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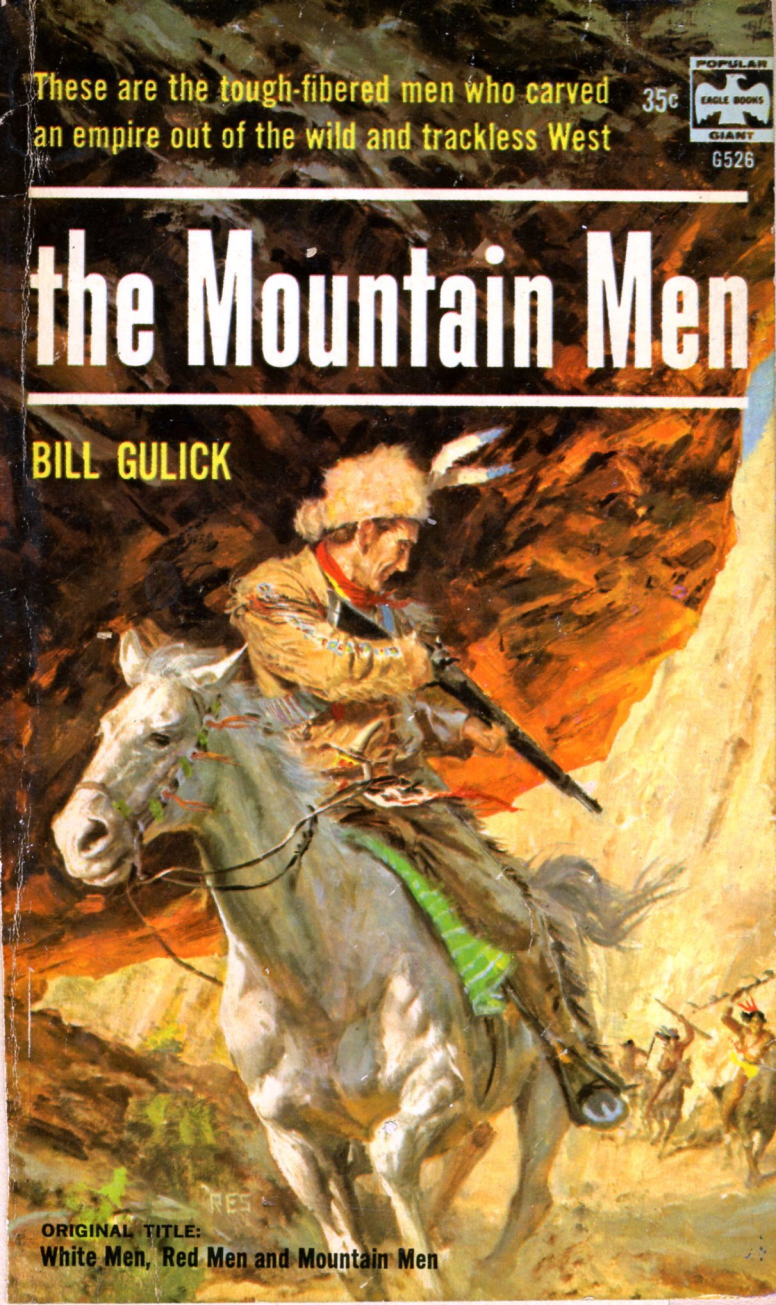
the Mountain Men

BILL GULICK



ORIGINAL TITLE:
White Men, Red Men and Mountain Men

Westward the Wild Men

They were the roughest, wildest, killingest bunch ever brought together under one piece of sky . . .

DAN LITTLE, frontier scout, who outdid any Indian at wilderness fighting—until one day in the Rockies . . .

TEX RANDALL, trailblazer, whose trouble began when he saw the lone girl in the wagon train . . .

OLD BILL WILLIAMS, trapper, who thought he was a grizzly bear nine feet tall, and acted accordingly . . .

"NO ONE WRITES WITH MORE COLOR AND ENTICING DETAIL ABOUT THOSE COURAGEOUS AND ADVENTURESOME MEN THAN GULICK, AND HE IS AT HIS BEST IN THIS BOOK."

—Pasadena Star News

the Mountain Men

Original Title: WHITE MEN, RED MEN AND MOUNTAIN MEN

BILL GULICK

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FOREWORD

If all the ornery reprobates of the Old West that deserved hanging *had* been hanged the population of the country this side of the Mississippi would be considerably smaller than it is today.

It's lots more fun to write about ornery, contrary characters than it is about good ones. Upright people are sadly limited in the things they can do, but the ornery character can do anything that comes into his head. The stories in this collection have one thing in common: they're full of uninhibited characters whose antics I had fun describing.

A common question asked of writers is "Where on earth do you get your story ideas?" Well, sometimes you grub for them like a hungry wild pig nosing for acorns, sometimes you stub your toe on them, sometimes they fall plop into your lap, sometimes you turn a page in a dry-as-dust reference book and there in one paragraph of fine print is a gilt-edged story idea that has been lying around free for the taking for a hundred and twenty years.

The story "Conquest" is one that first began to germinate years ago when, in reading about the mountain men, I noted references to their periodic horse-stealing expeditions to California. These rawhide-tough trappers usually wintered in some mountain-surrounded valley with bitter cold, deep snow, hunger and danger their constant companions. What was their reaction to the balmy clime of Southern California, the abundant food, good wine, the dark-eyed girls? The thought intrigued me.

An Englishman, George Frederick Ruxton, who spent several years during the 1840's living with the mountain men, devotes a chapter of his book *Life in the Far West* (first published in England in 1848 and since reprinted many times) to a fictionized account of what was probably an expedition led by Joe Walker, one of the more colorful of the mountain men. I have fictionized it further. I hereby

freely admit my debt to Ruxton for the characters of the Spanish hidalgo, Don Alonzo, and the priest, Fray Bernardo, whom I shamelessly borrowed with a mere change of names, and also for the battle scene, the essence of which I used.

As for the rest of "Conquest"—and the other yarns in this collection—I reluctantly take full blame.

—Bill Gulick

"CONQUEST"

Frenchy LeCroix was done for, no two ways about that. Going under soon, just like the orange ball of a sun sinking yonder behind the purpling, jagged peaks of the Tetons. Some out of his head, too, Matt guessed, because Frenchy kept babbling on about the beaver he figured to trap 'fore snow-fly and the whiskey he figured to swill come rendezvous next summer and the Blackfoot topknots he figured to lift to even the score for this to-do, when it was plain to see that the candle of life in him had burned plumb down to the end.

Because it seemed to ease his breathing some, Matt put an arm under his shoulders and lifted him up a bit, while Buff Radford let Frenchy hang on to one of his tough, calloused hands. Didn't seem to be much else they could do then but wait. Presently Frenchy's senseless chattering ceased and his eyelids fluttered open.

"The fight—she is over?"

"Sent 'em a scootin'," Matt said.

"Made meat of a round dozen, we did," Buff said.

"Is good. Is ver' good." Pain filmed the black eyes for a moment, then Frenchy gasped, "I would die happy . . . if . . . if . . ."

"If what, Frenchy?" Matt said.

With a great effort, the swarthy little trapper straightened up to a sitting position, turned his eyes to the west and whispered, "If only I could see California again! The mission of San Miguel! The priest, he was kind—he would burn one small candle for my soul. Ah, the mission of San Miguel! The sea, the sunshine, the horses, the women, the wine . . . !"

And with that he smiled and died.

"Poor Frenchy!" Buff said, shaking his head. "Kept on tellin' big stories to the last, didn't he? Well, nothin' we can do for him now but bury him. You know any words to say over him?"

"None he'd hear," Matt said. "Let's get at it."

They scooped out a shallow trench, wrapped a blanket around the stiffening body and heaped rocks well up over the grave to keep the wolves from getting at it. As night came down, bringing with it the keen chill of the high country, they built a small fire, tightened their belts and smoked a pipe of tobacco in lieu of a meal. Buff said, "Them Blackfoot left us in a fix, boy. We'd best do some tall figurin'."

When it came to deciding on anything, Matt Adams had his own special way of going at it. A tall, strong, yellow-haired, blue-eyed young man who had run away from his home back in Kentucky because he'd rather hunt than plow, rather trap than build fence, he wasn't much for talk. When something troubled him, he'd just sit quiet or walk quiet or lie quiet on his back staring up at the sky for a spell, then all of a sudden he'd say, "I'm goin' to do so-and-so."

And he'd get up and do it.

That's how he left Kentucky. Left a mule hitched to a plow in the middle of an unfinished furrow. Left his ma and pa waiting supper. Left a black-eyed girl staring down a lane in the sunset wondering if she'd done right to say if he was fool enough to leave Kentucky he'd have to leave without her.

Far as he knew, she was still wondering. He didn't think of her often any more. Staring into the fire now, he tried to remember her face but all that came back to him was that she'd had black eyes. Out in Californy, Frenchy said, the Spanish girls all had black eyes. Black eyes, shiny black hair, smooth olive skin and a way of looking at a man. They had red lips, Frenchy said, flashing white teeth and a way of laughing at a man that sort of stirred him up inside. . . .

Buff Radford, who'd been in the mountains so long he'd got in the habit of thinking aloud, put another stick of wood on the fire and muttered, "Made off with all our traps an' fixin's, them murderin' Blackfoot did. We got no powder nor lead left save what's in our horns an' shot pouches. We got a hoss apiece an' the clothes on our back. Got our hair, too, which is one blessin' t'be thankful for. But how we goin' to trap beaver without no traps, you tell me that?"

"Buff," Matt said, staring into the fire, "did you ever taste an orange?"

"Ever do which?"

"Taste an orange. Them things Frenchy said he picked off trees an' ate that winter he was out in Californy. Oranges."

" 'Course I ain't. Neither has nobody else. Not in winter, nohow."

"Frenchy said he did."

"Now that's a yarn won't hold water no way you cork it, boy. It's agin nature. Who ever heerd of fruit growin' in the wintertime?"

"Ain't no winter in Californy, Frenchy said."

"I ain't no hand to knock a dead man," Buff said stubbornly, "but Frenchy was a talker, that you will admit. Why it come on him to talk so much about Californy is beyond me. But I will say this an' no meanness intended. Half of what Frenchy said about Californy was lies and t'other half was plain untruths."

"He was there once. Told me he was."

"Now what does that prove? I heerd Jim Bridger swear he was in them Glass Mountains he's always yarnin' about. I heerd Black Harris swear he seen a putrified bird singin' a putrified song in a putrified forest. But does that mean I got to believe it?"

"You ever been there?"

"Never seen a glass mountain nor a putrified forest in my life. I do my drinkin' at rendezvous, then I'm done for the year."

"Ever been to Californy, I mean?"

Looking some put out, Buff chewed on his pipestem. It always peeved him to have a place west of the Mississippi mentioned that he hadn't been to. He shook his head. "Matter of fact, I ain't. Never figured there was much out thataway. No beaver, anyhow. But I've heerd Joe Walker an' Kit an' Jim talk about the place."

"What do they say?"

"Hell, they're as big a liars as Frenchy! Somethin' about the air out there brings out the liar in a man, seems like." Buff picked a live coal out of the fire and relighted his pipe. "Why, mind ye, Kit was tellin' me only a spell back that them Spaniards out in Californy got so many hosses an' cattle they just let 'em run loose every whichway an' don't mind at all if a body walks in and helps himself. He was tellin' me that them priests which run the missions have got the Injuns so tamed down they wouldn't take a

scalp if it was handed to 'em on a solid gold platter. Does that sound reasonable?"

"No," Matt admitted, "it don't. Still, Frenchy said—"

"And the women! Why, d'ye know, Kit was tellin' me—" Buff suddenly scowled and broke off. "We're in a fix, boy. Can't catch beaver without traps, an' that's a fact. No sense talkin' about Californy. No traps out there. No beaver neither."

"What'd Kit say about the women?"

"You got it in your head to go to Californy?"

"What'd he say?"

"Well, it was a lie. Must of been. No menfolks would stand for their women carryin' on with strangers the way he claimed they carried on, I'm convinced. But if you just got to know, what he said was—"

Somewhere out in the darkness Matt heard a small sound, like a hoof clinking against a stone. Quick as a cat, he kicked the fire to pieces, made a grab for his rifle and bellied down snake-close to the ground. Then he heard a laugh, a white man's laugh, and a voice sang out.

"We ain't Blackfoot, boys. If we was, you'd be some dead by now. Stir up that fire and give us some light."

"Hell!" Buff muttered. "Speak of the devil—! Kit, ol' hoss, that you?"

"Was last time I looked. Give us a light, you mangy old buzzard, an' let's see if you still got your topknot or been snatched bald-headed."

Feeling considerably relieved, they remade the fire and got up to greet the dozen or so riders that came straggling in. There was Kit Carson, a small, wiry runt of a man with a grin like a friendly chipmunk. There was Jim Bridger and Joe Meek, big and amiable yet tough as they came. There was long-nosed Joe Walker, who looked dignified enough to be a preacher but who had seen more country and fought more Injuns than anybody among them. There was young Dick Wootton, bashful and awkward-looking, but chain-lighting unchained when the time came for fighting.

There was that liar to top all liars, Black Harris; there was Pegleg Smith and Ewing Young and wise old Tom Fitzpatrick. There was that ornery hardcase Old Bill Williams with his sharp, thin face, his keen gray eyes, his cracked, whining voice—Old Bill, who'd been around the mountains since the time they were molehills and who had,

all admitted, more than a little hair of the grizzly bear in him.

Not more than once in a coon's age would you see a bunch like that throwed together, Matt knew, but Joe Walker explained how it had come about. Seems they'd been leaving the fur rendezvous together, figuring to break up and go their separate ways a couple of days out, when a war party of a hundred or two Blackfoot had jumped the lot of them. It had taken them so by surprise that they'd lost most of their spare horses and gear, but they'd managed to make a few Injun widows and save their own skins. Hearing the fracas over in this direction, they'd decided to come over and have a look.

"Well, we made out all right," Buff said, " 'cept for losin' some hosses and traps and Frenchy LeCroix catchin' a musket ball in the liver. Went under, Frenchy did."

They were all sitting around the fire by now, save for that lone wolf Old Bill Williams, who was prowling around somewhere out in the dark, sniffing the air for signs of trouble, talking to his mule, maybe, which was about the only critter in the mountains with a better nose for Injun smell than Old Bill himself. There was maybe half a minute of silence after Buff told them the news about Frenchy LeCroix. Joe Meek muttered, "He was a good coon, an' that's a fact." Then with that subject all talked out they fell to discussing the more immediate matter of their own survival.

Meek had his say and Bridger had his. Carson put in a mild word or two and so did Fitzpatrick. What it all boiled down to was that there wasn't much point wintering in the mountains if they couldn't trap beaver. So they all fell silent again, looking as if by common consent at Joe Walker. Joe got his pipe going, rubbed thoughtfully at those short, black chin whiskers of his and stared off into the darkness to the west.

"Now I'll tell you, boys, I don't propose to waste my days. Man's only got so many of 'em on this earth and it just ain't fit for him to hole up for the winter like a bear in a cave. Seems agreed we can't take beaver. So let's take hosses, I say."

"Whar?" Buff Radford grunted. "Only Injuns I know of that's got hosses are the Nez Percé an' Blackfoot an' Crow. Time we git up to their country, snow'll be neck deep."

Joe Walker smiled. "There's Californy, Buff."

"You been thar?"

"Three year ago." Walker's eyes were as calm and peaceful—or as mean—as a man's eyes could be. From what Matt had heard of him, he was no man to pick a fight but he wasn't one to go two steps out of his way to avoid one either. "Three year ago I was there. Quite a place, Californy. Hosses, cattle—millions of 'em—an' nobody to care much if you help yourself. Sunshine all winter long, women's friendly, wine's good, an' if a man has a mind to he can pick oranges right off the trees an' eat 'em any time he wants to."

Matt looked at Buff and Buff snorted and looked away.

"So what I've got a mind to do," Walker said, "is head for Californy, spend the winter there, then pick up a thousand or so head of hosses and drive 'em east, come spring. Anybody wants to can come along."

"Them Spanish girls dance a right mean dance," Kit said, grinning that chipmunk grin of his. "I'm for goin'."

"When I can't git buffler meat I'll take beef," Jim Bridger grunted. "Count me in."

"Talk, talk, talk!" Old Bill Williams grunted, riding his mule into the circle of firelight. "This coon's fer Californy!"

"So's this 'un," Matt said suddenly, picked up his rifle and got up. "Comin', Buff?"

"I'm comin'," Buff muttered sourly. "But I tell ye, boy, it's all bound to be a pack of lies. Somethin' about the air out thar—"

The air enveloping the mission of San Miguel was tranquil, balmy and warm, subtly flavored by a faint salt tang from the blue, sunlit bay which lay at the foot of the height of land upon which the mission buildings sat. The scene was one of peace. On the grassy plains to the east fat cattle and horses grazed drowsily in the lazy warmth of midafternoon, the vineyards basked on the hillsides, the leaves of the orange trees rustled gently in the faintly stirring breeze. As always, the huge wooden gates which gave access to the inner courtyard of the mission stood open and within flower-surrounded fountains gurgled musically, splashing droplets of crystal clear water onto the clean-swept flagstones of the patio.

In the shade of a tall pepper tree outside the mission walls half a dozen women chattered and worked, being careful, however, to keep their voices low so that they would

not disturb the siesta slumbers of Fray Bernardo, the plump, kind faced priest who sat snoring gently on a low, circular bench that surrounded the base of the tree. Some wove straw mats, some knelt before charcoal-burning *braseros* on which simmered fragrant clay pots of beef and beans, some scraped patiently at hides, while one—María Vélez by name—ground dried corn into meal on the stone *metate* before her.

María did not join in the chatter, for the truth was it bored her. What was it to her that *pobrecito Pepito* had a boil on his little bottom or that Carlos was suffering from a headache due to an unfortunate fall into a wine vat or that little Teresa was extremely fretful these days because of the imminent coming forth of her first tooth? Perhaps the fact that María had neither husband, parents nor relatives accounted for her lack of interest in family matters. Perhaps it was because she was younger than the other women, prettier than the others, and therefore more inclined to foolish, romantic dreams. But their chatter bored her, so she ground her corn and smiled her secret smiles and dreamed.

She was a strong, healthy girl, this María, with gleaming black hair and eyes, full red lips, and a body as lithe and limber as a panther's. In color her skin was a shade lighter than that of the other women, in whom Indian blood ran strong, and this was to her at once a matter of pride and hurt. Who her parents had been only the gods could say. As a small child a priest traveling the trail from Santa Fe to California had found her hidden deep in a cholla thicket when he had come upon the scalped and mutilated bodies of the victims of an Apache massacre, had brought her to San Miguel, had given her a name—and the rest was mystery. This lack of any traceable ancestry had long been a great sadness to her; in time she had come to invent her own ancestry and to make it a great pride. It was sinful to be proud, she knew. But was it not better to be proud, sinful and happy than humble, virtuous and sad?

The long, round stone in her hands made a small scraping sound as she worked it back and forth, back and forth, pulverizing the grains of corn upon the surface of the *metate*. At the foot of the pepper tree, a dusty, barefoot figure stirred, sat up, yawned, and Pancho Oñate blinked at her with sleepy eyes.

"Is it a necessity that one should make so much noise as to disturb the sleep?"

María did not answer.

Moving with careful slowness so as not to excite the blood too abruptly, Pancho got to his feet, put on his hat and came over to where María was working. Even when he had sandals on, which was seldom, Pancho was several inches shorter than María, which in itself would have been justification enough for her to judge him of no consequence. The fact that he was also lazy, unclean and smelled eternally of tobacco made him in her eyes totally unworthy of notice. Eying her peevishly, Pancho rolled a corn-shuck *cigarito* and lit it.

"I was speaking to you, woman. Did you not hear?"

"I am not your woman."

"Nevertheless, I spoke."

"The wind blows through the trees and makes a noise also. It is not necessary that I answer the wind. *Vaya.* Go away."

"María, it is not that I meant to offend—"

"The smoke of your *cigarito* offends me. Go elsewhere with it."

The other women, most of whom also had *cigaritos* dangling from their lips, were watching them covertly, hoping, María knew, that Pancho would put her in her place once and for all. Aware of that attention, Pancho scowled blackly at her. "It is no sin to smoke."

"It is a sin to the mouth. The mouth should taste clean. It is a sin to the nose, which was meant for breathing clean air. Go away."

"I am not a dog to be spoken to thus. You will keep a polite tongue in your head or I will—"

He seized hold of her forearm and jerked her to her feet. This quickly proved to be a mistake, for once on her feet she was able to look down at him and lift the piece of stone in her hand into a threatening position over his head. Her bosom heaving, her eyes flashing, she said, "Go!"

He went, hurrying the first two steps only, then sauntering slowly along in the direction of the courtyard with his hands behind him and his eyes thoughtfully studying the ground, as if the condition of the soil were his only concern in life. María took one look at the women around her, tossed her head, laughed and went back to grinding corn.

On the bench beneath the pepper tree Fray Bernardo

burped in his sleep. This seemed to disturb him somewhat, for he shifted his fat body an inch to the left, then an inch to the right, found neither position quite comfortable and burped again. His eyelids fluttered. His lips opened and closed, as if retasting something that had tasted quite good some hours ago but did not taste so well now. His tongue licked his lips, his eyes blinked again, finally stayed open, and, after a few moments of adjusting themselves to the light, regarded the scene before them with the curious interest of a man who likes to keep up with the affairs of the world about him.

Nothing seemed amiss. The mountains were still there, hazy in the distance, the sea was still there, the mission still stood, and, from the smells emanating from the clay pots simmering on the *braseros,* another meal was in the process of preparation. True, the sun had progressed some two hours toward the west since he had last viewed it, but its reliableness was a thing to be expected, while all else in this immediate universe was in a sense Fray Bernardo's personal responsibility. It pleased him to find things going so well.

If Fray Bernardo had been a vain man, he would have felt more than a quiet pleasure in viewing the prosperous, peaceful scene before him, for it was in a way entirely his doing. If he had been a proud man, he would have said to himself many times a day that it was indeed an achievement that he, Bernardo de Alarcon y Morelos, whose ancestral holdings covered many and many a square mile of the sunlit plains of Andalusia, had forsaken all worldly wealth and splendor to become plain Brother Bernardo and to make a success of a mission in a far-off land. Being neither vain nor proud, yet at the same time human, he merely sighed a contended sigh each day upon wakening from his siesta nap, wriggled his bare toes in the warm dust and murmured, "I have done well. With God's help, I have done well."

Seeing Pancho Oñate shuffling toward the courtyard, it occurred to Fray Bernardo that at this season of the year, it being well on into autumn now, it would be wise to have an accounting from his major-domo as to the state of the mission's physical well-being. Acting upon that thought, he called out, "*Hola,* Pancho! I would speak with you."

Pancho turned and bowed, as he had been taught to do. "I am at your service."

"Come here, my son. There are matters of importance to be discussed."

Shuffling slowly back to the pepper tree, Pancho took off his hat and squatted on his bare feet beside Fray Bernardo, giving him a somewhat anxious, sidelong glance. "What is it you wish to discuss?"

"It is time for an accounting. How many bushels of corn are in the granary?"

"*Quién sabe?* Many, I think."

"The cattle? You have tallied them as I requested?"

"There are many. Very many."

There were also, Fray Bernardo discovered to his great satisfaction, many horses, much wheat, and the grape harvest had been of exceeding excellence. In a word, not for many a year had the larders been so full and the wine rooms so well stocked. The fact that Pancho had neglected to make out an inventory, as Fray Bernardo had some time ago requested him to do, was of minor importance, for, as Fray Bernardo now admitted to himself, that would have been a matter of some difficulty for a man who could neither read nor write nor count beyond the number of fingers and toes he possessed.

Fray Bernardo smiled. "You have done well, my child. It has been a good year."

"The best, I think, since *los Americanos* came," Pancho agreed.

A faint shadow clouded Fray Bernardo's eyes. "Those heathen *Americanos!* That was a bad time. How many years does it make since they came, Pancho? Four or five?"

"Three, I think."

"We defended ourselves as best we could, did we not?"

"*Sí*, we fought."

"How many did we kill?"

"Not many. In fact, I think we do not kill any. They do not fight fair. Before we can get ready to kill them, they are within our gates with their guns and knives. When this occurs, what can we do?"

"True, Pancho, true. One can do nothing then. I recall that when they attacked I was looking for a weapon with which to defend the mission, but by the time I found a pistol they were within the courtyard." Fray Bernardo sighed. "No doubt I could have killed many of them but I could not shoot without endangering the lives of our women. Also, the hammer of the pistol was absent."

"I, too, could have killed many of the dogs," Pancho said, nodding, "but when I rode out to meet them in battle my horse became frightened and ran the other way. Next time, I will ride a braver horse."

Fray Bernardo smiled fondly at him. "*Sí*, with valorous fighters such as you we have nothing to fear if the *Americanos* come again. We are much stronged now. We have the cannon, which we did not have before. Most important of all, we have Don Alonzo."

"He is a famous soldier, *sí?*"

"The finest of the fine. In Spain, he fought for the King. He has fought and conquered the infidels. And in the great voyage on which he was journeying when his ship was so unfortunately wrecked here, he fought many places, many times." Fray Bernardo looked up at the small brass cannon perched on one corner of the mission wall. "When the *Americanos* come—if they come, which God forbid—we will slay them all with the cannon. Boom! They are all dead. If any are left, Don Alonzo will slay them with his sword."

The women working in the shade of the pepper tree cast half frightened, half pleased glances up at the cannon on the wall, for to them it represented both the terrors of war and the satisfaction of knowing that they were safe from invasion. But María did not look. Vigorously grinding the corn, she murmured, "Ha! Don Alonzo could not slay a shadow! With his sword he will cut his big toe, shed two drops of blood and faint!"

"María!" one of the women chided. "How is it that you talk? Don Alonzo is our protector."

"He is not my protector. I do not want to be protected."

"Wait until the *Americanos* come, then you will be sorry for your foolish talk. Just wait."

Further discussion of the gentleman in question was suddenly ended by the appearance of Don Alonzo himself, who came sauntering leisurely out of the courtyard, paused and with eyes still drowsy from sleep meditatively surveyed that part of the world within range of his somewhat limited vision. He was, it must be admitted, every inch the *caballero*, though when totaled up the sum of those inches could not have exceeded five feet. Beneath his clean but faded jacket and breeches, his thin body seemed to be nothing but bones covered by a thin layer of skin, which in his face and hands was so pale and tightly drawn that one needed

only the quickest of glances to assure himself that the blood in the veins of Don Alonzo de Miraval y Ruiz was indeed the bluest of the blue.

The face was exceedingly distinguished, with fine, patrician lips, a bold hawk nose, and fierce brown eyes that had in their time looked far and far across the gentle hills of Castille and seen no square foot of soil that did not belong to either the Ruiz's or the Miravals, that had looked without fawning into the eyes of kings, that had watched distant, unknown seas rise and fall as the ship carrying him in quest of honor and glory sailed steadily on.

Unfortunately, Don Alonzo had been asleep in his cabin the night a drunken helmsman had mistaken east for west upon leaving the bay below San Miguel and had run the ship upon the reef. However, making the best of matters, Don Alonzo had managed to salvage one small cannon before the ship went down and had brought it and his crew safely ashore, where the mission of San Miguel had received them kindly. In due time, the crew had been picked up by a vessel bound for Spain, Don Alonzo choosing to remain in the pleasant company of Fray Bernardo until such a time as he might obtain another ship in which to continue his great quest for *Isla de Oro.*

This island of solid gold for which Don Alonzo had been patiently searching when his ship was wrecked was located in the ocean somewhere to the south and west of the California coast. Painstaking perusal of a map sold to him by a sailor in Seville, plus considerable research, careful celestial observations, and the employment of three of the finest seers in the Spanish Court, had long ago convinced Don Alonzo of that. But until another vessel could be obtained there was nothing to do but contain his impatience and wait. That being the case, it was indeed fortunate that his waiting be done in such a pleasant place as San Miguel.

Spying him, Fray Bernardo called out a warm greeting, for it had been all of two hours since they had last seen each other. *"Hola, Don Alonzo.* How is the state of your health?"

"I am well, thank you. And you, Brother Bernardo?"

"Exceedingly well, *gracias.* Seat yourself here and rest. The day is warm."

"The affairs of the mission are in good order?" Don Alonzo inquired politely as he seated himself upon the bench.

"In the best order. As a matter of fact, I was just saying to Pancho here that not since the year *los Americanos* came have our affairs been in such good order." Fray Bernardo sighed a deep sigh. "Ah, those heathen *Americanos!* We fought well, did we not, Pancho?"

"Very well."

"How many did we kill?"

"A great many, I think. Twenty, at least, perhaps more."

Fray Bernardo nodded soberly. "*Sí,* we taught them a lesson they shall not soon forget. But it is comforting to know, Don Alonzo, that if they should come again you are here to defend us."

"I shall endeavor to do my best."

"The cannon, it is in good order?"

"I have no doubt of it. I examined it closely only a year past."

"The cavalry which you organized when you first came, it is well drilled?"

"Only this past summer we had a most excellent parade."

Fray Bernardo smiled and settled himself more comfortably upon the bench, his eyes benignly regarding the women at their work. Don Alonzo gazed out at the autumn-hazed foothills and dreamed of *Isla de Oro.* Pancho squatted on his heels, dozing. María ground corn. The sun moved slowly down the western sky toward the quiet surface of the sea.

