himself dragged down by a hunk of lead before he gits a three-foot start if he tries it," Kit said grimly. "But I don't like the idee of you goin' into that outlaw territory alone."

"An' I like the idea of leavin' Jim McConnell up there till Crawford gets at him a lot less," Tom replied.

25

TWILIGHT HAD SETTLED OVER the basin, softening its rough contours in velvet purple shadows when the three men got to the pass where they were to part.

The body of Jack McConnell had been lashed across his own saddle, and Kit led the two horses.

"Keep an eye on that fellow, Kit," Tom advised earnestly. "Don't be in too big a hurry to come back every now and then and see that he's still well tied."

"I'm no pulin' infant," Kit said a little indignantly. "I'll git him in there or I'll kill him."

Tom waved an arm in farewell and struck out along the trail which Monk Heaton had ridden over a short time before. The vicinity of the white rocks, it seemed, was a meeting place for the two sections of the outlaw gang, and apparently Heaton had just been up there to gather information from Jack McConnell when he had met Hoyne.

Finding a trail through the chaparral in the darkness promised to be a most difficult undertaking. Though old Kit knew the basin as well as anybody he declared that he had never known of any way for cattle to get into that particular canyon, and so he had never ridden it. Dark though it was Tom soon began to have evidence that numerous bands of cattle had been driven there.

Nevertheless, he had to ride up and down the edge of the long chaparral thicket three times before he finally found the gap through which the cattle had been taken. It was clever. The chaparral was still there, but heavy snow in that particular spot had beaten the brush almost down flat. Animals could be forced over it, and though they might tangle their feet in the twisted brush it would not stop them. But certainly no cow would come back over it, and it was obvious that even in daylight it would require a sharp-eyed man to see the place even if he was looking for a path through the thicket.

Once over that twenty-foot barrier Tom found himself in a sort of lane through the chaparral which twisted about like the blood veins in a man's hand, but which ultimately led him to the bottom of the canyon.

Rough as the canyon was he perceived that it would have held a sizeable herd of cattle in perfect safety for several weeks.

Finally the canyon narrowed between precipitous walls, and here the grass was beaten down by hundreds of trampling hoofs. Evidently the outlaws had collected the cattle at this point and started them trailing in a close herd. He didn't believe that they would have moved them far that day for fear of being heard. The real drive had probably begun at dusk. Had it not been for his talk with Jorg Jorgensen no doubt the cattle would already have been out of the country. It was plain now that Heaton had come on anyway.

Presently the canyon seemed to end against a sheer dark mass of mountain. Tom was puzzled. He lost an hour before he finally found a wide, bare ledge over which the cattle had been driven to the top. Then at last he stood upon the wind-swept divide that marked the south boundary of Pine Creek Basin.

The cattle had been driven one way or the other along the top

of the divide to some canyon head where they could be driven down. He was not long ascertaining that it had been to the east. Some three miles along he discovered the place, and then it was down a steep slope where a stampede would certainly have annihilated the herd.

The thick, salty smell of sweating cattle now hung heavily in the air; and flakes of foam from their slobbering mouths still clung to the bushes. Once he got off the steepest pitch and down into a canyon he could hear the faint yells of the riders as they urged the stolen herd onward.

They were now well into the badlands, where the outlaws had every reason to feel entirely safe. Tom followed along a short distance within rather easy hearing of the two men who were bringing up the drags, but he almost blundered squarely upon the entire outlaw force when they stopped unexpectedly. Only the fact that it was still dark saved him. He saw a whole group of horsemen collected just to his right as he passed the end of a grove of quaking aspens. He wheeled his horse around like a flash, but he didn't breathe easy until he discovered that there was no outcry.

He comprehended instantly what had happened, but he didn't have to use his imagination, for he could hear Monk Heaton's sharp, penetrating voice.