Presently, far-off to the east across the rolling plain, there appeared a small smoke-curl of dust. It seemed to move but slowly at first, then, as it drew nearer, the figure of an Indian bent low over the neck of a hard-running horse could be made out. A few moments later the rider was within earshot and his frantic voice was heard shouting, "They come! They come! *Vienen los Americanos!*"

Don Alonzo jumped to his feet. Pancho staggered up and stood staring at the Indian, who, wild-eyed, had tumbled off his horse as he jerked it to a halt and was pointing now with a trembling hand toward the east.

"*Los Americanos!* They come! They come!"

"How many?" Don Alonzo demanded.

"They come! They come!"

"How many, fool?" Speak!"

"How many? I did not stay to count them—but I think fifty, a hundred. No, I think a thousand!"

Fray Bernardo got to his feet and looked uncertainly at

Don Alonzo, who stood scowling fiercely into the distance where a faint dust cloud now was visible. Hesitantly, Fray Bernardo said, "We should do something, *sí?*"

"Of course!"

"What should we do?"

"First, it is a necessity to sound the alarm."

"Excellent!" Fray Bernardo wheeled and started waddling toward the gates of the mission. Suddenly he stopped and turned around. "What alarm, Don Alonzo?"

"The bell on the wall. It should be rung."

"I shall have it done immediately. *Andale,* Pancho, go ring the bell!"

"Also the calvary must be alerted!" Don Alonzo snapped. "Pancho, alert the cavalry! *Prontissimo!*"

Pancho, who had moved two paces toward the gates, stopped. "*Sí,* Don Alonzo, as soon as I ring the bell."

"Can a bell fight, *estúpido?* Alert the cavalry! Tell them to bring guns, lances, whatever they have to fight with. Tell them to bring horses. Saddle mine for me, Pancho. The gray stallion, I think, he is well gaited."

"*Yo voy!* I go."

Don Alonzo's eyes were flashing with spirit now that he had gotten into the swing of the thing, and Fray Bernardo stood regarding him with fond pride. Ah, but it was wonderful to have a fighting man in charge at such a time as this!

"The gates must be closed," Don Alonzo muttered, pacing rapidly back and forth with his hands clasped behind his back. "The cannon must be loaded." He halted abruptly and scowled up at the wall. "Why is the bell not ringing as I ordered it to?"

"I shall ring it," Fray Bernardo said, and started hastily toward the gate.

"No, you must load the cannon."

"I?"

"It is a matter of grave responsibility."

"Very well. I shall load the cannon. What do I load it with?"

"Powder, of course! I shall go to my room and get my sword. When the cavalry is ready I shall meet our brave ones here and lead the charge. See to that of the bell and the gates and the cannon, brother. *Vámanos!*"

What had been a scene of utter tranquillity now became one of frantic activity. Only the women huddled in the shade of the pepepr tree seemed at a loss for something to

do. Their tasks forgotten, their chatter stilled, they crouched frozen while the bell atop the wall began to clamor, while horses and men ran here and there, while a dozen men struggled to close the big wooden gates, which seemed somehow awry on their hinges. Only María remained calm. She stopped working and gazed off toward the hills, where the cloud of dust was growing steadily larger. Smiling, she murmured, "I must make many tortillas, for after the exercise of fighting they will be hungry."

"Who will be hungry?" one of the women demanded, staring at her. "Our brave ones?"

"No," said María. "*Los Americanos.*"

"You think they will conquer us?"

"They will take the mission, *sí*, as they did before. Whether they conquer us or not is another matter."

The women moaned and crossed themselves. "Mother of God! May the saints preserve us! What will these wild men do to us?"

María paused in her work long enough to look up and consider the women thoughtfully. Shaking her head, she resumed her task. "To you, they will do nothing. *Los Americanos* like only young, pretty women. It was thus when they came before and it will be so again."

"You are insane! Are you not frightened for your safety?"

"No. They are only men."

"Are you not frightened for your Pancho who goes out to fight?"

"He is not my Pancho."

"They will kill him!"

"They do not kill fleas. They merely flick them off."

"You talk as if you know everything about these *loco Americanos*," one of the women said scornfully, "yet you were only a child when they came before."

María looked dreamingly off into the sun-drenched distance and murmured, "I was only a child then, *sí*, but I remember what I saw. They are tall men, these *Americanos*, strong men, and some have golden hair and eyes like sunlight on the morning sea. They ride like gods and they fight like devils and they love like—" Her cheeks colored as she went back to grinding corn. "This I cannot be sure of, but one can guess. I shall make many tortillas."

The cavalry was gathering now in front of the mission gates, which had proved so stubborn that the men trying to

close them had desisted in their efforts. Pancho, armed with a rusty musket, rode up and down shouting orders, and, fearful of being trampled underfoot, all the women except María fled into the mission courtyard. A long sword encased in a scabbard strapped to one hip, Don Alonzo appeared and was assisted aboard his nervous gray stallion by a pair of even more nervous Indians. He shouted up to the *mozo* who was frantically ringing the bell, "*Bastante!* Enough of that of the bell! Fray Bernardo, are you there?"

Fray Bernardo's perspiring face appeared over the parapet. "I am here, my son."

"Is the cannon prepared?"

"We are preparing to prepare it. There was a small difficulty in locating powder but even now a barrel comes."

"Load—quickly!"

"Powder to the top?"

"No, no! Only so much powder—" Don Alonzo showed the proper measurement with his two hands. "The rest grape."

"Grapes?" Fray Bernardo said, somewhat perplexed. "Is it that we fight or make wine?"

"No, no! Grapeshot, good brother!"

"Ah, only the seeds then!"

Don Alonzo groaned and struck his forehead with the palm of his hand. "No, name of a holy name, no! Never was it like this when I fought for the King!" Controlling himself, he called patiently, "Grapeshot is what we call the little *pelotas* of iron with which we load the cannon when we wish to mow men down like stalks of wheat! Send to the powder magazine—quickly!"

"You are thirsty, Don Alonzo?"

"Thirst? What is this talk of thirstiness?"

"Because in the powder magazine there is nothing but wine and brandy since the last grape harvest. The other barrels took up too much room so I told Pancho to throw them away."

"Anything, then—stones, pieces of metal, nails—anything! But load quickly or we are doomed!"

The cloud of dust was much nearer now. The bell stopped clanging. As Don Alonzo placed himself at the forefront of the cavalry, Pancho was shouting for order; there were metallic sounds on the parapet as odds and ends of iron were brought for the cannon. Fray Bernardo could be heard

calling for a match and crying that what was lacked in iron could be made up for in powder. A shout arose.

"Mira! Vienen los Americanos! They come! They come!"

An expectant hush fell. Don Alonzo drew his sword and rose in his stirrups to his full height. "Are you ready, my brave ones?" he shouted to the cavalry.

"Ready!" a hundred voices answered.

"Ready?" he called to Fray Bernardo.

"Ready!" Fray Bernardo replied, holding a flickering match above the cannon with trembling fingers.

"Viva la patria!" Don Alonzo shouted. *"Viva el Rey! Viva la—"*

With a tremendous boom, the cannon went off. Unfortunately, its muzzle was pointed at the sky, and, as it had through an oversight not been securely fastened to the wall, it recoiled into Fray Bernardo's stomach and sent him tumbling backward. A hundred frightened horses bolted, some running north, some south, with only the well-gaited gray stallion charging directly east toward the nearing enemy. An exceedingly spirited charge it was, too, and if Don Alonzo had not lost his seat and been deposited in the dust directly in front of the mission gates the entire outcome of the battle might have been changed.

As it was, Don Alonzo could only sit dazed, sword in hand, while his army rode off leaderless. Despairingly he looked up at the parapet and cried, "Not yet the cannon, good friend! Not yet the cannon!"

But both cannon and the good Fray Bernardo had disappeared from sight.

María went on grinding corn.

Ever since they had come down out of the high Sierras Matt Adams had ridden with a great wonderment in him. Best he'd kept track of time, it was well on into November now. That meant it ought to be winter in the mountains, autumn in the lower country. They'd seen winter enough, all right, because three days back the snow had been belly-deep to a tall mule, but from then on the calendar had taken to running backwards. As they'd come down the slopes, winter had eased back into fall, and now fall had slid right back into summer. It just didn't make sense, no way you looked at it.

There was a peculiar smell in his nostrils, like something he had a notion he'd smelled before yet was sure he hadn't.

Beside him, Buff seemed to be smelling it too, for his nose was twitching like a suspicious coyote's. Squinting into the sun, Buff muttered, "Yonder's the damndest mirage this coon ever seen. Look at them white buildin's an' tall green trees, an' glittery stuff that looks like water. Seems plumb real, don't it?"

"Sure does," Matt agreed.

"Is real," Joe Walker said with a laugh. "That's San Miguel yonder. Water's the Pacific Ocean—goes clean to China, they tell me. That's what you smell."

"China?" Buff said.

"The ocean. It's some salty."

"Do you reckon them's orange trees yonder?" Matt inquired.

"Some of 'em."

Matt grinned. "First thing I'm goin' to do is eat me an orange. Then I'm goin' down an' wade barefoot in the ocean."

"Why?" Buff grunted sourly.

" 'Cause them's two things I ain't never done before, that's why, an' I got a hankerin' to do 'em."

As they rode on toward the mission a bell could be heard ringing musically, the smell of the sea grew stronger, and a large body of mounted men could be seen milling about on the dusty plain in front of the gates. Buff scowled.

"Looks like Injuns."

"Are," Joe Walker said.

"Reckon they'll put up a fight?"

"Probably try to. Did before."

"Thought you said they was tame Injuns."

"Harmless as flies. Least they was before."

Buff Radford gave him a skeptical look. "See hyar, if my eyesight ain't failin' me, thar's upwards of a hundred of the scamps yonder. They's only a dozen of us. Harmless or not, it appears to me—"

A loud explosion from the direction of the mission made him break off and stare to the west. The group of horsemen disintegrated, half of it wheeling off to the north, the other half galloping hell-bent toward the south, while one lone, riderless horse bolted toward them. Joe Walker grinned.

"You was sayin'—"

Buff shook his head and did not answer, but as they rode on he muttered to Matt, "I don't like it, boy. Don't like it at all."

"Don't like what?"

"The whole blamed smell of things!" Buff exploded. "It's agin nature, I tell ye. I've fit the Blackfoot an' I've had doin's with the Sioux an' I've tussled with Digger, 'Pache an' Crow. Iff'n I've learned one thing, it's that any Injun alive'll give you a fight when you come on him to steal his hosses, meat er women. It smells downright queer, I tell ye."

"It's the sea you smell. Got salt in it." Matt squinted into the distance. "D'ya suppose them tall ones are orange trees? Wonder if you shake 'em or have to climb up an' pull 'em loose?"

"They can be some cunnin' when they're a mind to," Buff mumbled. "Act harmless as all git-out, then soon as you go to sleep they slip up on you an'—"

"Now how's an orange goin' to slip up on you?"

"It's Injuns I'm talkin' about, you blamed fool! They'll wait till you go to sleep, I'm sayin', then sneak up an' ease a knife into you an' lift your hair 'fore you know it. Eat oranges till you bust! Wade in the blamed ocean till you grow gills! Hyar's one coon aims to keep his eyes open an' save his hair."

Directly in front of the mission gates, the party of trappers reined in, Matt craning his head back and peering up through the rippling leaves of the tall tree before him. No oranges on that one, far as he could see.

"Alto!" a voice cried.

"Would you look at that," Jim Bridger grunted. "What would you say it was, Kit?"

"Why, I'd say here's a jigger figures to do all the fightin'."

"Alto!" Don Alonzo commanded, striking a pose directly in front of the mission gates with his sword extended before him. *"Alto en el nombre del Rey!"*

"You speak the lingo, Kit," Joe Meek said. "What's this banty rooster crowin' about?"

"He says halt in the name of the king."

"Does he now? Well, I'm some thirsty an' that fountain yonder looks purely wet an' cool. Tell him to fetch me a drink."

"Seems to have his innards set on fightin'."

Meek grinned and swung out of the saddle. "Be a shame to disappoint him, then, but damned if I got the heart to shoot a man that's carryin' nothin more harmful than a

toad-sticker." Reversing his rifle, Meek prodded experimentally at Don Alonzo with its butt. "Lookee hyar, Mister Spaniard, I got a mouth dry as dust an' a mind to—"

With a fine disregard for the overwhelming odds against him, Don Alonzo cried, *"Viva la patria!"* and swung his sword with all his strength. It was an admirable blow intended to separate the *Americano's* head from his body, but instead of landing on the *Americano's* neck the blade of the sword struck the sturdy walnut stock of the rifle. Never before had that trustworthy piece of tempered steel failed Don Alonzo, but now for some inexplicable reason the sword snapped squarely in two. Unbelievingly he stared down at the glittering length of broken blade lying in the dust at his feet, blinked at the blunt length left in his hand, then, accepting the inevitable with all the grace at his command, he went down on one knee and offered what was left of the sword to the *Americano* hilt first.

"Quarter! In the name of honor, quarter!"

Meek looked at the nick on the stock of his rifle, swore heartily, then took the broken sword and examined it curiously. "Busted it, didn't you? Well, it serves you right for nickin' my rifle. Whar'd that other piece go? Hyar 'tis. Now git up, you spunky little jigger, an' don't take on so 'cause your toad-sticker's busted. I ain't no fancy blacksmith but tomorry or next day I'll fire up a forge and stick it back together for you. Git up, I say!"

Raising his eyes, Don Alonzo stared at the big *Americano,* understanding nothing he said. But because the *Americano* was smiling, because he was tendering the two pieces of broken sword to Don Alonzo, there was no mistaking his meaning. Stiffly Don Alonzo got to his feet, accepted the sword and made a low bow. Defeat was bitter, yes. But it was made less bitter by the enemy's acknowledgment that he had fought bravely.

"San Miguel is yours," he said gravely. "Enter at your pleasure."

Dismounting, the trappers entered the courtyard, Buff edging over to Joe Walker to mutter in a low voice, "You trust 'em?"

"Why not?"

"That little jigger yonder's got a mean eye."

"We'll lock him up for a day or two, just to make sure he's going to behave. Might be a good idea to lock up

the priest, too. Long as we've got them under control the Injuns'll be afraid to start anything."

"What about the women? Our boys git to cuttin' up with them all hell's apt to pop. I'll keep a close eye on Matt, of course, but as for the rest of 'em—"

"Where is Matt, by the way?"

"Stayed outside t' look fer oranges," Buff snorted disgustedly.

Walker laughed. "No harm in that."

"Maybe there ain't," Buff muttered uneasily, shaking his head, "but I'm a mite worried about that boy. He used to have right good sense but lately he's sure been actin' queer. Must be somethin' about this Californy air. . . ."

In the lengthening shade of the pepper tree outside the mission walls the air was quiet and still, disturbed by no sound except the *pat-pat, pat-pat* of María's hands as she deftly shaped tortillas. Out of the corner of her eye she watched the tall *Americano* who had remained here after his *compadres* had gone into the courtyard. Why he had remained puzzled her. Apparently it had something to do with the pepper tree, for he was circling it slowly, peering upward with a grim intentness. Did he suspect that some enemy was hiding there? Undoubtedly he did. María shivered as she looked at the long-barreled rifle cradled negligently in the *Americano's* strong arms. Lucky for Pancho that he had chosen to run away rather than to hide in the tree!

The fact that the young man was so intent on his search that he had not yet noticed her gave her an excellent chance to look him over. He was tall—so very tall that she doubted that the top of her head would much more than reach his chin. His hair was the color of bright wheat straw, his eyes were like sunlight on the bluest of seas, and as he walked around the base of the pepper tree he moved with the silent, muscled grace of a mountain lion. He had a lean, handsome face which she suspected would be very friendly and pleasant if he would only smile. Suddenly an overwhelming desire to see him smile made her forget that she could not speak his language and she burst out, *"Señor Americano!"*

He looked at her. Those sharp blue eyes turned full upon her, engulfed her as did the blue waters of the bay each morning when she went for her daily swim. They made her

feel the same way she felt when she plunged into the bay, chilled with shock at first—then warm, very warm. He came over and sat down cross-legged on the ground before her, still staring at her, his face still intent and serious. Flushing, she placed tortillas on the hot griddle over one of the *braseros*.

"It is of no use to look in the tree, señor. They have all run away."

He stared at the griddle, still not smiling. She asked him if he were hungry or thirsty but he did not appear to understand, so she made signs of lifting a wine bottle to her lips, of eating. He nodded. She brought him a bottle of wine, watched him sniff it suspiciously, then raise it suddenly to his lips and hold it there while his Adam's apple bobbed with amazing rapidity. She fried tortillas for him until she lost count of their number; she gave him bowl after bowl of stewed beef and beans. She brought more wine. He ate and he drank until she marveled at his capacity, but not once did he smile, not even when hunger and thirst were at last satisfied and he rubbed his stomach and shook his head to signify that he wished no more.

He got up and started circling the pepper tree again, and the fact that he left his rifle lying on the ground made her wonder if it were a hidden enemy he was searching for after all. Puzzled, she watched him. He peered upward for some time, scowled in obvious bewilderment, turned and said something to her in English. She shook her head.

"I am sorry but I do not understand."

He made a gesture of reaching up into the air, of picking something, of eating it. Name of a name! she marveled, what manner of man was this that he should still be hungry! Suddenly she understood and leaped to her feet.

"Momentito, señor!"

Like a deer she ran to the grove of orange trees that covered the hillside sloping away from the south wall of the mission, picked a dozen of the juiciest and best, hurried back and dumped them on the ground at his feet. Then, on her knees, she faced him as he hunkered down and stared at the gleaming fruit. She picked up an orange and held it out to him. He stared at her, a slow smile beginning to lift the corners of his mouth.

"Oranges?"

"Naranjas. Son buenas."

Gingerly he took the orange, turned it over and over,

then suddenly lifted it to his mouth and bit into it with strong white teeth. He made a face. Taking it from him, she laughed, peeled it for him, quartered it and held it out to him again. He began to eat, soberly at first, then absently, the smile coming back to his face as he gazed into her eyes. By the time he had finished the first orange she had a second peeled and ready for him, and when the second was gone she had a third waiting, but by then the oranges might have been fish or grapes or stones for all either of them knew because they were aware of nothing but the depths of each other's eyes. . . .

That was how Buff found them. Matt down on his knees, grinning like a fool at a smiling, black-eyed girl, orange juice staining his hands and dripping down his chin and peelings strewn over the ground between them. For a moment Buff stared at them then he grunted, "Well, I see you found your blamed oranges. How d'ye like the taste of 'em?"

Matt did not answer. Buff scowled and raised his voice. "Matt!"

"Ummm?"

"I say, how d'ye like the taste of them oranges now that you've sampled 'em?"

"What oranges?" Matt said absently, and kept grinning at María.

Night was falling. On the table of the room in which Don Alonzo and Fray Bernardo were confined a candle flickered yellowly, its feeble light doing little to dispel the gloomy shadows in the corners and the even gloomier shadows that lay over the spirits of each of them. Outside the door an *Americano* guard paced slowly up and down, and from the courtyard came sounds of music, singing and laughter. Fray Bernardo, sitting beside Don Alonzo on a wooden bench against the wall, stared down at the iron shackles which secured his left ankle to Don Alonzo's right ankle, rubbed his still tender stomach and sighed heavily.

"Don Alonzo."

"Sí?"

"We fought bravely, did we not?"

"Very bravely."

"I am sorry about that of the cannon. I should have waited longer."

"Please have no regrets. It was an unfortunate misunderstanding, that is all."

There was a period of silence, then Fray Bernardo said in a more cheerful voice, "At any rate, we fought bravely. How many do you suppose we killed?"

"A great many, I have no doubt. There are only a dozen left."

"It would have turned out differently had it not been for that of the cannon. The cavalry charge, I am told, was magnificent."

"It suffered from lack of a leader. That dog of a horse of mine, he would not wait."

"How long must we suffer the indignity of the shackles?"

"*Quién sabe?* The *Americano* general has a great fear of me. A great respect also. Did he not return my sword?"

"He is an intelligent man. An honorable man, I suspect. Perhaps if we gave him our word that we would permit the *Americanos* to remain here in peace he would release us."

"I am no traitor!" Don Alonzo exclaimed, his eyes flashing fiercely. "Never would I give such a pledge!"

"What else can we do?"

"I will think of something."

Considerably chastened, Fray Bernardo fell silent. When the *Americanos* had come the other time there was nothing that he, a peaceful priest, could do but bow his head before the conqueror's might and hope for the best, but such a course would not be acceptable to a fighting man like Don Alonzo. That he readily understood. Still . . .

The door opened and Pancho Oñate entered bearing a tray loaded with food and wine. Though he did not look at all happy, sight of him cheered Fray Bernardo almost as much as did sight of the viands which Pancho placed on the table.

"*Hola,* Pancho! I am happy to see that you survived the battle."

"*Sí,* I survived."

"And the rest of our brave ones?"

"They survived also."

Pulling the bench over to the table, the two prisoners began to eat, Fray Bernardo with his usual healthy appetite, Don Alonzo with a brooding, thoughtful scowl on his face. Pancho watched them gloomily. Sipping his wine, Fray Bernardo smiled up at him.

"You appear sad, Pancho."

"How can I be otherwise?"

"What makes you sad?"

"They are eating our food, these *Americano* dogs. They are drinking our wine. They are singing and dancing and making sport with our women."

Don Alonzo's scowl deepened. "They entertain themselves with our women, you say?"

"*Sí.*"

"Why did not our women run away and hide?"

"They were too frightened. They trusted too much in the power of the cannon to repel the *Americanos,* and suddenly the dogs were within our gates and it was too late to hide."

"Go, Pancho—go and tell the women to be brave and bear up under the indignities they are suffering as best they can. Presently I shall rescue them—if I can think of a way."

"Very well, I go."

As the door closed behind Pancho, Don Alonzo put his elbows on the table, rested his chin in his hands and stared at the wall. Fray Bernardo poured himself another glass of wine.

"You have not eaten your *frijoles,* Don Alonzo."

"I have no appetite."

"Then I will eat them. It is a sin to be wasteful."

"Hurry, then. I cannot think well save when I am pacing the floor."

"Pace, if you like. It will not bother me."

"How can I pace when we are shackled together like chickens being carried to the market place?" Don Alonzo demanded angrily. "To pace, we must pace together."

"I forgot, good friend. One moment, please, and I will be finished."

Presently he was finished, table and bench were pushed to the wall and they began pacing up and down the room. For five minutes they paced, then Fray Bernardo, beginning to puff from the unaccustomed exercise, exclaimed, "If you please, Don Alonzo, I would sit down for a moment."

They sat down. Hesitantly, Fray Bernardo inquired, "Are you still thinking?"

"Yes."

"I have been thinking too. And I have thought of a most excellent plan."

"To get rid of the *Americanos?*"

"*Sí.*"

"I should like to hear it."

Fray Bernardo sat breathing deeply for a time, gathering his thoughts, then he said, "It is the same plan I used when the *Americanos* came three years ago. It worked quite well then and I am sure would work as well now."

"What did you do?"

"I pretended," Fray Bernardo said, giving Don Alonzo a somewhat uneasy sidelong glance, "that they were not conquerors or enemies but guests. I offered them every hospitality that San Miguel could give them." He smiled and spread his hands. "After a while they went away." He waited anxiously for a moment. "Do you not think that a good plan?"

"No," Don Alonzo said curtly.

"It worked."

"That is beside the point. It is not honorable. The honorable thing to do is kill them."

"How?"

"I will slay them with my sword."

"Your sword is broken."

"The *Americanos* are excellent workers of metal. I will persuade them to mend it for me. When it is mended, we will pretend that we have become their friends. We will say that we wish to have a grand fiesta in their honor. We will give them much food and wine. When they fall asleep I will slip upon them and slay them one by one."

"No, I forbid it. The danger to you is too great."

"We will poison their food, then. I will show the women how to mix a most potent poison with the *frijoles* so that the *Americanos* will never suspect they are eating poison until all of a sudden they are falling down dead."

"I do not think it would be wise to suggest such a thing to the women," Fray Bernardo said, shaking his head. "They take a great pride in their cooking. They would think it an insult to them if anyone died from it."

"Very well. We will use the cannon. We will feed them and give them much wine, then we will turn the cannon upon them and blow them to pieces." Don Alonzo turned his fierce eyes on Fray Bernardo. "Can you find any fault with that plan?"

Fray Bernardo stared abjectly at the floor. "Only a little one. There is no powder left. I used it all."

Don Alonzo leaped angrily to his feet. "You used it all? You consumed one entire barrel of powder to do nothing

but blow a hole in the sky? Name of a most unholy name, what kind of a soldier are you!"

Indignantly, Fray Bernardo heaved his bulk erect and exclaimed, "I am not a soldier! I am a man of God!"

"You are a fool!" Don Alonzo shouted.

"At least I am not a butcher!" Fray Bernardo cried in sudden fury. "San Miguel is not a slaughterhouse that blood should be spilled on my clean courtyard stones! This is a mission of God! What kind of a Christian are you that you should even suggest such a thing?"

"I am not a Christian—I am a soldier!"

"You are a fool!"

Forgetting themselves in their anger, they lunged at each other, tripped over the iron shackles which bound their ankles together, and sprawled full length on the floor. Rolling over, they sat up with some difficulty and stared at each other. Feeling suddenly ashamed of himself, Fray Bernardo began to weep. Don Alonzo sniffed, coughed apologetically, then he too wept. Fray Bernardo put an arm around his shoulders.

"Forgive me, *amigo mio!* Friend of my heart, I did not mean what I said. You are a brave man. You are the bravest man I have ever known. I am overwrought, that is all. It is I who am the fool."

Don Alonzo shook his head and patted Fray Bernardo's shoulder consolingly. "No, good brother. I am a fool. It is not for you to know about cannons and bloodshed. You are right about this being a place of God. It would be a sin to shed blood within the courtyard. Even the blood of *Americanos.*"

Fray Bernardo gave him a forgiving smile. "I am happy to hear you say that. You agree, then, that my plan is best? We shall treat them as guests, *si?* Presently they will go away."

"I mean no offense," Don Alonzo said, shaking his head, "but I must do the honorable thing. In respect to you, I shall not kill them within the courtyard. I shall arrange that the matter take place outside the mission walls. Please to stand up and pace with me now. I would do some thinking as to how the affair is to be accomplished."

Fray Bernardo sighed and got up. If Don Alonzo insisted that killing the *Americanos* was the only honorable thing to do, he must bow to Don Alonzo's wishes. The door opened

and Pancho stepped inside, his face gloomier than before. They stopped pacing.

"You conveyed my words of encouragement to the women?" Don Alonzo asked. "You told them to be of good cheer, that I would rescue them?"

"*Si*," Pancho muttered, staring down at his bare toes. "I told them."

"What did they say?"

Pancho stared out at the courtyard, where lantern light gleamed and skirts swirled in time to the gay music of accordion and violin. He did not speak.

"*Habla, hombre!*" Don Alonzo commanded. "What did they say?"

"They said," Pancho answered at last, "resue them from what?"

When the mountain men had first come into the courtyard there hadn't been a soul in sight except for a handful of scared-looking women huddled together off in one corner. They didn't worry Buff Radford much but there were a lot of other things that did. First chance he got he cornered Joe Walker and Kit Carson and let 'em know what was on his mind.

"Boys," he said, "this is a right handsome diggin's we've moved into, that I will admit. If we take a mite of care we likely can hang on to it for quite a spell. First thing to do, it appears to me, is ride out an' butcher a few head of beef so's we'll have somethin' to put in our bellies. Better lay in a good supply of firewood, too, 'cause I ain't seen none around. We kin bring our hosses inside, close the gates, put guards on the walls—"

"What do we want guards for?" Kit said.

"Why, them scamps'll be back sure as shootin'," Buff said. "It's pure foolishness to think different. Damned if I'm goin' to risk losin' my hair."

"No need to fret over your hair," Walker said. "Long as we got the priest and the banty rooster locked up the Injuns won't start nothin'."

"Well, we do need firewood. It's comin' on winter now an' apt to give us a good snow most any day—"

Walker laughed. The blame fool threw back his head, opened his mouth and went into a fit of laughing that near shook him apart. Wondering what ailed him, Buff stared at him. Presently Walker quit laughing and said to Carson,

"Kit, I reckon Buff is some upset. Tell one of them women yonder to fetch us a jug or two of wine. Nothin' like this Californy wine to make a man quit worryin' about such foolish things as his topknot or how he's goin' to keep warm for the winter. Tell 'em to look after our hosses, too, and we'd be obliged if they'd rustle up some grub. My belly's beginnin' to chafe agin my backbone."

Well, it was hard to believe. Kit went over and jawed amiable-like with the women for a minute, and all of a sudden they weren't scared a bit any more and were all smiles, jabbering back at him fit to kill. Some of them went scampering off one way, some another, and though there hadn't been more than a dozen of them in sight at first it wasn't no time at all till the courtyard was full of them. Wasn't a one of the mountain men didn't have two or three smiling women waiting on him, bringing him food, wine, anything he wanted.

First thing Buff knew daylight had gone. Maybe it was all that wine he'd drunk, maybe it was them hot peppers and spices in the food he'd et, but the night didn't seem near as cold as an autumn night had ought to be, fact it seemed warm, plumb warm. When he'd first come into the courtyard the walls had give him an uneasy feeling of being trapped, but now those same walls seemed friendly and comforting and cozy. In the soft light of the hanging lanterns he could see the dark faces and white shirts and pants of a score or two Injun bucks standing back in the shadows; more and more kept drifting in till he guessed that most all the jiggers that belonged to the mission were there, which made him some uneasy. They'd have knives, likely, maybe guns, too, and if they took it into their heads to start a fracas there could easy be some throats cut. He'd better warn Joe and Kit about that. He tipped up a jug of wine and had another long swallow of the weak, grape-juice-tasting stuff. Mild as mountain water it was, though some mellower, he would admit. Man could drink a gallon of the stuff and never feel a thing.