"The stuff is gittin' sulky, boys, an' we're in the clear. We'll make camp an' let 'em feed till after noon. When they start to drift we'll pick 'em up again. Start some breakfast, Snap."

"Gonna send anybody back to watch the trail?" a voice queried.

"Yeh, I'll send a couple men right after we eat."

Tom waited to hear no more. He had to get his horse hidden and get back there as quickly as he could. It was his big chance to find out about Jim McConnell.

Fifteen minutes later he was crawling into the heart of that aspen grove. The outlaws already had a fire going, and it was getting dangerously light over in the east. The outlaws were slouched around the fire waiting for their breakfast, while their horses grazed around with the saddles on. Tom was not more than twenty-five feet from some of the men. If it came daylight on him while he was still there he would certainly be discovered. But the first words he heard caused him to forget danger.

"Well, how do you feel, McConnell?"

"I feel fine," came the reply in Jim McConnell's voice. "I'm dead certain my friends will be along here soon, and then there'll be a bunch of outlaws decoratin' the trees in this canyon."

"But you won't see it, McConnell," Monk Heaton said ironically. "You cooked your goose when you got suspicious of your own brother. As soon as we know we're not being followed we'll finish you. It's the penalty of knowin' too damned much."

"That's purty damned cold-blooded, Monk," remonstrated a voice which Tom recognized as Jorg Jorgensen's.

"Yeh?" the outlaw leader said in an evil tone. "Look here, Jorgensen: I don't like you. When my good friend, Sheriff Marsh, was investigating Tom Wood he discovered that Wood came into the country with you. You said yourself that Wood talked with you not long ago an' tried to git us to give up makin' this haul. I've learned something else, Jorgensen: the description of this fellow Wood jibes with that of Tom Powell, a brother of that Boulder county attorney who was too damned good to hook up with the lumber company. Wood and Powell are the same, and Wood is the fellow who's been causin' us trouble. You see where that puts you?"

"Out on a limb, mebbe," came Jorg's grim voice. "If you think I'm workin' with Tom Powell you're mistaken. But I'm damned if I'll stand by an' see Jim McConnell or any other man murdered."

"Then, Jorgensen, you won't be with us any longer," rasped Monk Heaton.

The man had been standing close to the fire, where Tom could see him clearly. Even as the man uttered Jorg's death sentence he went for his six-gun like a streak of lightning.

But fast gunman that he was Heaton wasn't fast enough, for Tom Powell already had him covered. No matter what the consequences were to be Tom couldn't stand by and see Jorg murdered for trying to prevent another murder. At the report of Tom's gun Monk Heaton swayed sideways. His finger pressed the trigger of his gun, but the shot went into the dirt almost at his feet. Then his knees buckled and he fell face forward right across the fire; upsetting the coffee-pot, and knocking over a frying pan as he fell.

Sudden demoralization seized the outlaws at the sudden calamity which had overtaken their leader. They could see Jorg and knew that though he had tried to draw, his gun wasn't half out of the holster when Heaton was killed.

"Hand's up, you outlaws!" Tom yelled. "You're surrounded."

26

A BOMBSHELL FALLING IN THEIR MIDST could not have caused the outlaws more consternation than did the sudden death of Monk Heaton, and that incisive command to surrender, coming to them out of the half-light. They could only think that they had been followed by a posse and were caught in a trap. Some of them reached for the sky like automatons; others merely seemed frozen by fear.

Tom knew it was a good bluff, but making it good was another matter. Once the outlaws realized that there was but a lone man in the aspens the situation would change rapidly.

"Take their guns, Jorg, while we keep 'em covered," Tom spoke

again with the confidence of a general with a whole army at his back. He was sure that Jorg would recognize his voice.

"Git yore hands up, Smoke, damn you," Jorg bellowed.

"Not to you," a voice retorted, and suddenly two guns bellowed. It was the signal for the opening of a miniature hell.

Tom saw that Jorg was still on his feet, and the outlaw who had made the mistake of trying to draw was groveling on the ground. But the outlaws had come out of their paralysis quickly.