They was a fiddle playing and an according going and a grinning, leather-faced old codger was rattling a couple of gourdlike gadgets that made a sound like two diamond-back rattlers fightin' on a tin roof. Out in the center of the courtyard a gal in a bright red skirt and a snow-white blouse that was cut lower in the neck than any blouse ought to be cut was whirling this way and that. She was laughing

and her white teeth were shinning and her black hair was giving off sparks in the lantern light, and all around her buckskin-clad mountain men were squatting on the flagstones clapping their hands in time to the music and grinning like fools.

All of a sudden she darted over to one of them, held out her hands and pulled him to his feet. *"Baile, Señor Americano! Baile!"*

"Go on, Matt!" Jim Bridger hollered. "Show her how we do it in the States!"

Meek was beating his big hands together and roaring:

" 'Possums in the tater patch,
Coons're in the corn,
Choose your partner, honey,
'Fore the roof blows off the barn!"

"Wagh!" Black Harris grunted, threw back his head and howled up at the stars like a wolf.

Buff scowled and took another swallow of wine. Going to get in trouble, Matt was, foolin' around with a gal like that. Look at him cavortin' out there with her! Stompin' around like a Blackfoot doin' a scalp dance. And there was young Dick Wootton lettin' another of the black-eyed creatures latch onto him. And Bridger, even. Why, there went Black Harris and Kit Carson and Tom Fitzpatrick—why, by God, there was Pegleg Smith clumpin' around like he had three good legs 'stead of only one! If that didn't beat all!

Them hot peppers sure raised a man's thirst. Buff took another swallow of wine and got uncertainly to his feet. The thing to do, he mused, was ketch hold of Matt next time he come whirling past, pull him off in a corner and talk some sense into him. Or maybe it'd be better to wait till morning. You could expect young bucks like Matt to cut up some. Long as a few wise old heads like himself and Joe Walker and Bill Williams kept their wits about them, couldn't much harm come of lettin' the young fellas dance. No harm at all. . . . .

"Baile, Señor Americano! Baile con migo!"

Well, this fool woman had took hold of him and was dragging him out into the middle of the melee and try as he would he couldn't shake her off. Wouldn't be seemly to hit a woman, he guessed. Come to think of it, he wasn't quite

as old as Moses yet, and now that he'd got mixed up in this fandango they wasn't a reason in the world why he shouldn't show the youngsters how high he could kick his heels. 'Cause it was a good idee for some of the wise old heads like Walker and Old Bill to stay on the sidelines and sort of keep an eye on things. . . .

"Woops!" someone said as Buff and his partner careened into another couple. "Watch where you're goin' there, ol' hoss!"

"Watch whar *you're* goin', you blame fool!" Buff roared, whirled around, then blinked. "Well, Joe Walker, I never knowed you could trip the light fantastic!"

"Fling a mean heel, I do! Stand clear, boys, I'm wound up tighter'n a dollar clock an' in need of room! Wagh! This Injun's painted from head to toe and out for blood! Give me room!"

Well, long as at least one of 'em stayed sober an' kept an eye on things, what was the harm in a little dancing? Leave it to Bill Williams. Yeah, leave it to Old Bill. Sittin' yonder, them mean snake-eyes of his never restin', that center-shootin' long rifle of his layin' acrost his knees and ready to speak up quick and clear should the jiggers take it in their heads to turn ornery. Good Old Bill! Cunnin' Old Bill! He'd sit there keepin' an eye on things and at the first sign of trouble he'd jump up an'—

Right about then, Old Bill Williams heaved his rifle over his head, jumped three feet in the air like a man snake-bit, and lit with both legs pumping. Over the sound of the music, over the laughter and gleeful yells of the other mountain men, his high, cracked voice went yowling up to the stars.

"Hyar's a grizzly bar that's nine feet tall! Got claws a foot long, drunk a barr'l of Taos Lightin' an' I'm lookin' fer a tree to chaw in two! Clear the way, boys, hyar's a coon fer dancin'!"

Well, that was a dance to see, that war dance Old Bill done, and it warmed things up real fine. From then on the party got interesting. Meek and Bridger put on a rough-and-tumble wrestling match. Black Harris decided Joe Walker's beard needed trimming and got six of the boys to hold Joe down while he done a job of barbering. Matt and Maria persuaded Buff to go down and wade barefoot with them in the bay and Buff near drowned because the place he picked to wade in was twenty feet deep.

The swim sobered him up considerable and he climbed out of the water hopping mad, figuring to tell that young fool Matt a thing or two, but both Matt and Maria had disappeared. He went back up to the mission looking for them and just as he was about to go in through the gates he saw Pegleg Smith standing on one foot on top of the parapet above him. He stopped and yelled up, "Pegleg! What in tarnation you doin' up thar?"

"Whee!" Pegleg said, flopping his arms like they were wings. "Stole my wooden leg, them thievin' Blackfoot did! But I'll ketch 'em, never you fear. Goin' to swoop down on 'em like an eagle! Goin' to fly right over their heads like a buzzard an' pick their eyes out!"

"Git down off that wall, you blame fool, 'fore you bust yore other leg."

"Goin' to fly, I tell you! Goin' to sail through the air like a hawk an' sink my claws smack into them Blackfoot boogers—!"

As he teetered uncertainly, a couple of men grabbed him from behind and pulled him down out of sight. Buff ran through the gates, up the steps to the parapet and lent Bridger and Meek a hand as they spread-eagled Pegleg and sat on him.

"No more tryin' to fly, you hear?" Meek grunted.

"Gotta fly. Them Blackfoot stole my leg, they did, an' the only way to ketch 'em is sail through the air and swoop down on 'em like a magpie!"

"Where's his leg?" Buff said.

"We hid it soon as he got this flyin' notion. Thought that'd stop him but it didn't."

"Lookee hyar," Bridger muttered, "you fellas kin spend the rest of the night sittin' on this one-legged carcass if you want to, but I got other idees. I say let's hobble him so's he can't fly and go back and join the fandango."

"Now how you goin' to hobble a one-legged man?" Buff snorted.

That, both Bridger and Meek admitted, was a poser. If he'd been a mule they could of side-hobbled him, Bridger said, fastening a front and rear leg together so that no matter how much grazing he tried to do he'd just go round in circles. But Pegleg wasn't no mule, though at times he did act like one. While Pegleg cursed and yelled, they sat there on him talking it over for a spell, then all of a sudden Meek jumped up.

"Stay right where you are, boys! I'll be back in two shakes of a lamb's tail!"

It took a little longer than that, but shortly Meek came back dragging a pair of heavy iron shackles. Buff stared at him suspiciously. "Where'd you git them things?"

"Pick him up, boys, an' we'll tote him downstairs."

"I say, Joe, where'd you git them leg irons? They look exactly like the ones we used on the priest and the banty rooster."

"Shouldn't wonder," Meek said, " 'cause that's where I got 'em. C'mon, we'll tote him downstairs."

"You turned 'em loose?"

"Just the little jigger. You see, the way I figure it we got to pair Pegleg up with somebody that'll sort of act as an anchor should he try to fly again. The little jigger won't do a-tall, but that priest, now, he's got some heft to him."

"I don't like it," Buff muttered. "I don't like it at all."

"You want to sit on him all night?"

No, Buff didn't want to do that, so he helped tote Pegleg down the stairs and into the room where the priest sat snoring peacefully on a wooden bench. One end of the leg irons was snapped around Pegleg's ankle and they were about to secure the other end to the ankle of the priest when Pegleg cut loose with as vivid a half minute of cussing as Buff had ever heard. The priest, roused from his slumbers, opened his eyes, smiled at Pegleg and said sleepily, *"Buenas noches, señor."*

Then he went calmly back to sleep.

Meek looked at Bridger and Bridger looked at Meek. Neither had ever been much of a religious man but both seemed disturbed suddenly by the same thought. Meek said, "Do you reckon it's proper, Jim, lettin' the padre hear language like that?"

"Don't suppose he can understand English."

"You know Pegleg—when he puts his mind to it he can swear in any language."

"You're right there. Guess we'll have to let the padre go. But we got to have somebody to anchor Pegleg to, an' that's a fact."

"Now you two look hyar," Buff said angrily, stepping toward them. "They's a hundred Injun scamps out there that're just itchin' to shove knives in our ribs. The only thing that's stoppin' 'em is that we've got their head men

locked up. But you've gone an' turned the banty rooster loose already, an' now you're about to—"

There was a metallic click. Breaking off, Buff stared down at his ankle, around which Joe Meek had just secured the other leg iron. Swearing mightily, Buff made a lunge for Meek, but right at that moment Pegleg decided he'd clobber Bridger, and they both ended up flat on their faces on the floor. Pegleg added his swearing to Buff's. Meek and Bridger shook the priest awake and led him to the door, Meek pausing to grin down at Pegleg and Buff.

"You got three legs between you. Way I figger, that makes one an' a half apiece. Ought to be able to dance a right mean dance, you two, once you get the hang of it. C'mon, Jim, let's join the fandango."

Sitting on the bench under the pepper tree, Fray Bernardo smiled complacently at the distant mountains and marveled at how well his plan was working out. Two weeks had passed since the *Americanos* had come. With each passing day his friend Don Alonzo seemed more and more inclined to accept their presence as a thing beyond his power to remedy. Indeed, that was the only sensible thing to do, for the *Americanos* were proving to be the most amiable of conquerors. Others than food, wine and a place to spread their blankets under the stars in the courtyard, they required nothing. They were polite to the women. They were respectful to Fray Bernardo. If they at times drank too much wine and became a shade boisterous in their behavior, they harmed no one by it but themselves.

They had become, in a word, but another addition to the small world for which Fray Bernardo assumed responsibility, and, though he dared not admit this to Don Alonzo, he was growing quite fond of them. He was not sure whether this was an honorable attitude for him to take, but honor, he mused as he wriggled his bare toes in the warm dust, was like a pair of tight shoes: life was much simpler and more comfortable when one used it only on formal occasions.

Don Alonzo came out of the courtyard, paused and bowed politely. *"Hola,* Fray Bernardo. How is your health this fine afternoon?"

"Excellent, my good friend. And yours?"

"I have not the smallest complaint."

"You are indeed looking well."

"I am feeling well," Don Alonzo answered, seating him-

self upon the bench. "My spirits are much better than at any time since the *Americanos* came."

Vaguely alarmed, Fray Bernardo looked closely at Don Alonzo, whose eyes were glittering strangely. "What is the reason for your good spirits?"

Don Alonzo looked carefully around, then leaned close and said in a low voice, "I have found it, good brother. I have at last thought of a way to kill the *Americanos*. Not all of them perhaps, but some of them."

"It is a necessity that they be killed?" Fray Bernardo asked unhappily.

"Honor requires it. I have told you that."

"Yes, I remember. But I had hoped—"

"Would you like to hear my plan?"

"My ears are yours."

His eyes gleaming fiercely, Don Alonzo smiled. "Listen, then. These *Americanos* are such fools that they are afraid of nothing. They begin to grow bored with idleness. They wish entertainment. So tomorrow I have arranged to take them to the hills and find entertainment for them."

"What manner of entertainment?"

"In the hills, I have told them, are some small but nimble steers which our *vaqueros* are accustomed to catch by means of riding alongside them, throwing themselves upon the horns of the animals and wrestling them to earth. The *Americanos* wish to attempt the same feat." Don Alonzo paused significantly. "But instead of seeking out the small, harmless steers, I shall take them to where the *cimarrónes* are found."

Fray Bernardo was alarmed. "Not the wild bulls! Not the fierce, terrible *toros* with horns like daggers, which our own *vaqueros* dare not go near for fear of their lives!"

"*Si,* the wild bulls."

"But this is murder! *Los cimarrónes* will kill them!"

"I have no doubt of it," Don Alonzo said, rising. He bowed. "You admire the cleverness of my plan?"

Fray Bernardo nodded. Yes, he admired it, he said aloud. But what he said to himself was an entirely different matter.

A great sadness came over Fray Bernardo as he watched Don Alonzo and the gay, laughing group of *Americanos* ride off toward the hills next morning. Don Alonzo was his friend and countryman and therefore above criticism. He was no doubt motivated by the noblest of motives. But to

lead such carefree innocents as these out to horrible deaths on the horns of the wild bulls . . .

Shuddering, Fray Bernardo hurried to the chapel on the hill overlooking the blue, sunlit bay and knelt for a long while in silent meditation. He did not wish to be disloyal to Don Alonzo. Neither did he wish the *Americanos* to die on the horns of the terrible-tempered bulls. Composing a prayer that would reconcile these two opposite wishes proved an exceedingly difficult thing to do, but at last inspiration came to him.

"Father," he whispered fervently, "make *los toros* run so far into the hills that they cannot be found. Amen."

That settled, he rose from his knees and went serenely about his tasks for the day.

Dusk was settling over San Miguel when a great noise outside the walls told Fray Bernardo that the group was returning. Uneasy in mind, he left his room and waddled out into the courtyard just in time to meet Don Alonzo stalking in through the gates. Dusty, sweat-streaked and weary, the Don dropped heavily down upon a bench.

"Good evening, brother."

"Good evening," Fray Bernardo said, regarding him anxiously. "You look tired."

"I have had a most exhausting day."

"You did not find *los toros?*"

"*Si,* we found them."

Fray Bernardo sighed in disappointment and sat down beside him. "How many did you account for?"

"Ten."

"You killed ten of them?"

"No, we did not kill them. We merely secured them well with ropes so that they might be saved for the sport tomorrow."

"The *Americanos?*"

"Of course not! The bulls." Don Alonzo shook his head in dazed disbelief. "It is beyond comprehension, the things I have seen. These *Americanos* are such fools! First, it is the little one whom they called Señor Carson. *El toro* jumps from the cover of a thicket and runs like all the fiends of hell—pardon me, brother—that is to say, he runs like the wind. But Señor Carson, he makes his horse run faster. There is much dust, much shouting—oh, merely to remember it makes the blood run hot! Then, *zoom!* Señor Carson

flies through the air, siezes the bull's horns, gives a twist. *Zoom!* He is flat on the ground!"

"Señor Carson?"

"The bull."

"Señor Carson is killed, *si?*"

"Of course not! Did I not just tell you—"

"You told me ten were accounted for."

"*Sí!* Ten of the biggest, wildest, most ferocious bulls I have ever seen."

"No *Americanos* were killed?"

Don Alonzo looked unhappy. "None."

"Were any hurt?"

"The one who is called Señor Bridger suffered a horn wound in the posterior. This is my fault. It would not have happened had I not had difficulty in wrestling my *toro* to earth. You see, Señor Bridger came to help me, and my hand slipped and the horn of *el toro* caught him in the—"

"*Momentito, amigo.* How is it that you are wrestling this *cimarrón?*"

"It is a point of honor," Don Alonzo said, his shoulders straightening. "Can I permit it to be demonstrated that the *Americanos* are braver than I?"

No, Fray Bernardo admitted, that could not be permitted. As Don Alonzo stared gloomily down at his feet the *Americanos* began straggling into the courtyard, some limping, some with their clothes torn half off, but all laughing and giving the appearance of having had the lark of their lives. Passing Don Alonzo, several paused and slapped him heartily upon the back.

"Hyar's a booger swallowed grizzly hair!"

"Spunky little jigger, I do say!"

"Half-pint size but a gallon of guts!"

There was more color than usual in Don Alonzo's face, but he did not look up, did not speak. Fray Bernardo said, "Why do they strike you and speak to you thus?"

"Who can say why a *loco Americano* does a thing?"

There was a long silence. Giving Don Alonzo a sidelong glance, Fray Bernardo said hesitantly, "I have been thinking."

"So?"

"You are a brave man, *amigo mio,* an honorable man. But I would not have you risk your life further. Let the *Americanos* live. Presently spring will come and they will go away."

Pride stiffened Don Alonzo and he shook his head. "I apreciate your solicitude, good brother, but it cannot be. I have thought of another plan. I shall try it tomorrow."

"And what is this plan?"

"Tomorrow we shall have a bullfight. I have explained to the *Americanos* that in Spain only the bravest of men dare to take a sword and fight the wild bulls on foot. Being fools, they of course wish to try it."

"But they have no experience in bullfighting!" Fray Bernardo protested. "They will be killed!"

"I hope so," Don Alonzo murmured, staring happily off into the distance. "I most sincerely hope so."

Owing either to worry or a bit of tainted fish upon which he had dined, Fray Bernardo found himself so ill from a stomach disorder that he was unable to attend the bullfight the next afternoon. But lying on his hard wooden cot in his windowless room he could faintly hear the cheers, the long silences, the muffled thud of hoofs, the sudden frenzied bursts of applause. In his mind's eye he could see the broken bodies of the gallant *Americanos* being tossed high in the air, the needle-like horns goring, the red blood staining the dusty ground. . . .

No longer able to bear the suspense, he tried to rise and climb the stairs to the parapet, but a sudden weakness came over him and he barely managed to stagger back to the cot and lie down again. When a measure of strength returned to him he called out to his servant, "Cristeno! Come here!"

Presently a stooped, wizened little man appeared in the doorway and bowed. "I am here. What is it the father wishes?"

"I would know what occurs outside. Take the spyglass and go to the parapet. Call down and tell me what you see."

"I go."

His bare feet could be heard paddling up the steps, then there was a long period of silence. Growing impatient, Fray Bernardo called, "Cristeno, are you looking through the glass?"

"Yes, father."

"Tell me, what do you see?"

"The ocean is very blue and seems to have no end. No ships are in sight. But there is something which appears to be a whale—"

"I am not interested in the ocean, foolish one! Look the other way. Tell me what you see of the bullfight."

"It appears to be far away. So far away that the figures are no larger than ants."

"You are looking through the wrong end of the glass. Turn it about."

"Ah!"

"Have you turned it about?"

"*Sí. Nombre!* It is as if the bulls were only an arm's reach away!"

"What is happening?"

"Mother of God, there are many dead!"

"*Americanos?*"

"No—bulls. I count nine dead on the field." There was a long silence. "Ah, what a pity!"

"What is a pity?"

"I cannot understand this. It passes belief!"

"Speak sense, dull-witted one. What passes belief? What is occurring?"

"An *Americano,* he fights the bull. Ah, such a tremendous bull! *El toro* charges, the *Americano* thrusts with his sword. The sword sticks in the bull's neck and is wrested from the *Americano's* hand. Now the bull is turning to come back. Of a surety he is doomed to die!"

"The bull?"

"The *Americano.*"

Fray Bernardo groaned. "Is he running away?"

"The bull?"

"No, no—the *Americano!*"

"He cannot run. His leg has come off!"

"Whose leg?"

"The *Americano's*. He has taken it off! Now the bull is charging. The *Americano* stands on one leg and he is swinging the other leg at the bull like a club. He is beating the bull over the head with his leg—the one he has taken off, that is. Ah, what a pity! The bull has speared his leg on its horn and tosses it high in the air!"

"He is a dead man!" Fray Bernardo moaned. "Why did he not keep his leg and use it to run with?"

"*Mira!*" Cristeno shouted in sudden frenzy. "Look, good father, look at what occurs!"

"How can I?"

"What a brave thing this is! A man runs forward and seizes *el toro* by the tail. He twists, the bull turns around.

Now the man jerks the sword out of *el toro's* neck. The bull charges. The man thrusts—so!" There was a long moment of silence. "*Le mató!* He killed him!"

His face bathed in sweat, Fray Bernardo raised himself up on his elbows and cried, "Who killed who?"

"The bull, he is killed. The man, he has killed the bull, I mean. *Madre de Dios,* what bravery!"

"Can you see who it is? Tell me quickly, who is the brave *Americano* who does this thing?"

"I cannot tell. I have dropped the spyglass."

Falling weakly back on his cot, Fray Bernardo closed his eyes and lay for some time oblivious to the world around him. Presently he heard someone enter the room, opened his eyes and saw Don Alonzo standing disconsolately at his bedside. Fray Bernardo favored him with a tired smile.

"The bullfight was a success?"

"No. It was a most miserable failure."

"No one was killed?"

"No one but the bulls."

"Cristeno was on the parapet watching when the last of the bulls was killed and described the fight to me. It was a brave thing, a noble thing, the way the one-legged *Americano's* life was saved by the fearless action of one of his *compadres.*"

Don Alonzo scowled and drew himself up to his full height. "I am not Señor Pegleg's *compadre.*"

"Ah, it was you, then!"

Don Alonzo started pacing the floor, his hands clasped behind him. "What else could I do? These crazy *Americanos,* they do not understand the rules of the bullfight. Could I stand by and see a brave bull beaten to death with a wooden leg? *Por supuesto, no!*"

"But the bull took the leg away from him."

"It is still necessary that I step in to assist, for the rules do not permit a one-legged man to fight a bull. Do you not understand? There was nothing else I could do. Honor demanded it."

Fray Bernardo smiled and nodded. "I understand, friend of my heart. Sometimes it is better to go barefoot."

"What?"

"Never mind. I was merely thinking aloud."

Don Alonzo resumed his pacing while Fray Bernardo, knowing that the faster the Don paced the more agile his mind became, watched him with increasing alarm. Suddenly

Don Alonzo stopped, raised his clenched hands skyward and exclaimed in delight, "I have it!"

"Again?" Fray Bernardo said.

"This time it cannot fail! It cannot possibly fail!"

"I am happy to hear you say that," Fray Bernardo said, but he was not in the least happy. "What is your plan this time?"

In a perfect frenzy of enthusiasm, Don Alonzo came over and sat down on the edge of the cot. "Listen! The wild bulls are fierce, yes, and it is dangerous to wrestle them to earth as the *Americanos* did. It is even more dangerous to fight them on foot as was done today. But this danger is as nothing compared to that of the bears—"

"Bears?"

"*Sí!* As you know, there is a valley in the mountains not far from here where the huge, terrifically ferocious grizzly bears gather at this time of year to hibernate. I shall tell the *Americanos* that our *vaqueros* are accustomed to roping these bears. . . ."

Fray Bernardo was indeed sorry that the expedition to the valley of the grizzly bears turned out as it did, for he knew that his friend Don Alonzo had high hopes for it and was greatly disappointed when they were not realized. Certainly that was not Don Alonzo's fault. How could he know that in the country the *Americanos* came from there were so many grizzlies that their tremendous size, strength and ferociousness awed the mountain men not at all? How could he know that the bears would be so fat and lazy and good-humored? How, above all, could he know that they would be so sleepy no amount of goading could persuade them to fight?

The simple truth was, he could not. Whether Fray Bernardo's timid prayer that the bears behave thus had any effect, Fray Bernardo was not prepared to say—least of all to Don Alonzo. In any event, the bears were sleepy, the expedition a miserable failure, and for days afterwards Don Alonzo stalked about the mission deep in gloom.

One afternoon Fray Bernardo tried to console him. "Be of good cheer, my friend. You have done your best. What more can a man do?"

"I have failed," Don Alonzo said, shaking his head despondently. "I, who once sat at the council table with the King and his ministers and planned campaigns by which

whole nations were conquered or defended, I, Don Alonzo de Miraval y Ruiz, whose ancestors have for centuries been renowned for their ability to devise brilliant strategies—I have failed."

"You will think of something. Keep trying. If you do not think of something—well, spring will come presently and they will go away."

Don Alonzo stared miserably at the sun-hazed foothills. "It must be faced, brother. I can think of nothing more. My head is as empty of plans as a dried gourd from which the pulp and seeds have been taken."

"In that case," Fray Bernardo said cautiously, doing his best to conceal his pleasure, "there is nothing to do but accept my plan. We shall treat them as guests, *sí?*"

"You would not reconsider permitting me to slay them with the cannon?"

"There is no powder. Besides, I would not have their blood spilled within the mission walls."

"There is still that of the poison."

"No, my friend. That I could never permit."

Don Alonzo sighed dejectedly. Fray Bernardo smiled and put an arm around the thin, proud shoulders. "Speak truthfully to me. Do you not like these *Americanos* even a little bit? Do you not admire their bravery, their friendliness? Must you hate them so very much?"

"I do not hate them at all," Don Alonzo said indignantly. "I have never hated them. I merely wish to kill them."

"I do not understand."

"That is because you do not understand the meaning of honor."

"Is it honorable to kill people you do not hate?"

"If they are enemies of your country, yes."

"But these *Americanos* are not enemies! They eat our food, yes—but we have plenty to spare. They drink our wine—but we do not go thirsty. They smile at our women and dance with them—but I do not hear our women complain. They let us walk about as free men, keep our possessions, hold our religious services. They do no harm to us at all. How can you call them enemies?"

"I must repeat, brother, you do not understand the meaning of honor. If you did you would not go barefoot."

"My feet hurt."

"You see, that is what I mean. You have no honor, no pride, no—"

Anger stirred in Fray Bernardo at the unbending stubbornness of this little man, then he forced back the sharp words that were on the tip of his tongue and said gently, "Let us not argue about the meaning of words. I would have nothing cool the warmness of our friendship, *amigo mio*. But this I must say—you will devise no more plans by which to kill the *Americanos*. Henceforth they shall dwell with us in peace."

Don Alonzo's eyes flashed defiantly. "I take orders only from my King!"

"And I take orders only from Heaven!" Fray Bernardo thundered, no longer able to stifle his feelings. "You are a guest here, tolerated only by my graciousness. You will do as I say."

For a long moment they stood staring at each other, then, his face gray and drawn, Don Alonzo bowed stiffly. "It shall be as you wish. Good day."

Feeling miserable, Fray Bernardo watched him walk away, then sat down on the bench beneath the pepper tree and stared unhappily at his bare feet. It had been exceedingly unkind of him to speak to Don Alonzo as he had, he admitted, yet was it not even more unkind of Don Alonzo to refer slightingly to the naked condition of his feet? Wriggling his toes in the dust, he sighed. Perhaps it would be more fitting if he wore shoes not only on Sunday but every other day of the week as well. He would go to his room immediately and put them on. No, not immediately, for he had several troubling problems to think through and he could not think his best when his feet were tightly confined. But tomorrow . . .

Where the days had gone to, Matt Adams couldn't rightly say. All he knew was that it'd been November when they'd first come to San Miguel and now it was March and there was talk of heading east shortly. In between was a kind of dreamlike, hazy space, chinked with fine, warm memories of fandangos, bullfights, lazy days under a pleasant sun, gay, happy nights filled with starlight, laughter, music and dancing. There was the sound of María's voice, the smell of the sea, the feel of María's body in his arms, the sound of the sea, the taste of María's lips. They were all mixed up together somehow and . . .

And now it was March and time for the thing to end.

The sun was almost down. Way off to the west it hung on

the curving rim of the world, took a last sleepy look at the gray land and the glittering sea, then, finding nothing amiss, it yawned and went to bed. Leastways María said that was what it did, and Matt, lying with his head in her lap as she sat with her back against the smooth-worn bole of a gnarled tree on the bluff overlooking the bay, was willing to take her word for it.

It was passing queer, he thought, how he'd come to take her word for a lot of things. Right from the beginning they'd understood each other, first by signs, gestures, head-noddings and smiles, later by means of a few Spanish words she'd taught him and a few English words he'd taught her, but mostly by means of the oldest language in the world—the language of instinct.

That was the simplest language of all, to his way of thinking. Quieter, for one thing. Quicker, too. Seemed to come a right time to do a thing—whether it was eating, sleeping or making love—and all the jawing in the world wouldn't make it come sooner or later. Weren't many people had sense enough to know that. Which just went to prove that in some ways people weren't near as smart as animals.

Take beaver, for instance. They got along just fine, beaver did, though you'd never catch a she-beaver jawing at a he-beaver, telling the old boy it was time to stir his hocks and rustle up some grub for the young 'uns, time to chink the house 'cause winter was coming on, time to get up or go to bed or leave off shooting the breeze with the neighbors and come into the house and sit down to supper. Only creatures foolish enough to waste time jawing were human-creatures. He'd heard his ma jaw at his pa, heard Injun squaws jaw at their bucks, heard politicians jaw at the people and people jaw back at politicians, but far as results were concerned they ended up not understanding each other near as well as the he-beaver and she-beaver did.

María just seemed to know things without being told. When he was hungry, she knew it and fed him. When he felt like wandering off alone someplace to think, she knew it and let him go. She knew when the mood came on him to laugh and talk and be with people. She knew when lonesomeness took hold of him in the night and he wanted nothing more than to lie down and sleep with her in his arms.

He stared out at the sea. It was March now and time for the thing to end. He guessed she knew that too.

All that remained to show where the sun had been was a

bleeding red stain against the sky. He closed his eyes. There was a breeze coming up, a land breeze sweet with the smell of growing things beginning to stir in the warming earth, a smell that brought a restlessness to him. Her slim, cool fingers, which had been running idly through his hair, became quiet. He opened his eyes, looked up at her face and found her staring out at the purpling sea. Not looking at him, she spoke.

"Was there another?"

"Another what?"

"Girl."

"Once, yeah."

"Are you thinking of her now?"

"No."

"Was she beautiful?"

"Had black eyes, that's all I remember."

"Why did you leave her?"

"Wanted to go west. She didn't."

Her eyes dropped to his, a puzzled light in their shining depths. "West? Where is west?"

"Why, it's sort of over the hill from where I was. It's fightin' Injuns an' trappin' beaver an' bein' free to go where you please. It ain't no one particular place—it's all over. It's—well, it's here."

"If it's here, why don't you stay?"

"Well, spring's comin' on and I got to be travelin'."

"West?"

"East. Back over the hill."

"Why?"

That was a poser. It took him a long time to think up an answer because he'd never before bothered to tell anyone his reasons for doing things—he'd just up and done 'em. But he thought hard and he thought deep and presently he told her all there was to tell.

"Man like me ain't made to spend his life lyin' around in the sun. I got to be doin' things."

"You must go west to do them? Or east? Or over a hill? You must search, like Don Alonzo, for an island of solid gold?"

"Seems like it, yeah."

"You told her that?"

"No. Just told her I was goin'."

"You are strong. If you wanted her to go with you, why

did you not seize her, throw her on your horse and make her go?"

"Didn't seem fitting. Figured if she'd wanted to go she'd of gone."

"Did you love her?"

"Thought I did."

"Did you tell her you loved her?"

"Figured she'd have sense enough to know that."

"How could she know when you did not tell her?"

"Blamed fool if she didn't. Why else would I be hangin' around her?"

"Did you court her?"

"Year or two, at least."

"Did you—did you ever kiss her?"

"Reckon I did. Don't rightly remember."

"If you do not remember," María said scornfully, "she could not have kissed very well." Suddenly her eyes darkened, she dumped him off her lap and knelt over him, her strong hands pinning his shoulders to the ground. "Or is it that you forget a kiss so quickly? Is it that?"

"My memory's as good as anybody's," Matt said angrily, trying to rise.

She held him down. "But you forget if you kissed her."

"Well, I think I kissed her. Courted her long enough, that's for sure. It seems natural a man would—"

The twilight sky was blotted out as her face covered his, as her lips sought his. Presently the sky appeared again and he lay limp, staring up at a faintly blinking star.

"Will you forget that you kissed me?" María whispered. "Will you forget now?"

"Not for a spell," Matt muttered, reaching for her. "Not for quite a spell. . . ."

The last reflected glow of sunset faded. There was no light now but that of the low, twinkling stars. Presently María said, "When do you go?"

"First of next week, likely."

"Do you want me to go with you?"

"Sure be nice. Only—"

"I would keep your *casa* beautifully clean. I would cook for you, mend your clothes, have many strong sons for you."

"That's real kindly of you. But—"

"But what?"

"I don't have a house."

"A tent will do as well."

"Don't have a tent either." He sat up and pushed her away. "Matter of fact, the notion of you goin' east with me is plumb ridiculous! First place, I didn't ask you. Second place, it'd be too uncomfortable and dangerous for a gal like you to live my kind of life. Third place—"

María smiled, drew his arm around her and snuggled close. "Do you have any blankets?"

" 'Course I do! What do you think I sleep in?"

"You would not need as many. Two sleep warmer than one."

"That's a silly reason to get married for!"

"You want to marry me then?"

"Sure I do! I mean of course I don't! Well, what I mean is, it'd be a tough, hard life for a gal like you an' I just can't see—"

"Pinch me."

"Why?"

"Pinch."

He pinched her on the arm, then said, "Well?"

"I am hard, yes? In the muscles, I mean."

"Feel plumb soft to me."

"But under the softness is a hardness. I am neither sugar nor salt to melt in the first rain. I am not like that other girl—the one you left, I mean. I wish only to go where you go, to be with you, to work for you. That is all." She drew away from him. "Of course if you do not want me—"

"Who said I didn't want you?"

"You did."

"Look," Matt said in sudden exasperation, "you got it all wrong. What I said was—"

Right about then she turned and came into his arms and her lips were warm, warm. By the time he finally let her go he'd clean forgot what it was he *had* said. So he just grinned foolishly at her and muttered, "Guess we could ask the padre to say some words over us. 'Course Buff's goin' to be almighty put out over this. . . ."

Ever since that unfortunate day when Fray Bernardo had lost his temper and spoken sharply to Don Alonzo a change had come over the Don. No longer did he join Fray Bernardo each afternoon on the bench under the pepper tree for those friendly discussions of philosophy, politics, religion and war which they had previously enjoyed. He grew moody, indrawn, spending much of his time in his

room poring over long-neglected maps and charts. No longer did he show the slightest interest in the affairs of the mission, assuming toward Fray Bernardo a stiff, formal politeness that became a shell which no friendly overtures could penetrate.

This saddened Fray Bernardo, for he had long regarded Don Alonzo with a deep, sincere admiration. He had considered Don Alonzo his bosom friend. Rather than have that friendship destroyed Fray Bernardo would have apologized most humbly for his ill-chosen words if given the opportunity, but the Don's cold aloofness remained a wall he could not breach.

Looking out over the courtyard in the benediction-like hush of the balmy spring evening, Fray Bernardo sighed. Soon the *Americanos* would be leaving and San Miguel would settle back into its serene, timeless routine. As the surface of a calm sea ripples when a stone is dropped into it and then soon becomes still again, San Miguel would presently be as it was before.

Strolling out to the pepper tree, he sat down and meditated upon the dim black line of mountains to the east, and as the sound of music and laughter came to him from the courtyard his sadness deepened. San Miguel would be very quiet when the *Americanos* were gone, *sí*. Very peaceful. And very dull.

A slight figure came walking toward the pepper tree, paused, bowed. "I would have a word with you, Fray Bernardo."

"Ah, Don Alonzo! Please to sit down beside me."

"Thank you," Don Alonzo said coldly, remaining standing, "but I wish only to inform you that I am leaving San Miguel. If you would be so kind as to render me a bill for the food and wine I have consumed during my stay—"

"Leaving San Miguel?" Fray Bernardo said in astonishment, struggling to his feet. "When?"

"Tomorrow, I think. Next week at the latest."

"Where are you going?"

"To Vera Cruz. If you will render me a bill I shall arrange for payment—"

"No more of this foolish talk of bills and payments! Why do you go to Vera Cruz?"

"To obtain a ship with which to continue my quest for *Isla de Oro*."

For a moment Fray Bernardo was so stunned that he

could not speak; then he placed a hand on Don Alonzo's shoulder and said, "Speak truly to me, *amigo mio*. You are still angry with me because of my unkind words, is it not so? I apologize. Most humbly and sincerely, I apologize."

"It is of no consequence," Don Alonzo answered stiffly.

"You forgive me?"

"There is nothing to forgive."

Fray Bernardo beamed. "Good! Then you will stay?"

"No, I must go."

"But why, friend of my heart? Why must you go?"

Don Alonzo turned away and gazed at the mountains. "I am no longer a young man. The years pass quickly now and only the gods can say how many are left for me to use. But this I know, this I feel in my heart: there is within me the power to do one more great deed before I die. And I must do it. I cannot rest until I do it."

"But must this great deed be the discovery of an island of solid gold? Can it not be a deed that might be accomplished without your leaving San Miguel?"

"I fear not." Don Alonzo bowed. "I shall leave next week for Vera Cruz. Or next month at the latest. Good night."

Exceedingly troubled in mind, Fray Bernardo watched him walk away; then, thinking to meditate in the solitude of the chapel, he strolled to the hill overlooking the bay and stood for a time watching the luminescent waves lap quietly at the curving shore. Perhaps he had been wrong in refusing to let Don Alonzo slaughter the *Americanos* by whatever means he might devise. That, certainly, would have been a great deed. Fond as he had become of the *Americanos*, he was even fonder of Don Alonzo, and if a choice must be made between them. . . .

"Father, is that you?"

Startled, Fray Bernardo turned to find Pancho Oñate standing in the shadows behind him. He smiled and said kindly, "Yes, my son. Did you wish something?"

"I bring news. Bad news."

"Of what nature?"

"*Los Americanos* are leaving next week."

"Is that bad news?"

"Wait, father, there is more. They plan to rob us."

"How can they? We have no gold."

"They are going to steal our horses. A thousand of them, at least."

Fray Bernardo shrugged his fat shoulders. "No matter. We have many horses."

"They are going to steal our women also."

"So? How many women?"

Pancho fussed uneasily with his hat. "I cannot say. But that dog of an *Americano* who is always with María—"

"Ah, it is only María you think will be stolen!"

"The attempt will be made. I am sure of it."

"Then you must warn her. Tell her to run away and hide."

"She would not listen to me. She wants to be stolen."

Fray Bernardo spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness. "In that case, what can I do?"

Pancho's eyes glittered angrily. "You can whip her and lock her up."

"The *Americanos* would not stand for it."

"You could kill them, father."

"I?" Fray Bernardo said in astonishment.

"*Sí*," Pancho said, lowering his voice and sidling closer. "It would not be a difficult thing to accomplish. With one small prayer you could call lightning down from the sky to strike them dead—"

"Do not speak sacrilege!"

"Or permit Don Alonzo to poison the *frijoles*."

"I have already forbidden that."

Pancho stared sullenly at the ground. "It is a mistake not to kill them."

"They have not hurt us, Pancho. Why not let them go in peace?"

"Because they will come back."

"Then we will make them welcome."

"And when they come back there will be not a dozen of them but hundreds, perhaps thousands. They will take our land, our homes, everything we have."

Fray Bernardo scowled uneasily. If there were any danger of that happening, then there was no doubt of what he should do. Seeming to sense his uncertainty, Pancho said, "Could it not be arranged, father? You could pray for one small earthquake to swallow them up—"

"I shall give the matter some thought," Fray Bernardo interrupted curtly. "But now we shall discuss it no more." He turned and gazed up at the chapel roof. "Speaking of earthquakes, why have you not repaired the damage done

to the chapel by *el temblor* two years ago? I have reminded you of it many times."

"It is a thing of much difficulty to accomplish."

"The crack, I have observed, extends completely across the roof and down one wall."

"It is not serious—unless we have another earthquake."

"What would happen in that event?"

"The roof would no doubt collapse. Then we could build a new chapel." Pancho paused, then said hopefully, "Padre, if I suggested a simple, easy way by which to kill the *Americanos*—"

"Kill, kill, kill!" Fray Bernardo exclaimed, quite losing his temper. "I am weary of the word! Now, go—I wish to mediate in peace."

When Pancho had gone, Fray Bernardo gave a tired sigh, waddled into the chapel and knelt for some time in the flickering candlelight before the image of the Virgin, trying to find a solution to the many perplexing problems that troubled him. Presently he rose, turned and saw two figures standing in respectful silence at the rear of the chapel. He smiled and beckoned María and the tall, yellow-haired *Americano* to him.

"What it is, my children?"

Under the black rebozo that covered her head, María's eyes were shining like two bright stars. "We would be married, father."

"But this *Americano* goes away soon, I am told. What will you do then?"

"Go with him."

"This is your home, my child."

"My home shall be where his is," María said simply.

"Where is his home?"

"East. Over a hill. In a blanket."

Somewhat perplexed, Fray Bernardo stared curiously at the grinning *Americano*, then said to María, "Ask him if he likes our country."

She asked him, then said, "*Sí*, he likes it very much."

"Do his *compadres* like it?"

"*Sí*."

"Will they tell other *Americanos* about it?"

"He says of course they will. He says that soon many, many *Americanos* will come here—perhaps to stay."

Fray Bernardo sighed. "That is what I fear."

María looked at him imploringly. "You will marry us,

father? You will permit us to have a big wedding in the chapel so that all the *Americanos* may come and know that I am truly his wife and he is truly my husband?"

"Yes, María," he answered, gently patting her hand. "It shall be as you wish."

When they had gone, he stood for a long time lost in thought. A man such as himself had many duties, he mused unhappily. A duty to his friends, to his people, to his church, to his country. Perhaps if he prayed for one very small, very gentle earthquake . . .

Black were the dancing shadows the hanging lanterns projected against the whitewashed courtyard walls as the fandango went on and on, black the sparkling eyes of the women, black their shining hair. But nowhere was there a blacker blackness than that in Pancho Oñate's heart as he squatted on his heels near one of the gurgling fountains, watching, smoking, hating with every fiber of his being. Furtively he fingered the hilt of the knife in his belt. Listen to the dogs howl! Ah, but they would howl in a different key—particularly the tall, yellow-haired one—could he only be so fortunate as to be presented a reasonable opportunity to dispose of them! That of course was the difficulty: Such an opportunity had as yet not offered itself. But perhaps tonight . . . if they all got very drunk . . .

They were all trying to dance with María, all trying to kiss her, and neither she nor the yellow-haired *Americano* seemed to mind. It was a custom among the dogs, Pancho supposed, but *nombre!*—if it were he who were to marry her tomorrow *he* would not stand for such maudlin pawing! His scowl deepened. But it was not he.

Moodily he watched as she darted from one *Americano* to another, giving each a good-night kiss, then as she made her way through the laughing, chattering women and went out the gates, he rose and followed. Once outside, he quickened his pace and ran ahead of her, waited in the deep shadows where the path to the native village skirted the orange grove, then stepped out suddenly and seized her by the arms.

"Oh!" she exclaimed in surprise.

"Quiet! It is I, Pancho."

"Let me go!"

"No, you must listen to me."

She became suddenly still, her voice sharp as a steel

blade. "What do you have to say that I must listen to?"

"You are going to marry the *Americano* tomorrow?"

"*Sí.*"

"I forbid it."

She tossed her head and laughed. "Is that all you have to say?"

"No, there is more. If you do marry the *Americano,* I will kill him. I swear it."

"Swearing is all you have the courage to do. If you so much as touched him with your little finger, he would break you into so many pieces you would not need to be buried—the wind would blow the pieces away like dust."

"I will kill all the *Americanos!*" he boasted. "Not one will I spare! Also I will kill you!"

"Talk, talk, talk!" María said. "Go chatter with Don Alonzo! You two are just alike—two small bags filled with nothing but air!"

"Don Alonzo is not as clever as I," Pancho said savagely. "Where he failed I will succeed." His fingers tightened on her arms. "María! María *mia!* Do not be a fool and marry this dog of a—!"

He was not quite sure what she hit him with, but suddenly he found himself sitting on the ground suffering from an intense lack of air because of a foot, an elbow, a fist or a knee that had collided with his abdomen with considerable force.

"Dog of all dogs!" she spat. "Do your worst! No one shall be harmed by it!"

Then she ran, laughing scornfully, into the darkness.

Having no breath to spare for either cursing or groaning, Pancho sat for several unhappy moments gingerly rubbing his stomach. Dark were his thoughts as he got to his feet and limped slowly to the hilltop where the chapel stood, dark as the long, deep shadows cast by the rising moon. Moving an exploring hand along the chapel wall, he found the gaping vertical crack that the earthquake had made two years ago and scowled thoughtfully. It ran straight up to the roof, he knew, then zigzagged across to the far side of the building. Had *el temblor* lasted a few seconds longer, had it been a trifle more severe, the tons and tons of mortar, stone, beams and red curved tile would no doubt have gone crashing down into the interior.

If only such a fortunate thing might happen tomorrow while the wedding was in progress! To kill María, her

lover, and all the *Americano* dogs in one glorious moment—ah, that would be vengeance indeed!

Craning his head back, he stared up at the roof. The thing could be accomplished easily enough. Knowing the value of gunpowder far better than did the padre, he had not been so foolish as to throw away all the contents of the mission's powder magazine when Fray Bernardo had ordered him to clear out that room so that space could be made for the past autumn's wine production but had carefully hidden several barrels of powder in a secret cave down by the sea. One small barrel, properly placed, should do the trick. While it was yet dark tonight, while all the *Americanos* drank and sang and danced in celebration of tomorrow's great event, he would bring a barrel of powder up from the secret cave, place it so on the roof, and lay a short length of fuse. Then tomorrow, when they were all inside . . .

Smiling a dark, bleak smile, he padded silently down the path to the secret cave.

Because of his imminent departure for Vera Cruz and the vast number of exceedingly important letters he must write, Don Alonzo politely declined Fray Bernardo's invitation to attend the wedding. But as he sat at his desk in his room next morning, quill pen in hand and blank paper before him, as the courtyard outside grew empty and still, he found it difficult to concentrate. Always before he need only close his eyes and dream of the island of solid gold awaiting him in that distant, unknown sea to be fired with ambition, to feel the blood pulse hot and quick through his veins. But the magic was gone. Now when he closed his eyes and pictured himself standing on the deck of a ship gazing off across endless seas he thought only of how seasick he had been during the passage through the Strait of Magellan.

Scowling, he put down the pen, rose and paced the floor. The room was too small, too cramped. He went out into the deserted courtyard and prowled restlessly, thinking with gloomy anticipation of the long, uncomfortable days in the saddle, the heat, the dust, the poor food he must endure on the journey to Vera Cruz. He brooded on the time that must pass, the many difficulties that must be overcome before a ship could be obtained in Vera Cruz and the voyage begun. He thought distastefully of the stormy Cape

Horn passage which must again be made, and his stomach quivered at the thought.

What a pity it was that one must travel so far and endure so many discomforts merely to accomplish a single great deed! Would it not be better to remain at San Miguel as Fray Bernardo had suggested? The *Americanos* were leaving, *sí*, but how could one be sure that they would not come again? Next autumn, perhaps. If powder could be obtained, the cannon better secured to the parapet, the cavalry more intensively drilled . . .

He sighed and shook his head. No, it could not be. He had said he must go and go he must. Honor required it.

Though he had not been aware that his pacing had taken him out of the courtyard, he found himself on the outskirts of a great crowd of natives gathered around the entrance to the chapel, whose limited capacity did not permit them all within. The doors stood open. Respectfully silent, the crowd milled and shifted as each of its members tried to get a better view of the proceedings. Several boys had climbed convenient trees in order to see over the heads of their elders, and one native was so obsessed by curiosity that he was placing a ladder against the chapel wall, apparently intending to climb up to the roof and peer through the crack that the earthquake had made.

That should have been of no concern to Don Alonzo. They were curious as monkeys, these natives, and he knew of no religious rule that said one must not climb up on a church roof and peer down through a crack while services were going on within. Yet something compelled him to walk toward the native, to speak to him just as he was about to mount the ladder.

"*Momentito, hombre.* What is it you do?"

Pancho Oñate whirled around with a start, his hand darting to the hilt of his knife. Then, puffing nervously on the *cigarito* in his mouth, he dropped his gaze to the ground. "It is only to climb to the roof."

"To look through the crack?"

"*Sí.* I mean no harm."

Had it been any other than Pancho, Don Alonzo would have forbidden it, for it occurred to him now that a man scrambling about on the tile roof could be disturbingly noisy. But Pancho had long been in love with María, he knew. Certainly he, of all people, had a right to one last, sad look at his loved one.

"Very well, you may climb up. But please to make no noise."

"Not a whisper of sound will I make," Pancho swore. "Not even so much as a mouse-scratch of sound."

As Pancho started up the ladder, Don Alonzo wandered back to where the crowd stood in front of the chapel doors. Poor Pancho! How unhappy he had looked. How dejected. And how sad it would make him feel to lie up there on the roof and watch while Fray Bernardo said the words that would make María and the *Americano* man and wife.

A mist filmed Don Alonzo's eyes. Once, long ago, he too had loved and lost, he mused in sad melancholy, but he had been far too wise to go to his sweetheart's wedding. Knowing himself as he did, knowing the depths of his passion, he feared that the mere sight of the happy couple would have driven him so insane with jealousy that he would have killed them both. So he had gone away—far, far away. Better for Pancho if he would do the same.

He did not mean to go into the chapel, but the well-trained natives, seeing him, politely moved aside, bowed and opened a way for him. Presently he found himself standing just inside the doors. In front of him the natives, the *Americanos,* and the couple being wed were all down on their knees with heads bowed as Fray Bernardo solemnly prayed. Having no room to kneel, Don Alonzo removed his hat, lowered his head and closed his eyes.

Ah, my sweetheart of long ago, where are you now? Do you ever think of the brave, handsome lad who loved you, who sailed far and far across stormy seas in search of an island of solid . . .

Don Alonzo sniffed. Without opening his eyes, he sampled the close, still air around him and knew instantly that something was amiss. Out of a hundred smells and blends of smells compounded of garlic, wine, sweat, dust, salt water, tobacco—out of them all his nostrils picked out the smell of all smells that a soldier learns and never forgets.

Somewhere gunpowder was burning. Forgetting all else, he opened his eyes and gazed quickly around the interior of the chapel. No, it was not here. Outside, then. Quietly he began to work his way through the crowd, and for once in his life he found his small stature to be an advantage rather than a handicap.

He was clear of the crowd now and standing at one cor-

ner of the chapel. The smell of powder was stronger. Did he hear or merely imagine he heard a faint sputtering? Suddenly a sound above him attracted his attention and he looked up to see Pancho climbing hurriedly down the ladder. His scowl deepening, Don Alonzo walked quickly to the base of the ladder, waited until Pancho's feet touched the ground, then seized him by the shoulder and spun him around.

"*Hombre!* What have you done?"

With the quickness of a striking snake, Pancho's right hand dipped and rose, and suddenly a glittering knife was in it. In his eyes burned a madness. "I am going to kill them!" he breathed. "I am going to kill them all!"

"*Habla!* What have you done?"

"Let me go!"

"Not until you speak!"

The knife flashed in the sun. Don Alonzo stumbled backward. Pancho, with a laugh and a curse, went running off. Don Alonzo stared down at his left arm, whose jacket sleeve had been ripped from elbow to wrist. A woman on the outskirts of the crowd screamed. Natives were hurrying toward Don Alonzo now, chattering, shouting, pointing at his bloody arm and at Pancho's running figure. As they tried to help him, Don Alonzo shoved them away and staggered to the base of the ladder.

It was all clear now. And what he must do—that was clear too.

Grimly he began to climb.

Like all great deeds that are done when many excited, frightened witnesses are present, there are countless versions of how that bravest of all brave soldiers, Don Alonzo de Miravel y Ruiz, saved hundreds of people from certain death that bright spring morning. One version has it that he went climbing up that unsteady ladder three rungs at a time. Another says such a thing would have been impossible for a man whose left arm hung uselessly at his side and that he climbed very slowly, very painfully, and had to stop many times and cling tightly to the ladder until the faintness and dizziness in him went away. But all agree that he did reach the roof, did find the barrel with the sputtering length of fuse in it.

At that point, the accounts again vary. Some say that the fuse had burned into the barrel so far that it was not possi-

ble for Don Alonzo to jerk it out and throw it away. Another says that he was half blind with weakness brought on from loss of blood and thus was unable to find the fuse. But he did find the barrel, and he smelled the burning powder, and he was soldier enough to know that all within the church were only seconds away from eternity.

There was a great shouting, a great confusion of people milling about below. As he picked up the barrel he seemed to hesitate as to what to do with it. Then, perhaps because he knew many people would be killed if he threw it directly down from where he stood, he began running along the sloping roof. How many times he stumbled and almost fell no one can truthfully say. But he did not fall. Not until he reached the far end of the roof where the corner of the chapel overlooked a sheer, two-hundred-foot drop to the sea. There he paused, seeming to gather all of his failing strength, and threw the barrel as far out as he could.

A second later there was a terrific explosion. Don Alonzo collapsed, rolled slowly over like a limp sack, and fell a good twenty feet to the ground.

Inside the church, nothing was known of this save the sound of confused shouting, the sound of the explosion, and the jolting shock as the walls and roof quivered perceptibly. Some small debris fell on the bowed heads of the audience, but other than that and a momentary panic no damage was done. Those who were privileged to be kneeling in the front rows did claim they noticed a queer thing. They noticed, they said, that, when the explosion rocked the chapel an instant after Fray Bernardo had pronounced María and the *Americano* to be wife and husband, the good padre lifted his eyes in consternation to the ceiling and exclaimed, "Not now, Lord! Not now!"

What he meant by that no one ever troubled to ask him. Nor did Fray Bernardo ever trouble to say. In all likelihood it was of no particular importance.

The sun was warm. In the shade of the pepper tree Fray Bernardo opened his eyes, blinked sleepily, yawned, then sat smiling off into the distance. All was quiet, all was well. The women chattered and worked. The vineyards basked in the sunlight, the mountains stood hazy against the sky, the herds grazed on the plain before him, the sea lapped quietly at the shore. Nodding his head, he mur-

mured to himself, "We have done well. With God's help, we have done well."

From out of the courtyard limped a small, thin, fierce-eyed man, who paused for a moment to consider the world within range of his vision, then, seeming to find it in perfect order, proceeded with dignity to the pepper tree and bowed.

"*Hola,* Fray Bernardo. How is the state of your health?"

"Excellent!" Fray Bernardo answered, beaming. "Please to seat yourself beside me, Don Alonzo. The day is warm."

"*Gracias.* It is indeed warm."

"Your injuries are mending?" Fray Bernardo inquired solicitously.

"They no longer bother me in the least."

"I am happy to hear that."

For some time they sat in silence, staring off into the distance, dreaming their private dreams. Fray Bernardo sighed.

"I have lost track of the days, good friend. How many does it make since *los Americanos* left?"

"I do not remember. Many, I think."

Fray Bernardo looked at him fondly. "It was a great deed you did. Never have I known of a greater."

"It was nothing."

"The *Americanos* will never forget it. They told me as much. They told me, in the strange manner they have of giving compliments, that you have consumed much of the fur of the grizzly bear."

"Do not embarrass me further, good brother. Let us speak of something else."

"As you wish."

They both fell silent. After a time, Fray Bernardo said absently, "How many days did you say it made since *los Americanos* left?"

"I did not say. But it seems to have been many. Very many."

"Do you think they will come again?"

"Not before autumn, at least."

Fray Bernardo sighed. "That long? *Qué lástima!*"

"*Sí,*" Don Alonzo murmured, gazing wistfully at the mountains. "What a pity!"

FIRE-WATER FIASCO

1 "THREE OF A KIND"

In his time, Dan Little had seen a mite of contrary country, animals and people, but right offhand he couldn't recall when he'd met up with as much concentrated contrariness as was wrapped up in the bulky figure of the Missouri wagon captain Max Hitchcock. Maybe, Dan brooded, Hitchcock's contrariness stemmed from the fact that the unaccustomed responsibility worried him. Maybe being in love made him more fractious than usual. Or maybe—and this Dan regarded as more likely—it was just plain damned cussedness.

A chill darkness lay over the river valley where the fifteen wagons were camped for the night. Dan hunkered near the fire, a small, mild-mannered man whose quiet ways had caused more than one person to underestimate him. Hitchcock towered above, his broad face lined with stubbornness.

"You ain't answered my question yet," he snapped at Dan. "Why have we got to keep following the river?"

Dan drew an absent design on the ground with a stick. " 'Cause that's the way the trail goes."

"A hell of a trail. The way it winds around, a blind buffalo must have made it."

"A buffalo would have more sense than to try to take a short cut like you want to do across country where there ain't no water and the rocks are so sharp they'd cut his hoofs to ribbons."

Hitchcock flushed. "Are you insinuating——"

"Heh!" On the opposite side of the fire Fillmore Parrish chuckled, his faded blue eyes sparkling in his thin, wrinkled

face. "Dan ain't 'sinuatin' nothin', Max. He's just tellin' you point-blank that you ain't got the sense of a buffalo with the blind staggers!"

"Grandpa!" Anne Parrish scolded. The girl looked thoughtfully at Dan for a moment and his eyes fell before her steady gaze. He wasn't exactly an expert on women, but for his money Anne Parrish was the trimmest, purtiest young filly that had ever made a man's heart turn over at the lift of an eyelash. No wonder Hitchcock threw a purple fit every time she looked twice at another man.

"You hired Dan to guide us, Max," she said slowly. "You ought to trust him. *I* trust him."

Dan blushed. "Thank you kindly, ma'am."

Hitchcock snorted. "I still think—"

He broke off at the sound of nearing hoofbeats out in the night. Dan cocked his ear to one side and listened. That might be Tex and Wolf Ear. He reckoned it was about time they showed up. He had been worrying a mite about them lately. Not that he figured any harm had come to them; still, the folk back in Sagebrush City had been a shade riled up and you couldn't tell when some damned fool would take a notion to break in a new lariat by stretching a couple of necks.

"Who's there?" the wagon guard challenged.

The clatter of hoofs ceased and a calm, pleasant voice drawled, "Hold your fire, suh. They's just two of us and we ain't fixin' to shed no blood."

Dan thoughtfully rubbed his chin. It was them, all right. And that sort of posed a problem.

Two men walked into the circle of firelight leading a pair of tired horses. One was an Indian, a huge, hulking figure with fierce-looking eyes and a face like something out of a nightmare. The other was a tall, lean white man with friendly gray eyes set in a handsome face. Dan moved back so that Hitchcock's stocky figure shielded him from the eyes of the newcomers.

"Who are you?" Hitchcock demanded. "What do you want?"

"We're just a couple of weary travelers bound for Oregon, suh," the lean man answered with a smile. "I have the honor of being James Buchanan Randall—of the Texas Randalls. This is my friend Wolf Ear."

"I don't trust Indians."

"Wolf Ear is a civilized Indian," Randall said blandly.

"He is the gentlest, most tenderhearted Cheyenne this side of the Mississippi. If he likes you, Wolf Ear will give you the shirt off his back."

"He ain't got no shirt on," Grandpa Parrish said suspiciously.

"That proves my point, Colonel," Randall said, bowing to the old man. "He's so bighearted that I can't keep him in shirts. Ain't that right, Wolf Ear?"

Wolf Ear stared at Anne Parrish's long blonde hair and fingered his scalping knife longingly."Huh!" he grunted.

"We'd be obliged for the hospitality of your camp for the night," Randall said, smiling at Hitchcock. "You see, we're out of grub on account of ridin' fast and light so that we can catch up with a friend of ours who hit the trail out of Sagebrush City about a week ahead of us."

"Friend?" Hitchcock scowled. "Just what did this friend of yours look like?"

"Why, he was sort of—"

Dan stepped forward and cut in hastily, "I don't know as I'd believe that story, Hitchcock. Ain't nobody passed us in the last week. I sort of doubt that they even got a friend. More likely they're outlaws runnin' away from a posse."