Seeing an outlaw's gun come up Tom fired as he ran forward to join Jorg. The outlaw dropped his gun and grabbed his arm. Jorg dropped another man. Jim McConnell lunged for the gun which Heaton had let fall, and now he dropped a man in his tracks.

Now the others had got their horses and were racing away. Tom fired three shots in rapid succession, and at the third one he saw a man shudder and stiffen, but the man didn't fall. In three minutes the others were out of sight.

"Where's yore damn' posse?" the big Dane wanted to know.

"I'm it," Tom grinned. "How are you, Mr. McConnell?"

"I'm feeling mighty good right now," the cowman smiled, though his hands trembled. "You two boys certainly saved my life. But I never suspected that Jorg here was a detective."

Jorg's jaw dropped, but before he could enter a denial Tom said quickly, "Of course. Jorg and me came into this country just to clean out this Heaton gang." He winked at Jorg and the big Dane suddenly took the hint. It was an out that would save him from jail.

"Well, I'll be damned," Snap Johnson muttered. "Kin I take my hands down?"

"Sure, Snap," Jorg said. "You're all right. I know you didn't go in for this murder business."

There had been eleven outlaws in all, counting Jorg. Two outlaws were dead; two were dying, and another nursed a wounded arm. Only four had escaped, and one of those was wounded.

"All I want," McConnell said, "is a chance to go back there and expose Lee Crawford and my brother. I protected Jack on a murder charge, but he's gone farther than even I can tolerate."

"I wouldn't be in a hurry, Jim," Tom said quietly. "We can all stand some breakfast first. Your brother is dead. He was killed by Shad Hoyne, and me and Kit captured Hoyne. Hoyne has confessed everything. By this time I have no doubt that Crawford is under arrest. You won't have to worry about any murder charge, and we've got the goods on the sheriff and the lumber company, too."

"I guess it was a lucky day for us when you came into this country, Tom," McConnell said. "Are you really Verne Powell's brother?"

"I am," Tom acknowledged, "and Verne is a lot better man than you folks credited him with being."

Although Johnson finished cooking breakfast none of them had

much appetite; remembering how they had had to drag the badly burned body of Monk Heaton off the fire.

After they had made a pretense of eating they started back across the divide. Johnson and the wounded outlaw were disarmed.

"We should meet Kit and a posse any time now," Tom said optimistically. "Hoyme told us how to come; Kit can lead 'em to us."

They were back almost to the edge of the timber when Tom's keen ear caught the sound of approaching horsemen. "Here they come," he chuckled. "I knew old Kit wouldn't fail me."

They rode on a few yards, then Jim McConnell stopped. "Don't you think it would be just as well to stop here in the brush?" he suggested. "Just in case it might not be our friends."

"Well, it won't hurt any," Tom admitted. "You fellows turn out on that side, and I'll get behind this big sarvis bush here."

They had scarcely got concealed when a horseman appeared. Tom almost emitted a loud exclamation of astonishment when he saw that it was Shad Hoyme—the man he had last seen a prisoner of Kit Martel's. And the fellow was riding along as free as air! But it was the next rider which gave Tom a real chill down his spine. Right behind Shad Hoyme rode Jerry McConnell! And behind her came Lee Crawford. Ray Dusek brought up the rear.

For once in his life Tom Powell didn't know what to do. He comprehended that in some manner Crawford had captured the girl and set Shad Hoyme free. Crawford was as dangerous as a rattlesnake. At the first intimation of danger he would use this girl as a shield. Would Jim McConnell be able to keep his head when he saw his daughter in danger? Unable to decide what to do he remained concealed behind the sarvis bush.

Suddenly Jim McConnell leaped his horse out in sight. A gun was in his hand. "Stop, you scum," he shouted bitterly. "Where are you taking my daughter?"

"Dad!" Jerry cried out in alarm.