Wolf Ear's eyes glittered for an instant, then he grunted, "Huh!"

A momentary puzzled look wrinkled Randall's forehead, then his eyes narrowed down and he said, "I beg your pardon, suh, but it sounded to me like you said—"

"I wouldn't trust 'em," Dan went on hurriedly. "They look like the kind of men who'd cut their own mother's throat for next to nothin'. If you feed 'em and let 'em spend the night with us, the next thing they'll want to do is trail along with us to Oregon. We got enough trouble as it is."

"I'm wagon captain," Hitchcock said stubbornly. "I'll thank you to keep out of my affairs."

Dan shrugged. "I'm warnin' you—"

"Who is this dried-up little runt?" Randall demanded of Hitchcock, jerking his head in Dan's direction. "Is he running the wagon train or are you?"

"I am!"

"Then, suh, may I suggest that we ignore him and discuss this matter like a couple of gentlemen? As I was saying, Wolf Ear and I have been ridin' hard tryin' to catch up with this friend of ours who we think headed for Oregon. You'd remember him if he had come this way, I'm sure.

He's a big man about six feet four with black eyes and a beaver hat an' a long white beard—"

"Ain't nobody like that passed us," Grandpa Parrish said.

Randall sighed in disappointment and turned to Wolf Ear. "I reckon we missed him. Maybe he changed his mind and headed south for California. What do you think, Wolf Ear, shall we accept this gentleman's invitation and join his wagon train?"

"I didn't hear nobody give you an invite," Dan snapped.

"Shut up," Hitchcock demanded. "Of course you're invited, Randall. We'll be glad to have you."

"Well, Wolf Ear?" Randall prompted.

The Cheyenne's gaze moved to Dan's face and lingered there a moment. Gently Dan closed one eye. Wolf Ear grunted, "Huh!"

"He says," Randall explained with a smile, "the more the merrier. We will be delighted to join you."

Dan lay quietly in his blankets until the fires had died to embers and the rest of the camp had fallen asleep, then he arose and crept silently to where Tex Randall and Wolf Ear lay. He touched Tex on the shoulder and whispered, "You awake?"

"You're damned tootin'!" Tex answered hoarsely, "an' I'm waitin' for you to explain—"

"Shh! Follow me and we'll go where we can talk."

They moved like three bodyless wraiths across the enclosure, crouched in the deep shadows between two wagons until the guard had passed, then Dan led them downriver through the darkness. When they were well away from camp he stopped, hunkered down near a sheltering boulder and filled his pipe.

"Now," Tex said angrily, "will you tell us what the hell the deal is? Why'd you act like you didn't know us? Why'd you tell Hitchcock we were a couple of outlaws?"

Dan applied a match to his pipe. "It's a long story."

"It had better be a good one. Wolf Ear and me are plenty sore over the way you run out on us back there in Sagebrush City."

Dan grinned in the darkness. "Were they purty mad?"

"Mad enough to eat hornets. They were going to lynch us both when they found out you'd skipped with the money. I had to do some mighty fast talkin' to save our necks."

Dan nodded complacently. "I figgered you'd be able to

talk 'em out of it. You always were a mighty good hand when it come to slingin' words around, Tex. If only you could think as fast as you can talk—"

Dan broke off and smoked silently for a time, recalling the affair back at Sagebrush City. He had drifted into the trading post with Tex and Wolf Ear, figuring on stocking up on grub and supplies before tackling the long stretch of unsettled country that lay beyond the frontier outpost on the trail to Oregon. Tex, who could raise a thirst if he were swimming in a freshwater lake in a cloudburst, had suggested throwing one last spree, so the three of them had gone to the local saloon and absorbed a few drinks.

Somehow or other one thing had led to the next until they had found themselves sitting in at a poker game with half a dozen of the town's better-heeled citizens. It had been a pleasant, friendly game until a certain tall, solemn-faced gent with black eyes and very agile fingers had taken a hand, then somehow most of the cash around the table had started accumulating in front of him.

By nature, Dan Little was not a suspicious man. And the solemn-faced gent was smooth, very smooth. But Dan's eyes were sharp and he could put away an amazing amount of the potent redeye that flowed freely around the table without its affecting his eyesight in the least. So when the solemn-faced gentleman performed a neat bit of sleight-of-hand while dealing, Dan mildly called it to the attention of the assembled company.

Bedlam was not long in breaking loose. The tall man was not only deft of hand but also fleet of foot. Before anyone could move, he had upended the table, shot out the lights and was making fast and frequent tracks for the wide-open spaces. The losers in the game—and they were all losers by then—gave a concerted roar of rage and followed.

All except Dan Little.

It was dark in the saloon. He lay on the floor where his tipped-over chair had dumped him, philosophically reflecting that he should have shot the solemn-faced gent first and accused him of dealing from the wrong side of the deck second. He could hear the bartender cursing as he fumbled around for a lamp, while outside the sound of galloping hoofs grew fainter as the impromptu possee formed. In some manner, Dan's hand touched a scattered pile of greenbacks that had spilled on the floor. It was too dark to count them; besides, he was not positive just how much money he had

lost, so he did the thing any sensible man would have done. He scooped up all the loose bills he could find, stuffed them in his pocket and left the saloon before the bartender could strike a light.

Outside, he mounted his horse and sat for a moment debating what to do. Tex and Wolf Ear, impulsive souls that they were, had joined the pursuit of the fleet-footed stranger. That, Dan reflected, was too bad. It was really a rather pointless chase. The stranger had gotten away with nothing that belonged to any of them and the only satisfaction they would get out of catching him was the nonprofitable enjoyment of seeing him dance at the end of a rope. Dan sighed. Every man to his own pleasures. Evidently the citizens of Sagebrush City got more enjoyment out of hanging people than they did out of money, else they would not have hurried off so quickly and left their money lying about on the saloon floor. That being the case, Dan saw no reason why he should hang around until the posse returned. In fact, it appeared to him that the sooner he left town the better.

And so he did.

He grinned at Tex. "Did they catch the slick-dealin' gent?"

"Hell, no!" Tex snorted in disgust. "We chased him till damned near midnight and never got within shootin' distance of him, so we turned around and came back to the saloon. Everybody was plenty sore. But that wasn't nothin' to what they were when they found out you'd skipped with the money."

"I'd probably a won it anyhow," Dan said laconically. "I was holdin' three kings when the deal broke up. What'd they do to you?"

"Well, they knew you were with me an' Wolf Ear an' naturally they figured we was in on it. First they were going to take us out and string us up, but I managed to talk 'em out of that by tellin' 'em maybe you'd started out with the posse an' had got lost. So they threw us in jail to wait an' see if you'd come back. Wolf Ear ate so much they figured they were losin' money on him so they turned him loose after a couple of days. He waited for his chance an' caught the sheriff in a dark alley one night and bopped him on the head and borrowed his keys. Then we high-tailed it out of town."

Dan nodded. "I figgered you'd be able to take care of yourselves."

Tex looked at him curiously. "How'd you happen to tie up with the wagon train?"

Dan explained how he had come across the camp of the emigrants two days' ride out of Sagebrush City. "They was only five wagons," he said, "all of 'em from the same part of the hills back in Missouri. They was lost. I offered to set 'em back on the right trail an' this fella Hitchcock hired me as guide. He means well, I reckon, but he's a contrary cuss. A couple of days later we caught up with a fella by the name of Jim Miller who was headed for Oregon with ten freight wagons, so we all joined up together."

"Freight wagons?" Tex said with a scowl. "What's he carryin'?"

"Farm implements," Dan answered, applying another match to the dead embers in his pipe. "Leastways, that's what he claims."

"A funny thing to be freighting all the way out to Oregon."

"That," Dan said softly, "is kind of the way I figgered."

He smoked thoughtfully for a time. "There's another funny thing about this Miller gent. He's got two bullwhackers for every wagon, but they ain't worth a hoot in hell at driven' oxen. They're sure handy with a gun, though. And jumpy. The way they guard them wagons you'd think they was loaded with gold 'stead of farm implements."

"Seems to me you've strayed a long ways from the point," Tex interrupted. "What I want to know is why in the hell you acted like you didn't know us."

"I told you Hitchcock is a contrary cuss."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"If he'd knowed you was friends of mine, he wouldn't have let you come along. He don't like me."

"He hired you, didn't he?"

"Yeah, but I don't take nothin' off of him an' it galls him 'cause I know the country an' he don't. There's a gal in the train he likes to show off in front of an' he's so jealous of her he spits green."

"I saw her. Kind of cute. Who's the old gent?"

"Her grandpop. An' he's the one that's got me worried. You see, he's the one that's got the eight thousand dollars. He talks too much an' Jim Miller has found out about it an' I think he's fixin' to knock the old man off."

Tex stared at him for a moment, then said slowly, "Would you mind ropin' that critter and draggin' it by again?"

"I said," Dan explained patiently, "that Grandpa Parrish had eight thousand dollars—"

"Where'd he get all that money?"

"Sold his farm back in Missouri."

"All right, I'm ridin' double with you that far."

"Miller wants that money. He wants it so bad he's willin' to murder the whole kit and kaboodle from Missouri. An' take it from me, he's just the sort of gent who could do that little job and then sit down an' eat a hearty breakfast."

2 "ONLY WOMEN DRINK WATER"

"I'm beginnin' to see a faint glimmer of light," Tex said. "You figure this Jim Miller is the curly wolf in a pack of lobos. He's got ten wagonloads of hardware that damned sure ain't garden hoes, and you figure he's got some kind of a shady deal afoot. You've also got a notion that he's goin' to massacre a flock of innocent little sheep so's he can steal the old man's money, and it worries you so terrible you can't sleep nights for tryin' to figure out some scheme to save the poor little lambs."

"That," Dan admitted, "sort of sums it up in a nutshell. Sometimes, Tex, you show almost human intelligence."

"I'd say," Tex went on, eying him narrowly, "that it was downright noble of you—"

"That'd be kind of you—"

"—If I didn't know you so well. Just what do you figure to make out of it?"

Dan tapped the dottle out of his pipe on the heel of his boot. "Let's say I'm doin' it just for the good of my soul."

"All right. We'll say that—even though we know it's a damned lie." Tex was silent a moment. "Just where do Wolf Ear and me fit into this scheme of yours?"

"Well, I kind of figgered if you'd pretend you was outlaws—"

"We don't have to pretend. There's probably a couple of ropes just the size of our necks waitin' for us back in Sagebrush City."

"And sort of shine up to this Miller gent, you could get a line on what he calculates to do."

"I'd just as soon shine up to a nest of rattlesnakes, if it's all the same to you. What makes you think he's going to believe we're outlaws?"

"Well, he'll figure it this way: either you're for him or agin him, ain't that right?"

"Well—"

"Bein' as I'm guide for the wagon train and bein' as I got such an honest face, he'll figure I'm agin him. Right?"

"I ain't so sure—"

"So if you show him that you're agin me, there won't be nothin' left for him to believe except that you're for him. Ain't that logical?"

Tex spat on the ground. "I had a horse once that ate loco weed and from that day on the only way he'd run was in circles. He thought he was bein' logical, too, but he never got nowhere."

"Take my word for it, it'll work. What we'll do is frame up a fight 'tween you an' me. Then he'll come to the natural conclusion that we hate each other's guts."

"What'll we fight about?"

"I'll think of somethin'. Now, have you got all that straight in your head?"

Tex said he guessed he had. He turned to Wolf Ear, who had sat passively beside him all through the conversation. When it came to talking, the Cheyenne was a man of few words, but his understanding of English was adequate. Tex nudged him.

"You got that, Wolf Ear?"

The Cheyenne's only answer was a subdued snore.

Under Dan's guiding hand, the wagon train made good time during the following week, though Hitchcock constantly grumbled that sticking to the twisting river valley seemed like a lot of nonsense. Jim Miller sided in with the Missourian, saying that it appeared to him that if a guide really knew the country as Dan pretended to know it he ought to be able to show them a shorter trail than that along the river. Dan endured their grumblings without comment for a while, then one afternoon he said mildly, "Maybe you'd like to take over my job, Miller."

Jim Miller was a dark, ponderous man who towered over Dan by a full head. He made no attempt to conceal his antagonism in his eyes as he squinted down at Dan and said slowly, "I reckon a poor guide is better than none."

"This your first time up the trail?"

"Yeah."

"Then keep your opinions to yourself. We're gettin' close to Blackfoot country now. I'm gettin' sick an' tired of you two greenhorns belly-achin' about short cuts an' if you don't quit runnin' off at the mouth I'm goin' to leave you

flat and let you take your chances with the Injuns. I got a notion they'd sure like to have what you got in them wagons."

Miller's eyes narrowed. "Are you talkin' about my wagons or Hitchcock's?" he demanded.

"Both," Dan said shortly, and spurred his horse away.

After that there was no more talk about short cuts, but Dan noticed that Miller kept a wary, suspicious eye on him. Of evenings, Miller's ten wagons were always grouped alongside one another, and, in addition to the two guards who did sentry duty over the camp as a whole, there was always a pair of watchful, hard-eyed men seeing to it that none of the Missourians got to poking curiously around the freight wagons.

Tex, as Dan had expected, had soon talked himself into favor with everyone in camp. Even Hitchcock seemed to like him, despite the fact that the smooth-talking Texan was making a definitely favorable impression on Anne Parrish. Miller was more reserved, but on several occasions Dan caught him eying Tex with a speculative gleam in his eye, as if measuring him and wondering. The stolid Wolf Ear tagged along with Tex like a silent, oversized shadow.

After supper one evening Dan was sitting in front of the fire thoughtfully staring into the flames when Anne appeared carrying a worn calico dress and a needle and thread. She smiled pleasantly and sat down beside him. He watched her as she tried to thread the needle in the flickering glow of the fire.

"Kind of poor light, ma'am," he said, getting up to toss more wood on the fire.

"Thank you, Dan. That's much better."

"Travelin' is kind of hard on clothes, ain't it?"

"Terribly hard. I just hope this dress lasts until we get to Oregon."

Grandpa Parrish limped up, a thin, gaunt figure in the firelight, and stood looking over her shoulder for a moment. "What you doin'?"

"Sewing, Grandpa."

" 'Pears to me that dress is more patches than anything else."

She allowed that he was right.

"Doggone my tough old hide," he exclaimed, "iff'n I don't buy you a hundred dresses when we git to Oregon. Satin ones, too, by grab."

"One will be enough," Anne said quietly. "A white one with a long veil."

"What you want a veil for? You ain't got nothin' to hide."

"Brides always wear veils."

"You figger on catchin' yoreself a man?"

She flushed. "Quit teasing, Grandpa. You know I've already caught one."

Dan got up, ill at ease. All this talk about brides and wedding dresses made him feel peculiar inside, as if he'd just swallowed a big chunk of ice that lay in his stomach and wouldn't melt. As he walked away from the fire, Grandpa Parrish shot him an odd look, then limped stiffly after him.

"Say, young feller, wait up a minute."

Dan waited in the shadows, "Yeah?"

Parrish squinted at him. "You feel all right?"

"Sure. I feel fine."

"You look kind of peaked. Thought maybe you had a touch of indigestion or somethin'." The old man looked carefully around, then leaned close and whispered, "I got somethin' in the wagon that'll fix you up fine. That is, if you need somethin' to perk you up."

"Come to think of it," Dan said, "I have been sort of off my feed lately."

Parrish led him to the back of the wagon and fumbled around in the darkness for a moment. "Give me a hand with this here keg," he whispered hoarsely. "It's kind of heavy."

There were four small wooden kegs in the back of the wagon. Dan lifted one up until the spigot driven into it projected over the wagon's tailgate. Parrish produced a pair of large tin cups from somewhere and handed one to Dan, chuckling.

"Best damned corn whiskey in the state of Missoury, even if I did make it myself. Anne raised hell when I insisted on bringin' it along, but I told her damned if I was goin' to drink river water all the way to Oregon." He put his cup under the spigot and twisted it. "People get sick from drinkin' river water."

Dan allowed that that was so.

Parrish waved Dan to the spigot. "Help yoreself an' don't be stingy."

Dan did and he wasn't. As he stood with the cup in his

hand, the rising fumes of alcohol made his eyes water. "Smells like good whiskey," he said politely.

"It takes the hair off where you got it an' puts it on where you ain't," Parrish said with modest pride. He studied Dan in the darkness. "Say, what do you think of Max Hitchcock?"

"Why, I reckon he's all right," Dan said cautiously. "Maybe a little bullheaded."

Parrish snorted. "He's half ox an' t'other half mule!"

"He and Anne figure on marryin' each other?"

"Well, *she* figgers on it an' *he* figgers on it. But I ain't so sure." The old man's voice grew wistful. "Anne's all I got left in the world an' 'fore I kick off I want to make sure she's got a man that can take care of her." He was silent a moment, then said abruptly, "You married?"

"Not hardly."

"Ever think about gettin' married?"

"Sometimes. But I always sobered up the next mornin'."

"You want to know somethin'? I think you're a purty bright young feller who'd know a bargain when he seen one. Not countin' the fact that Anne is as purty as a picture and as sweet as a hive full of honey, she's purty well fixed financially."

"That so?" Dan said in some embarrassment.

"When I turn up my toes—an' that may be most any day now—she gits every penny I own. An' that ain't hay." He looked cautiously around, then beckoned Dan closer. "Ain't many people know it, but I'm carryin' eight thousand dollars in cold cash."

Not many people, thought Dan, but the whole damned wagon train.

"Ain't that kind of risky?"

"Heh!" Parrish chuckled. "I ain't as foolish as I look. I got that money hid where nobody'd find it. You want to know where it's hid?"

"Well—"

"Well, I damn sure ain't goin' to tell you." Parrish lifted his cup. "Better drink up quick. These cups ain't worth a hoot in hell. The whiskey eats the bottoms out if you let it set too long."

The old man raised his cup and drained it before he lowered it from his lips. Dan followed suit. Parrish gave a sigh of satisfaction as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Shore hits the spot, don't it?"

Dan was starting to say it sure did when unaccountably his voice failed him. His ears burned like a pair of torches.

When he had finally got his voice back, he muttered, "Not bad."

"Kind of tastes of tar a mite," Parrish apologized.

"Is that what it was?"

"—but that don't hurt it none. First batch I put up ate right through the seams in the keg, so I had to line 'em with tar. Tastes kind of funny at first but you git used to it. The tar cuts the acid."

"Does it?" Dan gulped. He was beginning to feel dizzy. In his time, he had downed some pretty potent concoctions but never in his born days had he swallowed anything like this.

"I think," he mumbled, "that I'll turn in. Thanks for the snort."

"Any time," Grandpa Parrish said with a generous wave of his hand. "Any time at all."

Dan never knew how he found his way to his blankets, but somehow he did. Gratefully he lay down, starring up for a moment at a handful of stars that had suddenly gone crazy and were chasing one another around in circles—then the whole sky went black.

It was several days before Dan got a chance to talk to Tex and Wolf Ear. The wagon train had left the rough country along the river behind by then, climbing out of the narrow valley where it swung off to the southwest to the flat, sage-covered plain above and following the dusty trail across dry country where the sun beat down without mercy and heat waves shimmered on the distant horizon. Dan was scouting several miles ahead of the train one day when he met Tex and Wolf Ear returning from a hunt with a pair of antelope they had shot. They paused in a draw where they would be unobserved.

"How you comin' with Miller?" Dan asked.

Tex built a cigarette. "Slow. He's a mighty cautious gent. But I found out one thing. This ain't his first trip up the trail."

"How do you know?"

"Overheard him talkin' to one of his men. He was pointin' out Chimney Mountain when we passed it a couple of days ago an' sayin' that it marked the eastern boundary

of Blackfoot country. No tenderfoot would know that."

Dan nodded thoughtfully. "I kind of figgered he was lyin' about not knowin' the trail."

"Why would he want to do that?"Tex demanded, eying Dan curiously. "It don't make sense that he'd tie up with emigrants and let you guide 'em if he know the country."

"Supposin'," Dan said, "that his wagons are carryin' what we think they're carryin' an' he run into an army patrol. By himself, he might draw suspicion. But if it looked like he was part of an emigrant train, it ain't likely the soldiers would suspect anything, is it?"

"That's reasonable, I reckon."

"I'd sure like a peek into them wagons."

"It's risky as hell, but if you say so I'll chance it."

Dan shook his head. "I'll manage that end of it. The important thing for you to do is to get on the inside track with him an' find out when he plans to jump Hitchcock's bunch."

"When we goin' to stage this little battle of ours?"

"Soon," Dan said.

Tex started to rein away, then turned back, a speculative gleam in his eye. "I was talkin' to Anne last night."

Dan gave him a suspicious look. "Yeah?"

"You know what she told me? She told me she figures on marryin' Max Hitchcock when they get to Oregon."

"I reckon that's her affair."

"Kind of a shame, ain't it?"

"That's all accordin' to whose viewpoint you look at it from."

Tex took a final drag at his cigarette and tossed it away. "You ever think about gettin' married, Dan?"

"Who'd marry me?" Dan said stiffly.

"Reckon you got somethin' there. You are a kind of ugly little runt. Now if you was handsome, like me—"

Dan watched the lean Texan and the Cheyenne ride away, a scowl wrinkling his face. Why, that puffed-up, conceited bag of wind! What'd he mean—if you was handsome . . .

The camp had a quiet, peaceful air about it that evening as the members of the wagon train lolled around in the growing dusk waiting for the call to supper. Hitchcock, Grandpa Parrish and Jim Miller were squatting near a wagon listening to one of Tex Randall's long-winded stories

when Dan came strolling up. Wolf Ear lay under the wagon engaging in his favorite pastime—sleep.

"We gave 'em hell, all right," Tex was saying. " 'Course I was only a kid then but my pa has told me many a time how them Mexicans come marching up at San Jacinto as cocky as jaybirds in a cornfield. They didn't know what kind of fighters us Texans were."

Dan hunkered down and started drawing designs on the ground with a stick. "I come from Kansas myself."

Tex looked up in irritation. "What's that got to do with it?"

"With what?"

"With the way Texans fight."

"Nohin' much," Dan said. " 'Cept I always figgered I was lucky to be born in Kansas an' have Indian Territory between me an' Texas."

Tex's eyes narrowed. "It's every man to his own taste, but if you're insinuatin' that Texas—"

"Texas," Dan said absently, "ought to be given back to the Mexicans."

Tex rose slowly to his feet, his gray eyes going smoky. "Suh, it sounded to me like you said Texas ought to be given back to the Mexicans. If you did make such a remark, I'll give you exactly five seconds to apologize."

Dan stood up. "I did make the remark. But I reckon I had ought to apologize. Giving Texas back to the Mexicans would be a dirty trick—on Mexico."

Tex gave a roar of rage. In a blur of speed his right hand dropped to his hip and his gun whipped up. Dan heard a terrific explosion, then his hat went spinning away. He blanched.

"Tex—!"

"You double-dyed, insultin' son!" Tex exclaimed, launching himself toward him. "Dogged if I don't tear off your ears and stuff 'em down your throat!"

Dan took a couple of steps backward, wishing fleetingly that he had chosen some less explosive way of starting what he had intended to be a nice friendly fight. Then Tex was on him and was lifting the heavy pistol and aiming a blow with which, from the look in his eye, he intended to split Dan's skull from the waist up.

3 "BLACKFOOT COUNTRY"

Dan seized the gun-arm just as it was about to descend. Throwing all his weight against it, he twisted hard. Tex gave a grunt of pain and dropped the gun. A vicious short left caught Dan on the ear. He reeled back. Tex charged in like a loco steer. Dan clipped him a good one on the chin, missed a short left, then Tex closed with him. Both men lost their balance and tumbled to the ground in a tangle of arms and legs.

"Yippee!" Grandpa Parrish chortled. "Give it to him, Dan. Ram yore fist down his throat an' turn him wrongside out!"

"Knee him, Tex!" Miller shouted, his reserve vanishing. "Rub his face in the dirt!"

From the way elbows and knees were flying at him, Dan got the confused impression that Tex had suddenly sprouted six of each. He managed to drive him off for a moment with a stiff right to the face, then Tex was at him again. As they grappled, Dan whispered in his ear.

"Take it easy, you damn fool! This is the frame-up!"

Tex's eyes were glazed. "What frame-up?" he grunted.

Dan struggled to his feet. Tex lumbered up, wiped a trickle of blood off his cheek and started for him. Suddenly a bulky figure appeared out of nowhere and Dan felt a huge hand seize him by the neck. Rolling his eyes to one side, he saw Wolf Ear holding Tex in one hand and himself in the other.

"You crazy?" the Cheyenne demanded.

"Let me go!" Tex raged. "I'll murder that shriveled-up little runt!"

"Let us fight it out!" Dan choked. "I'll break every bone in his body!"

Wolf Ear stared first at one man, then at the other, his black eyes puzzled. At last he gave a grunt of disgust, and

muttered, "No fight any more," and brought their heads together with a solid smack.

When Dan regained consciousness, it was dark and he was lying on his back with his head in Anne Parrish's lap. Dimly he heard her say, "Bring some more water, Max. He's coming around."

"Water, hell!" Grandpa Parrish snorted. "That'll make him sick. Here, give him a snort of this."

Dan felt his head being lifted and a tin cup placed to his lips. The potent fumes of corn whiskey choked him. Feebly he tried to wave the cup away but suddenly his mouth was full of liquid fire. He gulped twice.

"Feel better?" Anne asked with concern.

"I—I—" he mumbled, then passed out cold again.

He didn't feel so good when he woke up the next morning but breakfast and a couple of cups of scalding coffee put enough life in him so that he reckoned he could make it through the day. As he was saddling his horse, Max Hitchcock came up to him, anger in his face.

"That was a hell of a trick you pulled last night," the Missourian grumbled, "startin' a fight with Tex."

Dan blinked. "I didn't start no fight. I just made an innocent remark and he pulled a gun on me."

Hitchcock scowled, and Dan saw there was worry in his eyes. "He did grab that gun awful fast, didn't he? I wonder—"

"You wonder what?" Dan prompted.

"Nothing," Hitchcock said shortly. "C'mon, we're going over and talk to Tex."

Dan gave the Missourian a shrewd sidelong glance as they walked over to where Tex, Wolf Ear and Miller were saddling their horses. Hitchcock had the look of a man with a good deal on his mind, and for the first time Dan sensed that under his bullheadedness the wagon captain had a streak of hard strength. Miller and Tex turned and regarded Dan with cold, hostile eyes.

"I want it understood that there's to be no more fighting," Hitchcock said sternly.

Tex gave Dan a narrow look, then dropped his gaze to the ground. "I ain't takin' the kind of talk he gave me last night from nobody."

"And I'm sidin' in with Tex," Miller said coldly.

So, Dan thought, Miller as well as Hitchcock had been impressed with the speed with which Tex had pulled his gun. A nice touch, that. But he hadn't exactly appreciated the way Tex's bullet had damned near parted his hair.

"There'll be no more of that kind of talk," Hitchcock said bluntly. He looked at Dan. "You hear me?"

"I hear you," Dan grunted.

"And you, Tex?"

"All right. But after we git to Oregon—"

"That's your affair. Yours and Dan's." He turned on his heel. "Let's get moving."

All that day the wagon train moved slowly across the flat, sage-covered plain. To the north, a jagged blue line of peaks broke the horizon, and every now and then Dan's eyes turned toward them with a frowning, worried look. This was Blackfoot country, and for the next week the wagon train would be in imminent danger from attack by roving war parties of the fierce tribe. If Miller and his twenty men could be depended upon, the train might be able to muster enough fighting strength to take care of itself. Dan wondered how far Miller could be trusted, and came to the grim conclusion—about as far as a man could throw an ox by the tail.

Several times during the day he attempted to get Tex off alone for a talk but no safe opportunity presented itself. But that evening, after camp had been made in a grove of cottonwoods that flanked a shallow creek, he got a brief word with him as they were staking their horses out for the night.

"It's about to break," Tex muttered in a low voice.

Dan looped his horse's tie rope about the picket pin. "Did I have it figgered right?"

"Pretty close."

"Meet me at the bend of the creek above camp when the moon comes up."

Because of the danger that sharp Blackfeet eyes might spot them, supper fires were kept small and were extinguished before night fell. The emigrants huddled together in a single group while on the other side of camp Miller and his men kept to themselves, talking quietly in the darkness. Dan got up. "Think I'll take a look at my horse 'fore I turn in."

It lacked an hour until moonrise. An unexplainable feeling of apprehension filled him as he made his way across

the dark camp toward the circled wagons. Had Tex meant that he had found out what Miller was carrying in the freight wagons and what he intended doing with his cargo? Or was Miller about to murder the Missourians and make off with the old man's money?

He was passing between two wagons when he became aware of a stealthy noise nearby. He froze. Dimly he made out the figure of a man dropping to the ground from the tailgate of one of the wagons, then it was gone into the darkness. Dan frowned. The wagon was Parrish's, but the figure had been neither that of Anne nor of the old man.

Quietly he moved around to the rear of the wagon and climbed inside. The darkness was complete but he could tell by feel that the wagon's contents had been strewn every which way—undoubtedly by the man who had disappeared at his approach. Why? The answer was obvious enough. The man had been searching for money. Parrish's money.

Dan vaulted lightly to the ground and stood unmoving for a time, lost in thought. Again the feeling came to him that something was about to break. Miller would like to get the money the easy way, if possible, but it was not likely his search had discovered it. Parrish, despite his talkativeness, had a certain shrewdness that would have made him hide the money where no casual search would uncover it.

Dan frowned. He would like to do a bit of searching himself—in Miller's wagons. But that might prove a difficult job to accomplish. The wagons were guarded. Of course he might slip up in the darkness and put one of the guards to sleep with the barrel of his pistol, but Miller would immediately know then that his game was discovered and would go into action before Dan could devise any scheme to defeat him.