Shad Hoyme had stopped, and in the face of McConnell's menacing gun he dared not draw. But Crawford had not hesitated. His gun was out—and it pointed straight at the center of Jerry's back.

"Keep back there, McConnell," the fellow ordered harshly. "I don't know how you got here, or who's with you, but if anybody makes a move to stop us your daughter will get a bullet right square in the back. Go on, Shad."

Tom heard McConnell give vent to a bitter, frustrated oath. He himself knew that nothing could save Jerry from a bullet if an attempt was made to stop the outlaws. Even if a bullet were fired into Crawford the reflex action of his finger would cause Jerry's death.

Suddenly Tom decided to take a chance. One thing only could save the girl. That was to shoot the gun out of Crawford's hand before he could pull the trigger. It was a small target, and if he failed

the result might prove instantly fatal to Jerry. But he must not fail. Certainly, however, his own doom was sealed. The moment he exposed himself to fire at Crawford he would draw a bullet from Ray Dusek—and at that distance the man would not miss.

He swung Midnight suddenly from behind the bush, and fired even as he saw the look of discovery in the outlaw's eyes. He was just in time to see Crawford's gun go spinning to the ground, and to catch a glimpse of the bloody hand which the outlaw held out when there came the mingled report of two guns. He felt the oscillation of a bullet past his face; then he saw Ray Dusek reeling from the saddle.

"Paid you back, feller," Jorg Jorgensen announced laconically, with a grin at Tom.

Both of them closed in ahead of Shad Hoyne and disarmed him. Jim McConnell, unable to suppress all his anger, drove his fist into Lee Crawford's face, and then clasped his daughter in his arms.

27

JIM MCCONNELL SUDDENLY RODE CLOSE to Tom and thrust out his hand. "That was the bravest thing I ever saw," he said.

"We all took a chance," Tom said in some embarrassment. Jerry was looking at him in a way that made him color to the roots of his hair. "What happened to Kit?" he asked.

"It seems that Crawford and Dusek found out about your discovery that he had murdered Montan', and when it got dark they slipped away from the rest of the men. They thought there'd be no men at the ranch so they came after me. Bert Friel was there, but they got in the house from the back way and before I knew it Crawford had me. Bert could do nothing.

"They tied him up, and I had to get ready to leave with them. Just as we were about to start Kit arrived with Shad Hoyne. They made me call him to the house, where Crawford stuck a gun in his ribs. Then they tied Kit up, set Hoyne free, and we started."

"Well, Hoyne, you're goin' back," Tom said. "And you're going to tell the same story that you told Kit and me. If you don't help hang Crawford you'll surely hang yourself."

"I'll talk," Hoyne said.

They were back in the canyon where the cattle had been gathered when they met Kit Martel, Lew Macy, and most of the other men of the basin. Old Kit's toothless jaws worked convulsively as he tried to keep back the tears of relief when he had heard the story.

"Dang it, I knowed all along you'd bring Jim an' Jerry both back safe an' sound," he asserted.

"But I'll bet you didn't know that he's a brother of Verne Powell, that fellow you disliked so much," Jim McConnell grinned.

Kit said something, but Tom wasn't looking at him. He was look-

ing at Jerry. She showed surprise, but her expression was an enigma.

"Now I understand a lot of things," she said softly.

"I reckon now you'll be gettin' engaged to the son-of-a-gun again," Kit remarked disgustedly.

Half of the posse went on to turn the stolen cattle back onto their own range, while the other half turned back.

When they were near to Bedford's mill Jim McConnell said, "I'm going down there and have this thing out with Westergaard and Marsh right now."

"No, don't, Father," Jerry begged. "You must see Mother first. You should wait anyway."

"That's right," Tom Powell agreed. "You keep away from 'em, Mr. McConnell, till we know what they mean to do. Let me an' Jorg talk to them."

"Don't leave me out," Kit said firmly.