The potent fumes of corn whiskey struck Dan's nostrils and he gave an involuntary shudder. Doggone, even the smell of Grandpa Parrish's panther poison was almost enough to knock a man out! He sniffed thoughtfully for a moment, then suddenly he climbed back into the wagon and started fumbling around among the scattered belongings. Ought to be a canteen here someplace. . . .

A few minutes later he was sauntering across the camp toward Miller's wagons. Walking boldly between two of them, he stopped in the deep shadows and uncorked the

canteen, ignoring the bulky figure of the guard who immediately approached him.

"Hey," the man muttered, "what do you think you're doin'?"

"Nothin'," Dan answered innocently.

"What's that you got in your hand?"

"A canteen."

"What's in it?"

Dan raised the canteen to his lips and held it there, making steady gurgling sounds but being careful that none of the potent liquid passed his lips. Lowering it, he whispered to the guard, "Look, a man's got a right to take a drink when he wants one, ain't he?"

"Ain't nobody supposed to be foolin' around these wagons. Miller's orders."

"I ain't goin' to eat 'em. All I want is a place where I can take my drink in peace."

"What's the matter with your own side of camp?"

"Hitchcock hates whiskey. Says if he ever seen me takin' a drink he'd fire me. Now I ask you, ain't a man got a right to take a drink when he wants one? Do you let Miller tell you when you can an' can't drink?"

" 'Course not."

"Well—?"

"Well—" The guard looked hastily around, then moved closer. "Smells potent. Where'd you get it?"

"Bought it off a fella from Missoury. It's guaranteed to knock your head off."

"That so?" the guard said eagerly.

"I'd give you a taste, only—"

"Yeah?"

"Only I wouldn't want to be responsible for what it did to you. It's got a hell of a kick."

The guard growled a curse, reached out suddenly and jerked the canteen out of Dan's hand. Dan watched him put it to his lips and hold it there for long seconds. "There!" the man said at last. "Reckon that'll show you—"

His voice faded away into a whisper. "What'd you say?" Dan asked.

The guard seemed to have lost his voice. Dan waited, counting slowly under his breath. The way he calculated, it ought to take effect by the time he counted to sixty. Seventy-five at the most.

". . . forty-eight, forty-nine, fifty . . ."

At fifty-one, the guard's knees buckled. Dan caught him so that his head wouldn't make a racket striking the wagon wheel as he fell, gently lowered him to the ground, then, shaking his head in admiration for Grandpa Parrish's iron constitution, turned and climbed into the wagon.

When the moon rose, flooding the plain with its orange, uncertain light, Dan was waiting for Tex at the bend of the creek, impatient and on edge now that he knew what the freight wagons contained. A few minutes later Tex appeared, a vague shadow in the faint light with the larger shadow of Wolf Ear padding soundlessly behind him.

"That you, Dan?" Tex called softly.

Dan's head still ached from the combined effects of Parrish's corn whiskey and its forcible collision with Tex's skull the night before. "What's left of me," he muttered.

Tex chuckled. "That was a good scrap we had last night."

"Too good to suit me. What was the idea pullin' a gun on me? If I hadn't of ducked, you'd a plugged me right between the eyes."

"Shucks, do you think I'd a missed if I'd really been shootin' at you?"

Wolf Ear interrupted with an unintelligible grunt. "He's apologizin' for battin' our heads together," Tex explained. "He says he didn't know it was a friendly fight."

"When brains was passed out," Dan snapped, "Wolf Ear was off somewhere under a tree takin' a nap." He said impatiently, "What'd you find out?"

Tex's voice grew sober. "Miller's goin' to pull his wagons out of the train tomorrow. He's headin' north into Blackfoot country."

"He'll get his scalp lifted."

"That's what I told him but he just laughed and said to let him worry about that. He says he's made arrangements to meet Chief Crazy Cow and some of his bucks an' trade with 'em."

"Did he tell you what he had to trade?"

Tex shook his head. "No. All he said was that he wasn't afraid of Crazy Cow because he'd had dealings with him before. Seems as if he comes up the trail every year and trade a few wagonloads of trinkets to the Blackfeet for beaver pelts. Does quite a thrivin' business, to hear him tell it."

"His trinkets," Dan said grimly, "are rifles. I climbed in one of the wagons and saw 'em."

Tex muttered, "I didn't exactly figure they were beads."

"How far does he trust you?"

"I dunno. He's a pretty cagy gent. I think he's convinced that I ain't exactly a Sunday School superintendent but he ain't seen fit to unburden his soul to me. All he said was that he was cuttin' loose from the wagon train tomorrow an' headin' north to trade with the Blackfeet and he wants me to come along. He kind of hinted that he didn't trust his crew of lobos too much and he'd kind of like to have me keep an eye on 'em. For that matter, he don't seem to trust nobody. He said that he's goin' to hide the wagons, take part of his crew an' collect the beaver pelts from Chief Crazy Cow before he turns the stuff over to the Injuns."

Dan nodded thoughtfully. "You goin' to be with him or the wagons?"

"Reckon I'll stay with the wagons. He says he wants to take Wolf Ear along to palaver with the Injuns." Tex spat angrily on the ground. "How far are we supposed to string along with him? I can't say I cotton to the idea of helpin' him turn over ten wagonloads of rifles to them scalp-liftin' Blackfeet."

Dan frowned. Miller's pulling out of the wagon train made it appear that he had given up the idea of trying to get the money hidden in Parrish's wagon, but somehow Dan couldn't believe it.

"He didn't say nothin' about jumpin' Hitchcock's bunch?"

"Not a cheep."

"Funny. Damned funny."

"Look here," Tex snapped, "I think you been barkin' up the wrong tree all along. It appears to me that the really tough nut we got to crack is to figger out some way to keep the Injuns from gettin' their hands on those rifles. You don't seem to be worryin' about that at all. Now I think—"

"Leave the thinkin' up to me," Dan said. "I've had more practice at it."

Tex snorted. "All right, professor, oil up that so-called brain of vours an' tell me just how we're goin' to take care of this little problem."

"Why," Dan said with a grin, "that's easy. Now listen close—"

Tex listened. At first he listened attentively, then, as Dan

elaborated on the plan he had in mind, he gave a snort of sheer disgust.

"It won't work. It won't work a-tall!"

"Sure it will," Dan said patiently. "You just do like I told you."

Tex shook his head, grumbling. "I've knowed you a long time, Dan, an' I've seen some mighty peculiar notions come out of that knot on your spine you call a brain—"

"They worked, didn't they?"

"—but of all the cockeyed, loco, bird-brained schemes I ever heard of, this'n takes the cake!"

"It'll work," Dan said stubbornly.

"Look, why don't the three of us go back to camp an' just pitch into Miller an' his gang without no preliminaries? That'd make more sense than this scheme you cooked up."

Dan patiently shook his head. "Gettin' yourself killed never did make sense to me. You try it my way first. If that don't work, then you can go out an' git yourself killed any way you want."

"Somehow," Tex said in a weary voice, "you always seem to get your way. All right, I'll try it. But I still think you're plumb loco."

"Other people have thought that too," Dan said mildly. "So far, they've all been wrong, but who knows—maybe you'll be the first one to be right."

4 "YOU'RE ON YOUR OWN"

Except for the sentries, the camp was asleep when Dan, Tex and Wolf Ear returned to the wagon train. They waited in the shadows until the guard had passed, then they slipped silently into the enclosure. "Wait here," Dan whispered. "I'll have to wake up Parrish."

He had no difficulty finding the Parrish wagon. Anne, he knew, would be sleeping inside, but Parrish himself preferred to spread his blankets on the ground under the wagon bed. Moving cautiously in the darkness, he found the dim figure of the old man and touched him lightly on the shoulder. Parrish stirred, grumbling.

"What in tarnation—?"

"Quiet—it's me, Dan."

The old man sat up. "What's got into you? It ain't near daylight yet."

"I need your help."

"Are the Injuns comin'?"

"Worse than that. Now listen close—"

Briefly Dan told him of finding the guns in Miller's wagons and of Miller's plan to desert the wagon train the next day.

"The lowdown snake!" Parrish muttered. "I never did like him from the first minute I set eyes on him. Well, it'll be good riddance. I hope the Injuns lift his hair."

"That's just it," Dan said grimly. "We won't be rid of him. As soon as he turns the guns over to the Blackfeet, I figger he'll be comin' back to jump the wagon train."

"What for?"

"He wants that eight thousand dollars you're carryin'."

"Dad-blast my hide, he'll play hell gettin' it! I got it hid away so good he'll never find it."

"He'll find it all right," Dan cut in, "even if he has to tear your wagon into little pieces to do it. And with all of us dead there won't be a soul to stop him. He's got twenty

gun-totin' men workin' for him an' if they jump us we won't stand a ghost of a show."

For once, Parrish was shocked into silence. At last he said, "What are we goin' to do?"

"Do you trust me?"

"Reckon I'll have to."

"Good. First thing I want is five gallons of your corn whiskey."

Parrish looked at him suspiciously. "You goin' on a spree?"

"Never mind. Just give me the whiskey."

"What are you goin' to do with it?"

"Give it to Tex."

"*He* goin' on a spree?"

"Do I get the whiskey or not?" Dan said impatiently.

Parrish gave a baffled shrug. "Sure, you can have it. But it sounds to me like you've gone plumb loco."

"That," Dan said with a grin, "is just what Tex thinks."

Max Hitchcock scowled as he watched the ten freight wagons lumber their slow way northward across the plain in the early morning light. Coming up beside him, Dan said, "Kind of left us in the lurch, didn't he?"

"He had a perfect right to pull out if he wanted to," the Missourian snapped.

"Well, let him go. We'd better be hittin' the trail. We ain't got much time."

Hitchcock turned and looked at him, stubbornness coming to his eyes. "What's the hurry? We've got all the time in the world."

"No, we ain't," Dan said doggedly. "This country is swarmin' with Blackfeet. If they catch sight of us, we're done for. We won't be safe until we get to Fort Buford."

"That's two days from here."

"A day an' a night," corrected. "We're goin' to lay the whip into them oxen an' keep movin' till we get to the fort. We can make it by tomorrow mornin'."

"If there's so much danger from Indians," Hitchcock said suspiciously, "how come you let Miller head north without warning him?"

The Missourian, Dan mused, had a faculty for asking the damndest questions. "I figgered he was old enough to take care of himself."

"So am I," Hitchcock snapped. "We'll camp the same as usual tonight."

All that day the wagon train moved steadily westward. When evening came Hitchcock gave order for camp to be made in the doubtful shelter of a shallow wash flanked by a scattering of trees.

"We'd better move on after supper," Dan said grimly.

"The oxen are tired," Hitchcock answered in a tone of finality. "We stay here."

Dan shrugged and filled his pipe with an air of indifference, but worry ate at his mind. Grandpa Parrish muttered, "Stubborn cuss, ain't he? Did you tell him what was up?"

"What good would it do? He wouldn't believe me."

"Reckon you're right at that." Parrish spat thoughtfully on the ground. "When are Tex and Wolf Ear goin' to catch up with us?"

"As soon as they finish what I told 'em to do."

"I'm powerful curious what that was."

Dan puffed placidly on his pipe and did not answer.

"The thing that makes me curious," Parish persisted, "is what in hell Tex is goin' to do with five gallons of my whiskey. That's enough to keep him drunk for a month."

"He ain't goin' to drink it."

Parrish blinked. "What else kin you do with whiskey?"

Dan smiled. "Didn't you tell me that your whiskey ate through the seams of the first keg you put it in?"

"Shore did—till I lined it with tar."

"And it ate the bottoms out of the tin cups?"

"In next to no time at all. 'Course, that don't mean it ain't good drinkin' whiskey." He scowled at Dan. "I still don't see what that's got to do with keepin' them Injuns from gettin' their paws on them new rifles."

"You will," Dan said patiently. "You will."

Despite the worry riding him, Dan had no difficulty going to sleep that night for he had long since formed the habit of leaving his worries outside his blankets. But he slept lightly. And he was instantly awake when, just as the first gray light of dawn was breaking, he heard the sound of horses approaching the camp. Getting to his feet, he saw Jim Miller and half a dozen of his men riding up. Wolf Ear was with them. Quickly Dan buckled his Colt about his waist, crossed to the Parrish wagon and called softly to the old man. "Rise an' shine. We got company."

Parrish threw back his blankets with one hand, picked up his rifle with the other and gave the riders a swift glance. "I'm ready," he muttered.

Dan watched Miller and his men dismount and file into the camp enclosure. Their faces gave no sign of what was in their minds, but a quiet, prodding voice inside him warned him to be ready for anything.

Hitchcock stared puzzledly at Miller. "What happened? Where's your wagons?"

"The Injuns jumped us," Miller said grimly. "Took everything we had. We were lucky to get away with our scalps."

"Where are the rest of your men?"

"Dead, I reckon. We tried to make a run for it but they got most of us."

"How terrible!" Anne exclaimed, sympathy flooding her eyes.

The Missourians had gathered around Miller. None of them were armed except for the two men who had been on sentry duty, and that pair, Dan saw with some concern, was completely off guard, standing with their rifle butts resting on the ground. His eyes went to Wolf Ear. The Cheyenne stood directly behind Jim Miller, his huge body motionless, his face impassive. As Dan stared, Wolf Ear gently closed one eye.

Hitchcock turned to his fellow Missourians and said, "You womenfolks start breakfast. We'd better eat and hit the trail in a hurry."

It happened then. Dan saw Miller's head move slightly in a signal to his men. He saw the men start to lift their rifles. Then the action became too swift to follow.

Wolf Ear seized Miller and another man by their necks, lifted them off the ground and batted their heads together with a resounding smack. A lone, hurried rifle shot from the Miller crowd went screaming over Max Hitchcock's head, then Grandpa Parrish's gun roared and the man who had fired the shot went down with a bullet in his chest.

Dan's Colt whipped up. He thumbed the hammer four times, and the explosions followed one another so swiftly that they sounded like one. Two more men went down. A man turned on Wolf Ear, but before his rifle could be brought to bear, the Cheyenne's knife flashed up and then down, and the man crumpled without a sound.

Miller stumbled to his feet, took one surprised look at the

shambles about him, then broke and ran for his horse. Dan fired the remaining cartridge in his gun at the fleeing figure but the shot went high. He cursed.

"Leave him be!" Grandpa Parrish shouted. "He's mine—I'll teach the lowdown skunk to mess with me!"

The old man's rifle barked. Miller's hat went spinning away. He stumbled, and for a moment Dan thought he had been hit, then he regained his feet, vaulted into the saddle and put spurs to his horse. In a matter of seconds he was out of range, his horse scuttling like a frightened jackrabbit over the plain.

"Doggone the luck!" Parrish exclaimed. "I'd a got him iff'n he hadn't tripped!"

A stunned silence held the emigrants. Hitchcock stared at Dan, who was laconically reloading his Colt. "You knew this was going to happen?"

"Kind of figgered it would."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Didn't reckon you'd believe me. You seemed to doubt everything else I said."

"Then Miller was lying about being attacked by Blackfeet?"

" 'Course he was. The reason he pulled out of the wagon train was because he had a load of guns for the Injuns. An' my guess is that he's ridin' hell-for-leather back to Chief Crazy Cow now to get him an' his Blackfeet to finish the job he started."

"If that's the case," Hitchcock said thoughtfully, "we'd better not waste any time hitting the trail."

"That," Dan said grimly, "is the first intelligent remark I've heard you make."

All thought of breakfast was forgotten. Urged on by the wagon captain, the Missourians yoked up the oxen in record time and did not spare the whip as the five wagons left the camping place and lumbered westward. When the train had gotten under way, Dan rode up alongside Wolf Ear. He had expected that Tex would rejoin the emigrants long before now and his prolonged absence worried him.

"Where's Tex?"

Wolf Ear shrugged. "With wagons."

"Ain't Miller turned the guns over to the Injuns yet?"

The Cheyenne shook his head, then went on to explain what had happened the preceding day. Miller had taken the freight wagons deep into the foothills to the north,

finally going into camp in midafternoon in a well-hidden valley. He had left Tex and most of his men there, ordered them not to move until he returned, then, taking Wolf Ear and half a dozen of his most trusted gunmen, he had ridden eastward out of the valley, as if intending to make contact with Chief Crazy Cow.

Shortly after dark, however, he had doubled back on his trail and ridden hard in a southwesterly direction to catch up with the wagon train, promising Wolf Ear that if he helped massacre the emigrants he would be rewarded by being permitted to take all the scalps he wanted.

Dan nodded. "Reckon he figgered that'd make it look like Injuns did the job." He frowned, his uneasy thoughts turning to Tex. "I hope Tex has got sense enough to make tracks while there's still time."

"Blackfeet come soon," Wolf Ear said warningly.

"I know." He was silent a moment. "I want you to take the fastest horse you can find and ride like hell to Fort Buford. Tell the soldiers there's big trouble and bring them back here plenty fast. You got that?"

The Cheyenne's eyes glittered. "Wolf Ear no go. Stay and fight."

"You do what I tell you. And don't pick no daisies along the way."

Reluctantly the Indian obeyed, and in a few minutes was galloping westward. The morning passed slowly. Dan kept twisting around in the saddle, eyes squinted up as he studied the back trail, but as the hours passed, the gray horizon line remained empty. Then shortly after noon he saw a moving wisp of dust lifting into the pale sky. Reining up, he stared intently at it.

"Injuns?" Grandpa Parrish said.

"Maybe. But there's just one of 'em. An' he's ridin' like the devil himself was on his tail."

Slowly the cloud of dust materialized into the figure of a lone rider. Minute by minute it grew until Dan saw that it was a white man. He gave a grunt of relief. "It's Tex."

The lean Texan's clothes were powdered with dust and his jaded horse was glistening with sweat. Seeing Dan, Tex lifted his hand in greeting.

"Howdy, stranger. Mind if I trail along with you?"

"About time you showed up. Everything all right?"

Tex shrugged. "It is and it ain't." He took a curious glance at the wagons ahead. "From what I saw back the

trail a ways, you must have had quite a scrap with Miller. Any casualties?"

"Only on one side—an' that wasn't ours. Miller got away."

"Yeah, I seen him. He come ridin' into camp with a couple of hundred Blackfeet just after I pulled out. Wish I'd been close enough to see the look on his face when he found all his men passed out cold."

"The whiskey did the trick?"

"Worked just like you said it would—'cept on one fellow. He was a teetotaler." Tex sighed. "Too bad. He pulled a gun on me, an' now he's teetotally dead."

"How about the rifles?"

"Why, I—"

"Hey," Parrish interrupted, "lookee yonder!"

Dan whirled around. Far in the distance to the east a swarm of black figures was galloping toward them, the hoofs of many horses raising a broad cloud of dust. Reining his horse about, he galloped alongside the wagons. "Lay the whip into your oxen—we got to make a run for it!"

Hitchcock rode back and stared at the nearing Indians. His face was drained of color but it held a certain dogged stubbornness. "Wouldn't it be better if we stopped and made a stand?"

"Wouldn't last five minutes," Dan snapped. "We got to keep movin' an' hope we can hold 'em off till the soldiers get here."

Hitchcock gave him a long look, hesitated, then said with unaccustomed meekness. "Whatever you say."

Oxen were not built for speed, but urged on by shouts, curses and cracking whips the stolid beasts broke into a clumsy run. Every man that could be spared mounted the extra horses and dropped back to the rear of the wagons. The Indians gained with every minute until soon their savage yells could be heard as they closed in.

Dan calculated that there must be two or three hundred of them, at least. He had to search for a minute before he found Miller, then he saw him with a dozen of his men—who had evidently recovered somewhat from the effects of the whiskey—riding in the fore of the attacking savages. Unlimbering his rifle, he waited until the Blackfeet were only a couple of hundred yards away, then he snapped, "Let 'em have it!"

A pitifully inadequate volley crackled into the Indian

ranks. A pair of horses went down and a shouting brave suddenly toppled backward to the ground, but that only served to anger the savages. Dan saw them sweeping forward, their rifles raised.

He was staring straight at a tall, rawboned warrior who was lifting his gun to fire when an odd thing happened. With a roar, the gun disintegrated in the savage's face, and the next instant a riderless horse was galloping over the plain. At intervals all along the line the same thing happened. Blackfeet lifted their guns, squeezed the triggers—and were blasted into oblivion as the weapons exploded in their faces.

Tex stared in awe. "Doggone! It worked!"

" 'Course it worked," Dan muttered as he shot another warrior off his horse. "I told you it would, didn't I?"

The Indians were falling behind as they milled about in confusion. Cries of anger split the air. Dan got a glimpse of Miller and his men, their faces white with sudden fear, as the Blackfeet turned on them. Tomahawks and knives flashed in the sunlight. Then the white men vanished in a welter of bronze bodies.

"What in tarnation?" Parrish exclaimed. "Them Injuns are killin' Miller an' his whole passel of snakes! Now what'd they want to do that for?"

5 "FIRE-WATER FROLIC"

"Even an Injun don't like to be skinned in a trade," Dan said with a thin smile. "Reckon he tried to palm off some bad merchandise on 'em."

"Lookee—they're throwin' away their guns!"

"A gun ain't no good if it won't shoot."

Parrish scowled. He turned and looked at Tex. "What'd you do to them guns?"

"Nothin' much," Tex drawled modestly. "Just poured a mite of your corn whiskey down the barrels."

"Well, burn my hide an' call me a two-legged steer!"

"Dan said he figgered the stuff would eat out the breech mechanism. 'Course I told him he was crazy, but I reckon he wasn't near as loco as I thought."

While the Indians had been occupied with the bloody business of taking revenge on Miller and his men, the lumbering wagons had drawn some distance ahead. But the respite was brief. Now the savages were closing the gap again, unlimbering their bows and sending a steady stream of arrows into the emigrants. Dan heard a woman scream in pain. Doggedly the rear guard kept up a volley of rifle fire, but the Blackfeet kept circling closer and soon would overwhelm the small force of whites by sheer weight of numbers alone.

"We're done for!" Parrish shouted, reining over toward Dan.

"Not yet, we ain't," Dan answered. "Close up on the wagons. If we have to, we'll stop an' try to make a stand."

"Ain't no use, youngster, but I'll do whatever you say. I just want to ask you one last favor. If you pull through this an' I don't, I want you to promise me you'll take care of Anne."

"Sure," Dan said absently as he reloaded his rifle.

"The money is all hers. Listen close an' I'll tell you where it's hid."

"Later. Git back to the wagon!"

"It's hid—"

The old man broke off so sharply that Dan whirled and stared at him. He saw with a feeling of horror that an arrow had struck Parrish in the throat, going diagonally through the old man's neck and leaving a bleeding wound. Dan caught him as he fell forward on his horse's neck.

"Did they get him?" Tex shouted.

"He's bad hit," Dan answered. "Give me a hand, we'll put him in the wagon."

Between the two of them they managed to support him and lead his horse to the rear of the wagon. Gently they put him inside. Anne stared at them, white-faced. "Is he—dead?"

As if in answer, Parrish stirred. Dan, who had climbed into the wagon, stared down at him. The old man was alive enough. He kept opening and closing his mouth in an obvious effort to talk, but not a sound came out. Dan knelt and examined the wound.

"It ain't bleeding much. Guess the arrow didn't cut no vein."

"But, Dan, he can't talk!"

"Cut a vocal cord, I reckon. Seen that happen once before. He'll be able to talk as good as ever in a week or two." He frowned and added thoughtfully, "If we're lucky enough to get out of this."

The Indians were closing in. Dan had tied the reins of his horse to the rear of the wagon and the animal was trotting along behind. Leaving Parrish in Anne's care, he started to clamber over the tailgate. Suddenly he stopped and stared down at the four kegs of whiskey underfoot. He sniffed. Then he looked out at the shouting hordes of Blackfeet.

Injuns sure had a powerful thirst for whiskey. He wondered . . .

Suddenly he stooped and picked up one of the barrels. Anne cried, "Dan, what are you doing?"

"Tossin' out some coyote poison."

"Look, Grandpa is trying to say something!"

Parrish had raised up and was shaking an angry fist at Dan while his mouth worked wordlessly. Dan shot him a brief glance, then shook his head in regret. "I know it's a shame to waste yore good whiskey, but it's our only chance."

He heaved the barrel out of the wagon. He watched it strike the ground, bounce, roll and then come to a stop. A Blackfoot's horse shied away from it. The Indian, recognizing the familiar shape of the barrel, gave a whoop of pleasure and whirled his pony around.

Dan held his breath. Quickly the savage slid off the pony and attacked the barrel with a tomahawk. Then he fell to his knees and placed his mouth to the hole he had made in the barrel's end. He lay there for only a moment, then suddenly he leaped to his feet, cavorted for a few steps in a crazy circle and then collapsed on the ground.

Dan grinned. "Best damned corn in Missoury!"

It did not take long for a crowd of savages to gather around the barrel, and soon the entire pursuing war party was left behind. In the distance Dan could see them fighting over the whiskey. Every now and then a brave who had been successful in getting a few swallows of the potent liquid would stagger away, give a few whoops and then fall flat on his face.

The wagons lurched clumsily on. Dan kept his eyes on the savages behind, and after a while he muttered, "Here they come again."

He waited until they had almost caught up with the wagons before he picked up the second barrel. From the feel of it, it was a full one. "Here's mud in yore eye, you red devils!" he said as he tossed the keg out of the wagon.

Again the oncoming Indians forgot their lust for battle in their thirst for more exciting pleasures. Anne exclaimed, "Who would have thought they would be so crazy for whiskey? It's disgusting, isn't it?"

"Looks plumb purty to me," Dan said.

"Do you think we'll be able to hold them off till the soldiers come?"

"We will if we don't run out of barrels."

The third and finally the fourth barrel had been tossed out of the wagon and for the time being the ever dwindling force of Blackfeet had been left behind, when Dan was thrown off his feet by a terrific jolt. The wagon crashed to a stop. Dazed, he got out and stared grimly at the wagon's rear axle.

"What's wrong?" Anne called.

"Busted an axle. Help your grandpa over here an' I'll lift him down. Maybe one of the other wagons has got room for you."

The remaining four wagons had stopped. Tex and Hitchcock quickly carried the old man to another wagon and placed him inside, Anne climbing in with him. Dan swung atop his horse. As the wagons lumbered into motion again, he stared back across the plain.

"Well, here they come again. An' this time I reckon I'm plumb out of hole cards."

The Indians gained rapidly, pausing only long enough to make sure the broken-down wagon contained no whiskey. Finding that it did not, they vented their rage by setting it afire and then rode forward with savage yells.

"Right now," Dan said as Tex rode up beside him, "would sure be a fine time for them soldiers to show up."

"Your luck can't hold forever," Tex answered with a shake of his head.

Dan sighed, "No, I reckon it can't. Still—" Suddenly he broke off, cocked his head to one side and listened intently. "Say, did I just hear a bugle . . . ?"

Escorted by a battalion of cavalry, they reached Fort Buford shortly after dark, and there the army surgeon treated the wounded and put them to bed. When he looked at Grandpa Parrish, he smiled and nodded encouragingly.

"Painful but not serious. He'll be as good as new in a couple of weeks."

"Will he be able to talk again?" Anne asked anxiously.

"Of course."

The old man glared furiously at the surgeon, and from the look in his eye Dan reckoned that he'd just as soon be dead as unable to talk for two weeks. Hitchcock stared thoughtfully at Parrish, then turned to Anne.

"You lost everything in that wagon, didn't you?"

"Everything except—" Her eyes probed his for a moment. "—except Grandpa and you."

"That's all that matters?"

"Yes, Max."

"You don't mind losing the money?"

"Not in the least."

A pleased smile spread over the Missourian's face. He seized Anne's hands. "I'm glad to hear you say that. I've wanted to marry you ever since we left Missouri, but I knew that your grandfather didn't like me and I was afraid the old goat would cut you off without a cent if you married against his wishes." Ignoring the anger in the face of the

inarticulate figure on the cot, he went on hastily. "Now that the money is gone, there's no reason why you can't marry me at once, is there?"

"Well—" she looked at him uncertainly, then smiled. "All right, Max. Whenever you say."

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes, Max, tomorrow."

Dan dropped his eyes to the floor, blushing self-consciously, as they kissed. Doggone, women were funny. Just to look at him, you wouldn't think any girl would see much in a big, contrary critter like Hitchcock, but here was this sweet little lady gone clean loco about him. It just went to prove that there was no accounting for tastes.

Parrish, from the look on his face, was about to have an apoplectic fit. "Acts like he wanted to tell us something," Dan observed mildly.

"Too bad we can't understand him," Hitchcock said indifferently, and kissed Anne again.

"Maybe if we brought him a pencil and some paper he could write it down," Tex suggested.

Anne shook her head. "He never learned to read and write."

Dan looked thoughtfully at the old man. "I reckon maybe he's upset over losin' the money."

"It doesn't matter," Anne said.

"Where was it hid?"

"He never told me. In the wagon, I suppose."

"Was it in greenbacks?"

"I imagine so."

Dan shook his head sadly. "Too bad. It's gone up in smoke now."

Parrish suddenly raised himself to a sitting position and started gesticulating wildly. The surgeon said in a firm voice, "You'll all have to leave the room. This excitement is bad for him."

Outside, Dan, Tex and Wolf Ear walked slowly across the fort enclosure, Dan staring down at the ground as he meditated on an intriguing possibility. Tex muttered, "The old man sure throwed a fit over Anne and Hitchcock decidin' to get married, didn't he?"

"I wonder," Dan murmured, "if that was what his fit was about?"

"What else?"

"Tex, did you ever have a grandpa?"

" 'Course I did, but what the hell has that got to do with it?"

"Did he put much trust in paper money?"

"Hell, no! He wouldn't take nothin' but silver or—" Tex broke off suddenly and stared at Dan. "What are you thinkin'?"

"Gold and silver coins don't burn. How would you and Wolf Ear like to take a little ride?"

The moon was standing straight overhead, bathing the deserted plain in a clear, translucent light, when they reached the spot where the charred remains of the wagon lay. Tex said, "It's goin' to be a hell of a job pokin' through those ashes."

"Eight thousand dollars is worth doin' a bit of pokin'," Dan answered.

They were starting to dismount when Dan suddenly gave a soft curse and swung back into the saddle. "Hey!" Tex demanded, "where you goin'?"

"Forget the wagon. C'mon, I'll bet my bottom dollar I know where that money is."

"Where else *could* it be but in the wagon?"

Dan didn't bother to answer. Riding a short distance back along the trail, he came across the last of the whiskey barrels that he had thrown out of the wagon. He picked it up and shook it. It was empty. He dropped it to the ground and started hacking at it with the hand axe he had had the foresight to bring along. After a moment the homemade iron hoops gave way and the barrel fell apart. He dropped to his knees.

"Have you gone plumb crazy?" Tex said.

Dan grinned, and in answer handed one of the barrel staves to the Texan. The damp, sticky tar was studded with small round objects that glistened dully in the moonlight. "Take a look at that."

"Gosh-all-mighty!" Tex breathed. "Twenty-dollar gold pieces!"

"Parrish ain't nobody's fool. I figured he must have that money hid in a purty good place or he wouldn't have been so free in talkin' about it. We could have looked in the ashes of the wagon till Doomsday an' never found it."

"How'd you ever guess it was in the barrels?"

"He didn't raise no rumpus when the wagon busted down an' we had to leave it. But he threw a fit when I tossed the

whiskey kegs out to the Injuns. Also, he was mighty careful to explain to me why the whiskey tasted of tar. Said he had to line the kegs with tar so's the whiskey wouldn't eat through the wood. Any fool knows that whiskey don't eat through wood—even though it might eat metal."

"How come it didn't dissolve the gold?"

"There's only a few acids will dissolve gold, an' the acid in corn whiskey ain't one of 'em." Dan chuckled softly. "Now all we got to do is find them other three barrels, pick out the gold pieces an' the eight thousand dollars is ours."

Tex was silent a moment, then he said cautiously, "Did you say ours?"

"Why not?"

"That ain't exactly honest, is it? It belongs to the old man."

Dan scowled thoughtfully. In a way, Tex was right. Still, in another way . . .

He said slowly, "He figgered on givin' it to Anne when he kicked off. But you heard what she said, didn't you?"

"Yeah. She said she didn't want it."

"Max Hitchcock is as proud as sin. It'd make him feel kind of bad if people said he married Anne just 'cause she had money, wouldn't it?"

"I hadn't looked at it that way, Dan, but I reckon you're right. Too much money is kind of bad for young folks just startin' out in life. Might make 'em unhappy. An' I sure would hate to make Anne and Max unhappy."

The thing Dan liked about Tex Randall was his faculty for always thinking of the other fellow. "Tell you what. We'll find the rest of the barrels, then we'll sit an' think a spell on whether we'd ought to take the money back to Anne and the old man or just keep ridin'."

"That," Tex said, "sounds like a mighty sensible scheme."

So that was what they did. Kept riding.

THE TROUBLE WITH TRADERS

It was coming on dusk when Matt Birch smelled the savory odor of broiling antelope steak and saw the campfire flickering through the willows along the creek. Though the old mountain man was a mite tired and powerful hungry, he didn't go barging down the slope at once. He stopped his horse and the pack animal trailing it, swung his musket around to where he could use it in a hurry if the need arose, then sat quiet for a spell. He made use of his eyes, his nose and the keenly developed instincts that had kept his hair attached to his skull during several seasons of trapping in country crawling with Injun bucks who would have admired to separate the two.

"Looks all right to this ol' coon," he muttered to his horse. "White man. Trapper, likely, on his lonesome. Reckon I better sound off and let him know he's got company."

He moved down toward the creek halloing loudly. No one was visible near the fire. Then something moved in the thicket and a voice boomed.

"You can quit brayin', you jackass. I heerd you comin' forty miles away."

A buckskin-clad man moved out into the light, a huge man with a musket cradled in his arms. His face was dark and beardless, his jet hair was plaited into twin braids that trailed down his back like an Injun's, and his black eyes were as ill-humored as those of a hungry grizzly waking from its winter's nap.

"Well, if it ain't Beartracks Smith," Matt said. "Ain't seen you for quite a spell. Two, three years, anyhow."

"Four," Beartracks grunted.

"Got any objections to me makin' camp with you?"

"None to speak of."

Matt unsaddled his horses, picketed them out to graze, then came back to the fire. Beartracks sliced a liberal hunk of meat off the antelope quarter and fell to eating. Without

waiting for an invitation, Matt did the same. When the meat was gone, Beartracks sat back with a belch of satisfaction, took out his tobacco and pipe and smoked, staring stolidly into the fire.

Matt dug out his own pipe, dusty and dry from disuse, and said wistfully, "Can I borry some of your tobaccy, Beartracks? I been plumb out for a month."

Beartracks grudgingly handed him the pouch. "Where you headed?"

"Rendezvous. Figure on tradin' off my pelts."

"You're too late. The company broke camp an' lit out for St. Looie two weeks ago."

Matt picked a live coal out of the fire with horny fingers and dropped it into the bowl of his pipe. Seemed like his run of bad luck hadn't ended yet.

"Well," he muttered, "if that don't beat all."

"Got many beaver plew?" Beartracks asked, waxing conversational under the mellowing influence of food and tobacco.

"Hundred an' fifty pelts. I sure was hopin' to git to rendezvous afore the company pulled up stakes. I'm plumb out of everythin'. No whiskey. No tobaccy. No powder n'r lead. No nothin'."

"Whar you been all summer?"

Well, that was a long story. Too long to tell.

"Had a leetle Injun trouble," Matt said, absently fingering the three new Blackfeet scalps on his belt. "Damn my hide, it sure looks like this ol' coon'll have to ride to the settlements. Can't hardly git back to the mountains afore snow flies. Sure hate to miss so much trappin'."

Beartracks knocked the ashes out of his pipe into the palm of his hand. "Saw a trader yesterday. Had a wagonload of stuff. Said he was lookin' for pelts."

"Where?"

"Green River crossin'."

"Alone?"

"Yeah. Name of Weatherford."

"Damned fool."

"Greenhorn from St. Looie. Figured on tradin' at rendezvous, but the company run him off."

"Well," Matt said, right pleased, "if that ain't luck. A fool greenhorn with a wagonload of stuff to trade an' nobody to trade with but me. Guess I'll look him up."

"Better watch out for him. Got a mean eye."

"Listen," Matt said, "any time a greenhorn trader skins this ol' codger, there'll be buffalo chips the size of houses floatin' down the Snake."

Matt sighted the wagon a little after noon two days later. It was halted by a water hole on the high plain and the man called Weatherford was fussing over a chip fire, trying to make it catch and not having much luck with it. As Matt rode up, he heard the trader cussing fit to kill.

One look at the outfit told Matt that Weatherford was a greenhorn, all right. First place, nobody but a greenhorn would tote such tempting Injun-bait as was in the wagon through this country alone. Second place, the pair of fat bay horses hitched to the wagon and the equally fat spare pair of blacks tied behind were practically engraved invitations for some horse-hungry Injun to help himself. Any fool knew that oxen or mules were the only safe beasts of burden in this neck of the woods—oxen being too slow and mules too contrary for an Injun's liking.

Weatherford was so occupied cussing the fire that he didn't even hear his visitor ride up until Matt said, "Howdy." The trader jumped then, kicking over a kettle of water and putting out the fire for good.

He was a squat, pudgy little man dressed in a black store suit, a beaver hat and flat-heeled shoes. He had small, beady eyes, narrow face, and a pink skin that the sun had baked until it looked like the flesh of a bruised salmon. Backing toward the wagon where a musket lay on the seat, he eyed Matt suspiciously.

"Howdy," Matt repeated.

"Who are you?" Weatherford demanded.

"Name happens to be Matt Birch."

"I thought you were an Indian."

That unintended compliment pleased Matt no end. Like all the lone trappers in the West, he had long ago learned that the only way to live to a ripe old age in Injun country was to live like an Injun, dress like an Injun, and think like an Injun. Maybe, he reflected with some pride, he was even beginning to look like an Injun.

"Well," he said, "I was born white. Maybe the color has run a leetle since."

The trader had a mean eye, all right. He stared at Matt for a moment, then his gaze moved to the pack animal. "What you got in those packs?"

"Nothin' much," Matt said with studied indifference.

"Just some beaver plew." He eyed the wagon. "What you got in the wagon?"

"Oh," Weatherford said cautiously, "this and that. Are you interested in trading your pelts?"

"Could be."

Matt dismounted, watered his animals and then built up the fire for the trader, sharing a piece of fresh-killed antelope and some tea with the man. Afterward they parried carefully for a while, feeling each other out. After all the trouble he'd gone to to save his pelts, Matt didn't intend to be traded out of them without getting what they were worth. The way he figured, the company would have given him six, seven dollars apiece for them in trade at mountain prices. Seeing as how Weatherford hadn't had any luck getting skins so far, Matt figured he ought to be good for ten dollars.

At Weatherford's request, Matt opened his packs and let the trader look at the pelts. Weatherford fingered them greedily, his eyes calculating.

Matt said, "How much?"

"Two dollars," Weatherford grunted.

"Hell an' damnation!" Matt said. "They're worth ten!"

"Two dollars. In trade. No gold."

"What kind of a fool do you take me for?" Matt said, spitting angrily. "The company would have given me seven."

"The company has gone back to St. Louis."

"Or I could ride down to Bent's Fort on the Arkansas an' git five."

"Then why don't you?"

Matt stuffed some of the tobacco he'd talked Beartracks Smith out of into the bowl of his pipe. Traders, he brooded, were born ornery. He'd never yet seen one he could talk out of anything.

"Why," he mumbled, "it just happens I ain't goin' thataway."

Weatherford smiled. "I know you're not. It's getting late in the year. I can see by what your horses are carrying that you're out of supplies. If you took time to ride down to Bent's Fort, you'd be snowbound before you could get back to the mountains. Right?"

"Six dollars," Matt grunted.

"Two."

"Five," Matt said desperately. "Not a red cent less."

"Two."

"Gol' dang it, you'd steal the pennies off a dead man's eyes, wouldn't you? Well, you got me 'twixt a rock an' a hard place. I'll take four."

Weatherford was silent for a moment fingering a silky pelt. At last he said, "Three dollars. You'll take that and like it."

Matt sighed and said he guessed he'd have to take it, but he sure didn't have to like it.

An hour later, with the trade goods stacked on the ground and the hundred and fifty beaver pelts stowed in the wagon, Weatherford climbed up to the seat and picked up the reins. He smiled down at Matt.

"I'm pleased to have met you. Maybe I'll see you next year."

"Not if I see you first," Matt said disconsolately. "I don't mind bein' skinned, but I shore don't like to have salt rubbed onto me too." He squinted up at the stocky little man. "How come all you traders are so damn-blasted ornery?"

"I'm afraid you just don't understand business methods," Weatherford said, chuckling. "You see, prices are determined by the law of supply and demand. It's just good business to buy cheap and sell dear."

Matt stood watching while the wagon lumbered up the slope and disappeared over a ridge to the east, then with a grunt of disgust he went about making camp. A scattering of trees edged the water hole. He staked the horses there, built up the fire, and went to work molding some badly needed musket balls. While he was waiting for the pot of lead to melt, he dug out a jug of whiskey he'd got from Weatherford and had a snort or two, moodily considering the injustice that had been done him.

A whole year's work—that's what those hundred and fifty pelts represented. And all he'd got for them were a few blankets, a pinch of powder and lead, and a handful of supplies, not to mention the half-dozen jugs of whiskey. Poor whiskey at that, he brooded. Damned poor whiskey. Lifting the jug, he took a long swallow. Well—medium-poor whiskey, anyhow.

There'd ought to be a law saying just how much a trader could charge for his goods and just how much he had to pay for prime furs. The way things were now, it was the trapper who took all the risk and the trader who made all

the money. That wasn't right. It wasn't right at all. Now, if he was running things, he'd make a law—

The clatter of wheels brought him to his feet, musket in hand. A moment later the trader's wagon topped the ridge to the east and came careening down the slope, Weatherford frantically plying the whip to the flanks of the team of bays. The blacks who had been tied behind were gone. The wagon came to a stop and Weatherford leaped to the ground.

"Indians!" he blurted, waving at the ridge.

Matt saw them top the ridge, a dozen or so of them, and one glance told him that they were Blackfeet. He scowled at them for a moment, then said, "Git them hosses back into the timber. I'll hold these rascals off."

Weatherford started fumbling with the harness. Matt lifted the trader's musket off the seat, made sure it was charged, then crawled under the wagon and lay prone on the ground, waiting. He heard the team pitching in fright, and, without taking his eyes off the oncoming Indians, he said laconically:

"Don't take time to unhitch 'em—cut 'em loose."

He let the hellions have it when they were fifty yards away. His first shot knocked the leading buck sprawling from his horse. His second downed a paint pony, whose flailing legs tangled with those of the horse immediately behind it, throwing both riders. Quickly he took the long-barreled pistol out of his belt and laid it on the ground beside him, eying the Blackfeet as he recharged the two muskets. As he had figured they would, they loosed a volley of arrows at the wagon and then sheered off, pausing only long enough to pick up their dead comrade and the two live ones who had been set afoot.

Behind him, Matt heard a scream. He scrambled out from under the wagon just in time to see the bay team go bolting away while Weatherford scuttled into the timber and burrowed into a thicket.

"What in tarnation did you let them hosses go for?" Matt demanded.

"I'm hit!" the trader gasped. "I'm wounded!"

"Well, come out here so's I can take a look."

Weatherford crawled out of the thicket, his face pasty-white.

Matt squinted at him, then chuckled. "You ain't hit bad.

That arrer ain't in no vital spot. Lay down on your belly an' loosen your britches an' I'll cut it out."

The trader obeyed, and in a few moments Matt had dug the arrow out of a well-padded part of the man's anatomy. When the operation had been completed, he cauterized the wound with a dash of whiskey and said, "Thar—you're as good as new. When you git back to St. Looie, you can show all your friends where you was wounded in battle."

From the look on Weatherford's face, he didn't seem to think he ever would get back to St. Louis. He eyed the ridge over which the Indians had disappeared. "They—they'll be back, won't they?"

"Likely."

"We're outnumbered. We haven't got a chance."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Matt said, hunkering on the ground by the fire and squinting into the pot of half-melted lead. "A man's always got a chance, long as he's alive an' kickin'."

"What will we do when they come back?"

"Fight 'em."

"But they outnumber us, I tell you!"

"Why, then, I reckon we just better whittle 'em down to our size." Matt stared thoughtfully at the ridge. "You got some new muskets in your wagon, ain't you?"

Weatherford nodded.

"Dig out half a dozen of 'em. Keep 'em loaded for me. I'll do the rest."

The trader did so, though his hands trembled in fear. Twice during the waning afternoon the Blackfeet appeared on the ridge top, made halfhearted sallies down the slope, and then wheeled and retreated at Matt fired a few well-aimed shots in their direction. Once they tried to circle around and slip up through the timber to the rear, but Matt had chosen the camping site well. He moved into the timber ahead of them, caught them as they attempted to cross the open prairie beyond, and soon discouraged any further attack from that direction.

Night fell. For a while Matt sat leaning against a wagon wheel, listening intently, then he got up, yawning. "Guess that's all for today. How about somethin' to eat? I'm powerful hungry."

Matt had let the fire go out with the coming of dusk. In the darkness, he munched on a piece of cold meat and stared out over the starlit plain, thinking. All four of

Weatherford's horses were gone. But Matt's own two horses were still safely tethered in the timber. Evidently it had not yet occurred to Weatherford that in the morning Matt could ride off and leave him and his wagon stranded here. But the trader would think of it, Matt guessed. And when he did, things were apt to get downright interesting.

Weatherford didn't seem to have much of an appetite but he maanged to nibble at the meat. Matt smoked an after-supper pipe, then stretched broadly.

"Well, I reckon we might as well get some sleep," he announced.

"Sleep! You'd go to sleep with us surrounded by Indians?"

"Ain't nothin' else to do. We'll take turns watchin'. You want to watch first or sleep first?"

Back in the timber one of the horses moved about, making a small noise. Matt saw the trader's head turn in that direction.

"Why, you go ahead and sleep," Weatherford said. "I'll watch for a couple of hours."

Matt said that suited him fine. He spread his blankets on the ground, rolled into them, and soon was snoring softly. The air grew cool and a wind came up from the south, stirring the leaves. The moon rose, shedding a pale, translucent light over the plain.

Weatherford sat in the deep shadows near the wagon, staring intently at the blanket-wrapped figure for a while. Then slowly, carefully, he arose and moved into the timber toward the tethered horses.

"Goin' someplace?" Matt inquired gently, rolling over on his side.

The trader stopped. A sliver of moonlight touched the barrel of the musket protruding from the blankets, and Weatherford stared at it, frozen.

"Why—no," he said shortly.

"Thought maybe you was goin' for a ride—on my horses."

"Look here," Weatherford said in desperation, "we're in a bad spot. We can't hold those Indians off forever. You may be willing to stay and make a fight of it tomorrow, but I intend to save my skin if I can."

Matt sat up, still holding his rifle on the trader. "Just what you aim to do?"

"Slip away while it's still dark. The Indians are probably

camped over the ridge to the east of us. There's good cover along the creek and it flows southwest. I'll follow it for a mile or so, then circle back to the east and by daylight I'll have a good head start to the settlements."

"That's a long walk. Or did you intend to walk? Did you maybe figure on stealin' my horses?"

"I—I was just going to take one of them. You don't think I'd leave you afoot, do you?"

"I know gol-danged well you won't," Matt grunted. "Well, if you got your mind set on headin' back to the settlements, I reckon you better get started. Like I said, it's a long walk. By the way, what was you goin' to do with the wagon?"

"Leave it here. My life means more to me than a handful of beaver pelts and trade goods." An idea seemed to strike Weatherford suddenly, and his tone changed. "Tell you what I'll do. I'll let you have the wagon and everything that's in it for one of your horses."

"Now that's no bargain," Matt said with a smile. "Not when you were figurin' on leavin' the wagon anyhow."

"Then I'll buy a horse from you."

"With what?"

"Gold. A hundred dollars in gold coin."

"That all you got?" Matt said.

"No—er, yes."

"Five hundred," Matt said. "Them's mighty good horses of mine. I couldn't hardly part with either one of 'em for less'n five hundred."

"That's an outrageous price," Weatherford snapped. "No horse in the world is worth that much. I'll give you two hundred."

"Five."

"Three hundred."

"Five," Matt said grimly. "That's my last price. You'll pay it an' like it."

Weatherford eyed the gun. "You're taking advantage of me just because you know you can," he said weakly.

Matt grinned. "No. I just larned about business methods from you. You see, prices are determined by the law of supply an' demand. I got the supply, you got the demand. You'll pay five hundred for that hoss—or walk."

When daylight came, Matt awoke, built up the fire, and then took a stroll to the top of the ridge. His squinted-up eyes surveyed the plain and found it empty in all directions.

He smiled. From the way Weatherford had lit out last night he should be well on his way to the settlements by now.

Matt circled around looking for Blackfoot sign, and at last found what he sought—the clear trail of ten ponies leading northward. From the looks of it, it was at least twelve hours old. As he had figured, the raiding party had been a stray band of Blackfeet bucks returning to their home stomping grounds far to the north, willing enough to steal a few horses or lift a couple of scalps if the opportunity presented itself, but in too much of a hurry to get back to the tribe's wintering-place before snow fell to make a lengthy siege against anyone capable of putting up a stiff fight.

He'd been on the point of telling Weatherford last night that in all probability the Blackfeet would give up the fight and skin out by dark. Then the trader had tried to steal his horses. And that had sort of riled him. Matt fingered the gold pouch in his pocket and his smile broadened. Trouble with Weatherford was he hadn't learned how to think like an Injun.

He went back to camp and inspected the trade goods in the wagon. A right nice stock, he mused. Enough muskets, powder, lead, and whiskey to keep him supplied for several seasons, not to mention all the trinkets and foofooraw that would come in mighty handy in case he met some friendly Injuns who wanted to trade.

Yes sir, he thought with considerable pleasure, for the first time in his life he'd finally got the best of a trader.

And his conscience didn't hurt him a bit. Traders, in his estimation, were the orneriest breed of men on earth, and nothing bad that happened to them could be quite bad enough.

He was just finishing breakfast when he saw a dust cloud rising into the clear sky to the west. He studied it for a time, watching it draw nearer, and at last made out a large body of Injuns on the move. Friendly Injuns, he calculated, because they had their squaws, children, and dogs with them and were moving in the leisurely, careless fashion of Injuns headed for wintering-grounds. Thoughtfully he watched them and waited.

The tribe turned out to be Shoshones, led by Matt's old friend, Chief Black Feather. When the chief rode up, Matt

greeted him cordially, invited him to sit and eat, and gave him tobacco and a few trinkets for his squaw.

Black Feather's eyes lighted with pleasure at the gifts. He glanced at the wagon and said, "You have muskets, powder, lead?"

"Why, yeah," Matt answered cautiously.

"Good. My people have many furs. We trade."

Slowly Matt filled his pipe. It would be much easier to trade for pelts than to trap the beaver one by one during the coming season in the mountains. Might be he could even get enough pelts to make it worth while to tote them back to St. Looie and sell them at eastern prices. Been a long time since he'd spent a winter in St. Looie. With all the gold the furs would bring he sure could buy himself a good time. First though, he'd need some horses.

"Well," he said, "we might make a deal. An' I could use some hosses. Say, about four."

"Black Feather has four good ones. Fat. Strong."

The chief signed for one of his braves to go get the horses, then turned back to Matt. "How much will you pay in trade for furs?"

"How much you want?"

Black Feather was silent for a time, then grunted, "Ten dollar."

"Two. That's all I kin give you."

"Black Feather is not a fool. Ten dollar."

"Two," Matt snapped. "Take it or leave it."

The chief gave a grunt of displeasure. "Give Black Feather eight dollar. And for the horses, ten red blankets."

That was an Injun for you, Matt thought angrily. Always trying to get something for nothing. "Two dollars," he repeated firmly. "And for the horses, four red blankets. That's the best I kin do."

Chief Black Feather rose and stared at him, his eyes glittering with a hurt, indignant expression. "When you were trapping for furs, you were my friend. Now you are a trader. Now you try to cheat me. Why do all traders try to cheat me? Why are all traders greedy?"

Matt suddenly felt uncomfortable. Damn-blast it if Black Feather wasn't looking at him like he was something that had crawled out from under a rotten log. Like he was something slimy and sneaky. Like he was as low-down as—as a *trader!*

The brave Black Feather had sent to get the horses rode

up just then leading a pair of fat bays and an equally fat pair of blacks.

Matt blinked. "Whar in tarnation did you git them hosses?"

"Belong to me long time," Black Feather said uneasily.

"You're a teetotal liar! Them horses run away from the man who owns—uh, who did own—this wagon."

"Then wagon is not yours?" Black Feather said quickly.

"Shore it is. I made a deal for it."

"Black Feather make deal for horses. Find Blackfeet with them. Kill Blackfeet. Take horses. A deal."

Matt fell silent. The whole trouble with Injuns was they didn't know nothing about business ethics. You couldn't explain to them, for instance, that there was any difference between getting something from a man by making a sharp trade and taking it from him by bashing his head in with a tomahawk— Come to think about it, maybe there wasn't so much difference after all! Principle was the same. He sighed. That was what come of learning to think like an Injun.

"You win, Black Feather. Ten blankets for the hosses. Twenty, if you want. Ten dollars for your furs—oh, hell, just let me have enough supplies to outfit me for a winter in the mountains and you kin have everythin' that's left in the wagon. Guess I've turned into too much of an Injun to go to St. Looie, anyhow. I'd probably scalp the first buzzard that looked at me cross-eyed."

Black Feather smiled. Reaching out, he placed both hands on Matt's shoulders, his black eyes warm. "You are my friend. You are my brother. I knew my brother could not cheat me."

That, Matt calculated, was worth almost as much as anything gold would buy him in St. Looie. Maybe more.

SQUAW FEVER

Charley Smith, the best white scout west of the Mississippi, had once tackled a grizzly bear with a hunting knife and come out winner, but when it came to women, he was as skittery of the creatures as a wild mustang colt is of a hair rope. Charley was a small shy man with a pink skin that the sun somehow never tanned, and innocent-looking wide blue eyes that made one think here was a tenderfoot ripe to be skinned—which feat a few men had attempted, much to their sorrow. Charley wasn't afraid of anything that walked, crawled or flew, except women. He learned about them the year he caught squaw fever.

Trapping had been good in the Rockies that winter. When spring came, Charley and his Cayuse Indian partner, Bear Claw, sold their furs in Fort Laramie, went on a week-long spree to celebrate, and then fell to discussing what they would do next.

"I'd kind of like to drift east to the buffalo country," Charley said.

Bear Claw sat and pondered for a while, as was his habit. At last he shook his head. "Been gone from Cayuse country six months. Go there. See if new squaw Bear Claw got last year has any papooses yet."

Charley looked at his friend in some surprise. "New squaw? What did you do with the old one?"

"Took her back to her family." Bear Claw's eyes glittered darkly and he muttered, "Woman all talk, no work. Not worth the five ponies she cost me. But got good squaw now —cost ten ponies. Lots of work, not much talk."

"Did you get back the ponies you gave for the first one?"

Bear Claw, whom contact with Charley had civilized to the extent that he could swear in English, swore fluently, then added an expressive Cayuse word which meant that the girl's father was a cheap skate who would not stand behind his merchandise.

"But no matter," the Indian said philosophically. "Got lots of money to buy ponies now. You come home with me and we live good all summer. Lots of eat. Lots of sleep."

"I think," Charley said, "that I'd rather go buffalo hunting."

"Do that too. We go to Cayuse country and see squaw for one moon, then we cross Bitter Root Mountains and hunt buffalo. Good?"

To Charley, a buffalo was a buffalo, and it didn't matter to him whether he encountered it on the plains of Kansas or in the Bitter Root Valley.

"Suits me," he said. "When do we start?"

It was a bright June morning a week later when they headed out of Fort Laramie over the long trail to the Cayuse country, which lay in a region of green mountains and winding rivers along the eastern border of that vast country called Oregon. The smell of the greening sod was sweet in Charley's nostrils, but inside him was a feeling of melancholy, a loneliness that Bear Claw's presence beside him intensified rather than soothed away. The Cayuse was riding home to see his wife and family, Charley brooded, but whom was he riding home to? Nobody; nobody at all.

They topped a swell in the prairie and saw a wagon train camped in the valley below, sunlight glittering off the white canvas tops.

"Tents that roll on wheels!" Bear Claw snorted scornfully. "Why don't white men stay at home?"

Because he was so lonely, Charley let sentiment get the better of him for the moment. "That's why they're goin' to Oregon," he said wistfully. "They're lookin' for homes."

As they trotted down the slope and swung off to go around the wagon train, a bearded, buckskin-clad man rode toward them, waving a hand in a gesture for them to stop. Recognizing Sam West, a professional scout and guide who made Fort Laramie his headquarters, Charley reined up and waited. West glanced at the two well-laden pack horses trailing behind them and said, "Headed up Oregon way?"

Charley admitted they were.

"How'd you like to take a wagon train through?"

"No like," Bear Claw said with a scowl.

"We're travelin' light an' fast," Charley explained. "Bear Claw's in a hurry to see his squaw."

West laughed. "She can wait. This bunch of greenhorns really needs help. Got lost three times 'tween here and

Council Bluffs, an' gosh knows anybody that can't find their way across the plains will never git through the mountains 'tween here and Oregon. I'd take 'em myself, but I'm tied up. Come an' talk to 'em anyhow."

Bear Claw lapsed into a sullen silence.

Charley said reluctantly, "All right, but it won't do 'em no good."

The wagons were drawn up in a large circle, inside of which breakfast fires still smoldered. Children scampered in and out, playing hide-and-seek under the wagon beds, and gingham-clad women bustled about, doing their morning chores. A group of lean, gaunt-looking men turned away from an animated discussion as Charley and Bear Claw followed Sam West into the enclosure. Charley and West dismounted, but Bear Claw stayed atop his horse, gazing haughtily off into the distance.

"Mr. Reynolds," West said to the tall, hawk-faced man who seemed to be the leader of the group, "shake hands with Charley Smith, the best guide in the West."

"We don't need no guide," Reynolds said crustily, glaring at Charley. "I kin find the way myself. Got us here all the way from Arkansas."

"In that case," Charley said gratefully, "we'll be ridin'."

"Wait a minute!" A square, solid-looking woman with the most determined chin Charley had ever seen pushed her way into the center of the group. "You shut yore mouth, Zeke. Who was it got us lost before we got to Fort Kearney? Who made us take the wrong turn at the forks of the Platte? Who'd a had us in Sante Fe 'stead of Oregon, if we'd a listened to him?"

" 'Tweren't my fault," Reynolds said uncomfortably. "There weren't ary sign tellin' us which way to go."

"An' there won't be ary signs from here on," the woman said triumphantly. She turned and looked searchingly at Charley. "Do you know the trail, young man?"