Presently the three of them rode toward the mill, while the others headed for the McConnell ranch. As they approached the mill they saw that the road-making gang was already at work.

"Well, by Gawd, look who's here," a voice boomed as they rode up. If it ain't the feller who had the fool notion he could lick Roarin' Hack Ringo. Come to try it again, feller?"

"Maybe I will, Ringo," Tom said calmly. "You busted my ribs the last time, but I've been too busy to think about them. I believe I can take your measure now, but before I do I want to give you some priceless information. It may save you an' your lumberjacks some time in the penitentiary."

"What do you mean by that?" Ringo demanded.

In short, crisp sentences Tom told the man of the perfidy of his superior and the sheriff.

"Murder has been done, and we've got complete evidence to prove Marsh and Westergaard were in on it," he finished. "If you don't repudiate them, now that you know the facts, you'll be an accessory."

"What's that about Marsh and Westergaard?" suddenly demanded the sheriff himself, as he and the superintendent approached.

"Just this," Tom answered quietly. "Crawford and his men have been captured, and those stolen cattle that you were to pay a bonus of ten dollars a head for, recovered. A number of the men have confessed, and we know everything about your dealings with Monk Heaton's gang."

The sheriff's thick lips quivered and he turned pale, but Westergaard didn't turn a hair.

"Well, I played a pretty desperate game and lost," the latter said.

"You mean—you—you're giving up?" the sheriff mouthed.

Westergaard shrugged. "What else is there to do? We're licked."

"But what about me?" Marsh mumbled.

"You're done, finished, that's all. So am I." The superintendent

of the Teton Lumber Company turned and walked slowly away.

"What about us?" Ringo yelled.

"You," Tom laughed, "are out on a limb. Now roll your sleeves; I'm going to give you the licking you've had coming for a long time."

He started to dismount, but Ringo waved him back "No, sir," the lumberjack boss said, "I don't want any more of you. Any time I bust a man's ribs an' it can't keep him down that man is good. I'm gatherin' the boys an' we're gittin' the hell out of this."

"Well," Tom grinned, "good-by—and good luck."

The three friends rode slowly back to the McConnell ranch. It was dusk when they arrived. While Kit and Jorg told the neighbors the result of their talk at the mill Tom went in to see Verne. The doctor had been there and assured them that thanks to the emergency treatment he had received Verne would get well. And, thanks to Tom's story that all of his activities had been at Verne's behest, the young county attorney found himself quite a hero.

"Well, you'd better pop out of there, prosecutor," Tom grinned. "Yo're gonna have a lot of work to do now."

"Thanks to you," Verne said. "I've been an awful fool, Tom. Think of giving up a girl like Jerry because of a damned fool idea."

"Well, it's all right between you two now, isn't it?" Tom asked. He knew that he should be pleased, but there was an ache in his heart.

Verne shook his head faintly. "We're friends, but the rest is finished. Jerry told me that she never would marry me."

"But why? She may get over it."

"No; she told me last night she was in love with another man."

"But I don't understand," Tom protested. "She was engaged to you when this trouble started. She surely couldn't have fallen in love with Lee Crawford. Even if she had—she didn't tell you who it was?" he finished.

Verne nodded. "Before she knew I was your brother," he said.

Tom pressed his brother's hand and went outside. He could see a solitary figure on the rail of the veranda where the ivy vines clustered. He took her small, firm hand without a word.

"You've made my parents very happy," she said softly. "I wanted them to be alone so I came out here."

"I feel pretty happy myself tonight, Jerry," he said. "Verne just told me something. If it's true—"

"I'm sorry. If I'd known you two were brothers I'd never have told him anything like that, of course."

"You mean that it's not true; that you only told him that to get rid of him?"

"Of course not, darling," she said softly. "Only I'd rather have told you after you had told me."

"All right then, we'll start all over again." He drew her to him and kissed her. "I love you," he whispered.

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