Charley took off his hat and crushed it in his hands, his pink face growing pinker. "I reckon I do, ma'am. But me an' Bear Claw—"

"How long will it take to get to Fort Walla Walla?"

"Three, four months; according to how fast you travel. But Bear Claw says—"

"How much will you charge to guide us through?"

Before Charley could answer, Bear Claw grunted, "Twenty dollar a day."

The emigrants looked at one another in dismay.

Charley said hastily, "It ain't a matter of money. We just happen to be in a hurry an' a wagon train moves powerful slow—"

"We're in a hurry too," said a sweet feminine voice at Charley's elbow.

Charley turned. A slim, dark-eyed girl stood smiling up at him. She wore a yellow dress that fitted her trim waist and full bosom like no dress Charley had ever seen on any woman. Shiny black hair cascaded down from under her sunbonnet, framing a creamy golden face the likes of which Charley had never known existed. The beautiful vision was so unexpected that he even forgot to blush.

"Hello," the girl said. "I'm Susan Reynolds."

"Pleased to meet you."

"Your Indian friend was just joking when he said you'd charge us twenty dollars a day to guide us through, wasn't he?"

"I—I reckon so," Charley faltered. "Bear Claw's got quite a sense of humor."

"How much would you do it for?"

"Well, guides usually get about four dollars. Only, Bear Claw an' me—"

"Then you will take us?" Susan turned to the square-jawed woman and exclaimed, "Oh, Ma, he says he'll take us!"

Charley didn't recall having said anything of the kind, but now that she mentioned it, it seemed like a mighty fine idea. Bear Claw gave a disgusted snort. Charley, lost in the smiling depths of the prettiest pair of black eyes he had ever seen, didn't even hear it.

"Ma'am," he said gallantly, "it would be a pleasure to guide you anywheres."

The wagon train, despite its late start, made twelve miles up the valley of the North Platte that day. As evening came, the wagons were formed in the customary circle, oxen were unyoked and turned out to pasture, and supper fires began to crackle in the growing dusk. Charley and Bear Claw ate in silence, then Charley lay back with his hands crossed behind his head and stared dreamily up at the darkening sky. Around him he could hear the laughter of children, the voices of women calling to their men, and he was no longer lonely.

"Nice night, ain't it?"

"Squaw camp no good," Bear Claw grunted. "Too much talk. Why you let squaw make you take job of guiding tents that roll on wheels?"

Charley sat up. "Nobody made me do nothin'."

"Huh! You got bad case of squaw fever."

"What's squaw fever?"

Bear Claw sat cross-legged in front of the fire, drawing designs absently on the ground with a stick. He said solemnly, "Squaw fever like smallpox—a sickness. Men catch it from women, makes them feel funny in their belly and think foolish in their head."

"I do feel kind of funny," Charley admitted, "but I figured it was the red-eye we drunk last week." He looked at Bear Claw. "What do you do for squaw fever?"

"Get a squaw. She cure fever plenty quick—make you sorry you had it."

Charley grew thoughtful. "Maybe I should get married," he mused.

"Good!" Bear Claw exclaimed. "We leave wagon train tomorrow and ride plenty damn fast to Cayuse country. For ten ponies Bear Claw find you good fat squaw. For five ponies find you pretty good skinny squaw. For two ponies——"

"I don't want an Indian squaw," Charley interrupted. "I want a white one."

"White squaw no good," Bear Claw said with a vehement shake of his head. "Make man chop wood, plow fields, skin buffalo. Indian woman do all that while man sleep."

"I still want a white one," Charley said plaintively.

"Big fool. What does white man do when white squaw talk all the time? Got to sit and listen. Indian just walk off and go hunting." He looked hopefully at Charley. "Maybe we start to Cayuse country tomorrow?"

Charley lay down again. "I'm stayin' with the wagon train. You can ride on alone if you want to."

Bear Claw got up, stood staring down at Charley for a moment, then muttered, "Bear Claw don't leave good friend when he is sick. You plenty sick."

Charley smiled wistfully. "Did you notice how purty her eyes were, Bear Claw?"

Bear Claw turned on his heel and stalked off into the darkness.

It took Charley a couple of weeks to get the fifty-odd wagons in the train out of the aimless habits of disorder that Zeke Reynolds had got them into. Reynolds proved to be a crusty, hard-headed, opinionated man, who, Charley guessed, had been elected wagon captain only because he had the loudest voice with which to cuss out the oxen. But his bluster was mostly wind, and it didn't take Charley long to discover that it was Mrs. Reynolds who wore the britches in that family. Once she made up her mind to something, stopping her was like trying to stop a yoke of oxen short of the river when they had smelled water after a long, hot day. Charley often marveled that anything as sweet and gentle as Susan could have come out of a union between people like Zeke and Mrs. Reynolds.

The weather stayed clear and sunny as the wagons lumbered their way up the Platte. At the mouth of Poison Spider Creek, the train clambered laboriously out of the river valley, crossed to the Sweetwater and moved on westward, through country which grew more rugged with each passing mile. At last the wide high valley which led across the Continental Divide through South Pass came in view. Just before time to halt the train for the night, Charley rode alongside the Reynolds' wagon and pointed ahead.

"See that ridge, Miss Reynolds? When we cross it, the streams will all be flowin' to the Pacific."

"Oh!" Susan's voice held an appreciative awe. She turned her lovely head and looked at him with respect in her eyes. "How did you ever learn so much about such a big country?"

Charley blushed and picked an imaginary cocklebur out of his horse's mane. "Reckon I just picked it up here an' there. I drift around a good bit."

"Doesn't your wife miss you when you're away from home for so long?"

"I ain't—uh—married."

"You're teasing! Imagine, a good-looking man like you not being married at your age!"

"Honest to Gawd—gosh, I mean—I ain't, Miss Susan."

Bear Claw came riding up at that moment with word that one of the lead wagons had broken a wheel.

As Charley spurred his horse to ride away, Susan called, "Oh, Charley!"

He stopped. "Yes, ma'am?"

"Ma says I should invite you to eat supper with us tonight. Will you?"

"Ma'am, it would be a pleasure," Charley said.

As they galloped along the line of wagons, Bear Claw muttered, "Too bad. Charley plenty sick."

Charley smiled vacantly; he had reached the point where he didn't care how sick he got.

It was the best supper Charley had ever eaten. After living on his own and Bear Claw's indifferent cooking for so long, the tender buffalo steak, baked potatoes and delicately browned white-flour biscuits tasted like food for the gods.

"More honey?" Susan asked, passing Charley the jar again.

"Sure is good honey," Charley said as he liberally smeared another biscuit.

"Back home we kept our own bees. Are there bees in Oregon?"

Charley said he guessed there were. Some of the honey dripped off the biscuit onto his finger, and he was just starting to put the finger in his mouth to lick it clean when he caught Susan looking at him. He turned red. "Reckon my manners ain't so good," he apologized. "It's been a long time since I ate in civilized company."

Susan smiled forgivingly.

Mrs. Reynolds said, "Manners ain't everything. Fine feathers may make fine birds, but fine birds don't keep the larder full."

Charley allowed that that was true.

"Out here," Mrs. Reynolds continued, warming up to the subject, "the thing that counts in a man is how good a shot he is and how well he can swing an axe. A man's got to be a good provider. If I was a young girl lookin' for a husband—"

"You ain't, Ma," Zeke Reynolds interrupted. "You got me."

"I know." Mrs. Reynolds sighed. "But if I was looking for a husband, I'd make sure he was a good provider."

"I'm a purty good shot," Charley said innocently. "I always kept Bear Claw and me in meat."

When supper was over, Susan started to help her mother with the dishes, but Mrs. Reynolds shooed her away. "You entertain Charley. We got to be polite to our company."

"Huh!" Zeke grunted.

Susan looked shyly at Charley. "We could go for a walk."

Charley swallowed hard and said he guessed they could.

A blue, cool twilight was gathering over the uplands as they walked slowly across the enclosure around which the wagons were parked. Charley couldn't remember when he had seen a prettier night. Susan looked out past the circle of wagons toward a hill whose rounded top showed faintly against the starlit sky.

"Would it be safe to walk up there?"

"Don't see why not. There ain't an Indian in a hundred miles."

A shadow moved out from one of the near-by wagons, and Bear Claw grunted, "No go. Saw trail of thousand Pawnees on hilltop today."

"Go away," Charley snapped, "an' quit followin' Miss Susan an' me."

As they left the enclosure, Susan put her hand in Charley's. "I'd be afraid with anybody but you," she murmured.

Charley was doing his best to swallow the rock that had lodged in his throat when he heard the clatter of hoofs. Shadows topped the hill and came galloping down toward the wagon train.

Susan squeezed Charley's hand and said in a terrified voice, "Indians!"

"Cavalry," Charley said quickly. "Indians don't ride in formation."

The wagon guard called out a challenge. A command was given and the riders reined in. The guard shouted, "Who it is?"

"Captain Vardon and a company of United States cavalry!" called a bold voice. "Where are you bound?"

"Oregon!"

"Where's your wagon captain? I want to talk to him!"

Before Charley could answer, Zeke Reynolds ambled over and said, "That's me. What can I do for you?"

The officer dismounted, handed his horse's reins to an orderly and strode into the circle of firelight. He was a tall, erect man whose chest filled every square inch of the blue cavalry blouse. The lines of his face were strong and handsome, and, when he smiled, even white teeth flashed against tanned, healthy skin.

"Do you mind if we make camp next to you? This is the only good water in miles."

"Help yourself; it's all free. Say, you headed for Oregon too?"

Captain Vardon nodded. "We're going to Fort Walla Walla."

"If that ain't luck! So are we! We'd be mighty obliged to have you travel with us, jest in case Injuns jump us."

"No danger of that. All the tribes are pretty well under control. Besides we're in a hurry."

As Charley and Susan approached, Captain Vardon turned and looked at them.

Susan smiled and said, "Hello."

The officer bowed from the waist. When he straightened, his eyes caught Susan's and lingered there. Charley didn't like the gleam that came to them. "Good evening, ma'am."

"Are you sure there's no danger from Indians?" Susan asked anxiously.

The officer's handsome brow wrinkled thoughtfully. "At the moment, the savages are peaceful enough, but it's difficult to say how long they will stay that way. You may be attacked farther up the trail."

"There ain't an Indian on the warpath west of the Rockies," Charley snapped.

"That," Captain Vardon said, giving Charley a haughty look, "may be your opinion. The Army has more accurate sources of information. Fighting Indians is its business."

"The Army," Charley muttered, "couldn't fight its way out of a paper barn with a boatload of howitzers."

"Charley!" Susan said reprovingly. She looked up at Captain Vardon and smiled. "What were you saying about Indians?"

The frown on the captain's face deepened as he looked at Susan. He removed his gauntlets and stood absently slapping them against the palm of his left hand. Suddenly he exclaimed, "It's my duty to see that emigrant trains get through safely." He turned to Zeke Reynolds. "Sir, we will accept your invitation and accompany you."

"You're shore welcome!" Zeke exclaimed.

"I'm so glad," Susan said demurely. "I'll feel so much safer with the Army guarding our wagon train."

"Huh!" Charley snorted. "More likely it'll be the wagon train guardin' the Army!"

Captain Vardon, being occupied with gazing into a pair of black, enchanting eyes, did not bother to answer.

The wagon train lumbered its slow way over the divide, across the long miles of dry, barren plateau on the other side, then swung north along Bear River and headed into the mountains again. It was wild, beautiful country, but Charley had no eye for its beauty; everywhere he looked, he saw Captain Vardon's handsome, arrogant face smiling down at Susan Reynolds.

"What in tarnation does she see in that tin soldier?" he demanded of Bear Claw one day.

"All squaws crazy," Bear Claw grunted, " 'specially white ones."

"But she seemed to like me 'fore he came along. Now she looks at me like I was somethin' that had been dead a week an' hadn't been skinned yet."

"White squaws different from Indians. Indian squaw glad to get any man that will feed her and not beat her too much. White squaw pick husband like a fool pick a horse —just look to see how pretty he is, not how fast he run."

"Maybe I ain't as purty as Captain Vardon. But I'd feed her good an' I wouldn't beat her at all."

Bear Claw looked hopefully at Charley. "Now Charley ready to leave wagon train and ride to Cayuse country?"

"When I start something," Charley said, with a stubborn shake of his head, "I aim to finish it. I'll show her who's the best man yet. We're stayin'."

They struck the tumbling, rapids-filled Snake River at Fort Hall two weeks later and turned down it, moving now into country bare of vegetation, with the river crowded into a deep, twisting canyon. Grass for the oxen and horses grew scarce. The canyon rim along which the trail led held no water, and the torture of thirst was doubly severe because of the cool, tumbling, inaccessible river below. The animals suffered so much that one evening Charley could stand their plaintive lowings no longer.

"Bring me some barrels," he told Zeke Reynolds. "I'm goin' down an' git some water."

Captain Vardon frowned at the sheer two-hundred-foot drop to the narrow river bed, then snapped scornfully, "When did you sprout wings?"

Charley did not bother to answer; he simply tied several lengths of rope together, lashed one end around the hub of a wagon and the other about his waist, and went over the edge. For two hours he stood knee-deep in the bitingly cold shallows at the river's edge, filling barrels and sending them

up. When darkness fell, he tied the rope around his waist again, and the men above hauled him up as unceremoniously as they had the barrels. He was tired, bruised and sore from his labors, but as he scrambled over the edge of the cliff there was a feeling of grim satisfaction in him. He looked around for Susan, and found her standing beside Captain Vardon, gazing off to the west, where the sun was sinking behind distant purple mountains.

"Look at that display of color," the captain said reverently, taking another sip of water out of the dipper in his hand. "It's as if the sun were blushing and had set the sky on fire."

"Oh, Edward!" Susan exclaimed. "You express yourself so well! I think that's such an admirable quality in a man."

Charley snorted and limped off to see if Bear Claw had left any sowbelly and beans in the pot he'd put on the fire.

The canyon of the Snake grew deeper and more tortuous, twisting back and forth upon itself in curves so sharp that frequently after a hard day's journey the wagon train found itself camped only a mile or two, as an eagle might fly, from the spot where it had camped the night before. The emigrants, weary from the long months of travel, began to grumble.

"'Pears to me," Zeke complained to Charley, "that we're takin' the long way round. There ought to be an easier trail to Oregon than this."

"There ain't," Charley answered.

"Are you sure you know where we are?" Captain Vardon asked.

"We're five miles from where we were yesterday, an', if we're lucky, we'll be ten miles down the river come dark."

The captain shaded his eyes as he stared off to the northwest, where a faint jagged line sawed at the clear sky. "Aren't those the Blue Mountains?"

"Yeah."

"Why can't we cut straight across here and save all this winding back and forth?"

"Because the trail don't go thataway. We got to stick to the Snake for another week 'fore we can cross the Blues."

The wagon train moved on, but, as Captain Vardon and Zeke Reynolds turned away, Charley could hear them grumbling.

He had ridden several miles ahead and was returning to

the train shortly before noon the next day when he saw that the wagons had halted and a knot of men were gathered around Zeke Reynolds and Captain Vardon. The officer was intently studying a map spread out on the ground.

"What's the trouble?" Charley demanded.

"If we swing west here," Captain Vardon said, "we can save ourselves a week. Look, it shows a trail on the map."

"The map," Charley grunted, "is wrong."

Captain Vardon gave him a sharp look. "This map was drawn up by the Army."

"Then the Army's wrong too. We can't get through that way."

Captain Vardon angrily thrust the map in Charley's face. "It says in plain English: 'Passable all year round.' "

Charley gave the map a quick look, flushed and then raised his eyes. "Don't care what it says."

Captain Vardon stared at him, then exclaimed triumphantly, "You can't even read!"

Charley looked down at the tips of his worn boots. "Never had no chance to learn," he admitted.

He could feel Susan's eyes upon him, contempt growing in them. Captain Vardon whirled and spoke to the crowd of men around. "Are you going to take the word of an illiterate guide or do you want to put your trust in this map?"

An angry discussion broke out. Zeke Reynolds glared at Charley. "You're tryin' to take us the long way jest so you'll get more pay."

"We got to stick to the river," Charley muttered stubbornly.

"The devil we do! You're fired!" Zeke wheeled to Captain Vardon. "Can you lead us through?"

"Certainly."

"Then lead away! Oregon, here we come!"

Charley stood beside his horse, watching them go. Bear Claw came up.

"Now we ride to Cayuse country?"

Charley shook his head. "They ain't through the mountains yet—not by a jugful. I'm stickin' with 'em."

"Plenty big fool to help them now."

"I ain't goin' to help," Charley said grimly; "I'm going along just to watch 'em sweat when they hit Needle Canyon."

For the first few days, the wagon train made good time across flat, gently lifting land. The spirits of the emigrants rose with each mile that fell behind. Nearer and nearer loomed the Blue Mountains, the last barrier between them and the sweet green land of Oregon.

"We'll be in Fort Walla Walla in another week!" the Arkansawyers told one another jubilantly.

"This shore beats followin' the Snake!"

Charley, riding along with Bear Claw off to one side of the train, out of the dust, stared patiently ahead at the towering Blues and said nothing.

Grass dwindled away and then disappeared altogether as the character of the land underwent a change. Eroded, gray-brown buttes lifted their scowling faces at a brassy sky. Deep gullies, invariably dry, cut across the plateau. A family milk cow, worn with heat, thirst and hunger, dropped after two hours traveling one morning and did not rise again, her thin sides weakly heaving in exhaustion until a pistol bullet ended her misery.

"We'll find water this evening," Captain Vardon promised.

Just before noon, the wagon train met a hunting party of half a dozen friendly Nex Percés, who told them where they would find a water hole. Bear Claw rode out and talked to one of the Indians, seeking news of his own tribe, then returned to Charley with eyes glittering proudly.

"Bear Claw got new papoose now. Big fat boy."

"Why don't you go on home, then? It ain't far."

Bear Claw shook his head. "Where Charley go, I go. Sent word for squaw to come to Fort Walla Walla."

That night the wagon train camped at the water hole, a circular, shallow sink half filled with brackish alkaline water. By the time the emigrants had drunk themselves and filled their water barrels, there was nothing left for the oxen but sticky mud. Charley and Bear Claw made their camp a short distance apart from that of the wagon train, as they had done since leaving the Snake, but as Charley was walking away from the water hole after filling his canteen, Susan appeared in the dusk before him. She started to pass without speaking, then stopped.

"Hello, Charley."

"Evenin', ma'am."

"It's pretty bad, isn't it?"

"It'll git worse 'fore it gits better," Charley said, and walked on.

The camp the next night was a dry one. So was the camp the night after that. Here were only harsh, upended rock strata, long miles of black lava beds which slashed the animals' hoofs like glass, and steep gray peaks on which no living thing grew.

After supper the emigrants held a meeting. Charley squatted on his heels beside a wagon, took out his knife and whittled, taking no part. The discussion went on for some time, growing more and more heated, but getting nowhere.

Finally Zeke Reynolds demanded of Captain Vardon, "Are you sure we're headed right?"

Charley looked up. The dusty faces of the men were grim in the firelight. Captain Vardon didn't look as handsome now as he had the first night he had joined the train, for there had been no water with which to shave or wash for more than a week, and the quarter inch of black beard stubble on his chin did not improve his appearance.

"Certainly we're headed right," the officer snapped. "Don't you think I can follow a map?"

"I don't care a hang about the map," an emigrant broke in. "My oxen are dyin'. I give 'em the last bit of grain I had yesterday, an' there ain't a blade of grass in a hundred miles."

"My horses are in the same shape," the captain said wearily. "Why jump me about it?"

" 'Cause you was the fella that told us he could lead us through the short way," Zeke cut in pointedly.

"I'll get you through all right. We're past the worst of it now." The officer's eyes went to Charley, and he demanded hopefully, "Aren't we, Charley?"

Charley spat indifferently upon the ground. "I can't read. What does your map say?"

He closed his pocketknife with a snap, got up and walked slowly away from the group around the fire. A slim form moved toward him and a hand touched his arm.

"Charley," Susan pleaded, "tell me the truth. Are we lost?"

"You an' the captain may be, but I damned sure ain't," Charley grunted, and shrugged the hand off.

The next day the trail wound up a twisting canyon which grew narrower and steeper with each mile, threading up

toward a pass between two towering bare peaks. When the wagon train crossed that pass, it would be on the other side of the Blues, Captain Vardon claimed, and from there on the going would be easy.

"It's all downhill," he promised, "and there's plenty of grass and water."

All morning the wagons labored upward. At noon the crest of the pass was reached, the exhausted oxen given an hour to rest, then the wagon train moved in single file down a steep, sheer-walled canyon which grew deeper and deeper until its sides rose far above, nearly closing together at the top, like the eye of a needle. Far off in the distance to the northwest, a green, wide valley could be seen through the open space at the lower end of the canyon.

"A river!" one of the emigrants cried.

"And it flows north! All we got to do is follow it and it'll take us right into Fort Walla Walla!"

That, Charley mused as he squinted off into the distance, was exactly right. Only trouble was, you had to get to the river before you could follow it anywhere.

The wagon alongside of which he rode suddenly came to a stop, its progress halted by the wagons ahead.

The ox driver shouted impatiently, "What's holdin' things up?"

Charley spurred his horse forward past the long line of halted wagons, until he reached the head of the train. There he found the emigrants gathered around Captain Vardon and Zeke Reynolds, who stood with bleak dismay on their faces as they stared down at an abrupt three-hundred-foot drop.

Charley got off his horse and inquired mildly, "What are we waitin' on?"

"There ain't no more trail," Zeke said in a grim voice.

"Sure there is." Charley pointed down at a narrow ledge which led diagonally across the face of the precipice. "See, there it goes yonder."

"That goat path? You can't call that a trail."

Charley jerked his head at Captain Vardon, who sat frowning down at the map in his hand. "His map called it a trail. The Army ain't never wrong. 'Cept it forgot to mention that it's a trail for horses, not for wagons. But I reckon that's a small matter. All you got to do is put wings on your wagons an' fly 'em down into the valley. . . . Ain't that right, Captain?"

The officer's face was pale. Angrily he crumpled the map and tossed it aside. "We'll have to turn around and go back," he snapped.

Charley grinned. He was really beginning to enjoy himself. "You'll never make it. It'll take you a week to get back to water, two weeks to grass. Your stock, I figure, is good for about two days."

"He's right as rain, Captain," Zeke said miserably.

"Then we'll go on without the wagons," Captain Vardon said in desperation. "We can make it down the trail on horseback."

A silence fell on the emigrants. The women had got out of the wagons to see why the train had stopped; now one of them started sobbing hysterically. For once, Charley noted with satisfaction, neither Mrs. Reynolds nor Susan had a word to say.

Zeke Reynolds said huskily, "Everything we own is in them wagons."

"I'll have to leave my company's supply wagons behind," Captain Vardon reminded him. "We're all in the same boat."

"Except that the Army can stand to lose a few wagons," Susan cut in, her black eyes blazing, "and we can't."

The captain whirled on her and snapped, "What do you expect me to do, sit down and cry about it?"

"I expect you to act like a man and figure out some way to get the wagons through."

"The age of miracles is past," the captain said sarcastically.

Charley took out his pocketknife and started whittling. Bear Claw rode up, the two pack horses trailing behind him. "We go now?"

"Pretty quick," Charley said.

"Go?" Susan demanded. "Go where?"

"Why, to Fort Walla Walla," Charley said calmly. "That's where we're all headed, ain't it?"

"You wouldn't go off and leave us stranded here!"

"I beg your pardon, ma'am, but you ain't stranded. You got two good feet and there's the trail yonder. All you got to do is start walkin'."

"But what will we do with the wagons?"

"I don't reckon you'll have to do anything. The Injuns will find 'em soon enough an' take care of 'em for you. Injuns sure do like to see things burn." Charley put the knife

in his pocket and turned to his horse. "Reckon Bear Claw an' me will be ridin'. See you in Fort Walla Walla."

Susan looked at him with stricken eyes for a long moment, then dropped her gaze to the ground. She made an obvious effort to hold back the tears, failed, and her long black eyelashes glistened with moisture.

"I didn't know you hated me so much, Charley," she murmured brokenly.

"We go quick!" Bear Claw said in alarm.

Charley began to feel uncomfortable. "Aw, I don't hate you, Miss Susan."

"You do, else you wouldn't run off and leave me!"

"Aw, Miss Susan—"

"Not that I blame you for going. After the way we've treated you, it would serve us right if you just left us here to die."

"It ain't that bad, Miss Susan. You ain't going to die."

She looked up quickly, her eyes sparkling. "Then you can get us through?"

"I didn't say I could. I ain't your guide no more."

"But if you were, Charley, what would you do?"

She was close to him now, smiling up at him. Bear Claw tugged at his arm, but Charley waved him away. He could take care of himself . . . even though his head did feel kind of funny.

"If I'd been your guide, we wouldn't have come this way," he said gruffly. "We'd a stayed on the main trail."

"But suppose—just suppose, Charley—that we had come this way? I'll bet a man as clever as you are wouldn't let a little thing like this stop him."

"Little thing!" Captain Vardon snorted. "She calls a three-hundred-foot canyon a little thing!"

Charley looked belligerently up at the officer. "It ain't polite to make fun of a lady like that. Specially when she's right. That canyon ain't nothin' to work yourself into a stew about. Anybody with sense enough to pound sand in a rat hole could figger out a way to git the wagons down, if he'd just sit an' think a bit."

"How?" the captain exploded.

"Tie ropes to 'em an' lower 'em."

"A wonderful idea, except that I had already thought of it and it won't work. We've got just enough rope to let a wagon down halfway. Where do we go from there?"

"Git more rope, Captain," Charley said calmly. He walked over and laid a hand on the dusty back of an ox. "We got plenty of it. Trouble is, you just don't recognize it when it's alive an' walkin' around. Ever see a braided-leather lariat?"

Three nights later, the wagon train camped on the south side of the river, just across from Fort Walla Walla. Bear Claw was impatient to cross at once, but Charley said, "You go on without me. I promised the Reynoldses I'd eat supper with 'em."

"Bear Claw wait until the moon rise," the Cayuse said. "If Charley not ready then, never be ready."

It was an excellent supper. Mrs. Reynolds beamed at Charley all through the meal, never letting his plate get empty. Susan sat and smiled shyly at him, her sparkling black eyes saying things that made him get that dizzy feeling again. Zeke slapped his back so many times and showered him with so many verbal compliments that it was a question whether Charley's back or ears burned most.

"Yes, sir, it's jest like I told Ma," Zeke exclaimed, "the thing that counts in this country ain't manners or education or money, but how much horse sense a man's got. Trouble with Captain Vardon was he'd been so busy gettin' educated, he'd never learned how to skin a cow."

Darkness had fallen by the time the meal was over. Charley got up. "Sure was a good supper, Mrs. Reynolds."

"Do you have to go?" Susan pouted.

"I told Bear Claw I'd meet him in half an hour. We're crossin' the river."

"I'll walk with you to the edge of camp."

They walked slowly across the enclosure around which the wagons were parked. Susan seemed very subdued, as if she were expecting Charley to say something, but he kept silent. They passed beyond the circle of firelight and stopped near a grove of willows which fringed the river.

"Charley," Susan murmured at last, "why are you going away?"

"Bear Claw an' me are goin' buffalo huntin'."

"Is that all you ever think about—hunting?"

"Course not. I think about lots of things."

"Like settling down someplace and having a home and —and a family?"

Charley flushed, glad of the darkness that hid his face. "I reckon every man does . . . once in a while."

"You used to like me, Charley."

"I still do, Miss Susan."

"But not enough to—" She broke off, then said sharply, "Charley, I don't think you've told the truth about yourself."

He frowned. "What do you mean?"

"About your not being married. I'll bet there's a woman waiting for you—that's why you're so anxious to leave."

"There ain't, Miss Susan. Honest to gosh, I ain't hitched up to nobody."

"I don't mean married exactly. Ma said that men like you always have Indian squaws they live with—sometimes three or four of them."

"That ain't so!" Charley said indignantly. "I never looked at a woman in my life, till you came along."

She moved close to him, and the smell of her hair was sweet. "Oh, Charley, then you do care!"

"'Course I do. I like you a powerful lot."

"I love you, too, Charley."

Charley didn't understand exactly how it happened, but suddenly she was in his arms and he was kissing her warm, upturned lips. He discovered, then, that the fever hadn't left him at all; it had just been playing possum, for now he began to tingle from head to toe, as if he'd been tied to a stake and a fire kindled under him.

"Oh, Charley," Susan whispered, "we'll be so happy."

"I reckon we will," he muttered dazedly.

"You won't leave me, ever?"

"'Course not."

"And you'll go tell Bear Claw that you're not going with him?"

"Sure," Charley said.

"We'll be married tomorrow. I'll run back and tell Ma right now. She'll be so happy!"

She kissed him again, turned and ran back toward the camp. Charley stood staring after her, numbly wondering what had happened to him. Whatever it was, it sure felt good.

The moon lifted above the rim of the mountains to the east, orange and huge. A figure moved toward him, leading a pair of horses. Bear Claw said, "We go now?"

Charley shook his head. "I ain't goin'."

"White squaw talk Charley into marrying her?"

"She didn't talk me into nothin'," Charley exclaimed. "Leastwise, I don't think she did."

"But you going to marry her?"

Charley nodded.

Bear Claw was silent for a long while. Then sadly he shook his head. "Too bad. You were a good friend."

"We'll still be friends," Charley said fervently. "Me an' Susan will settle down somewheres close, an' you an' me can come see each other whenever we take the notion."

Bear Claw shook his head again. "Charley will never come to my lodge. Be too busy chopping wood, plowing fields, milking cows. White squaw make man work. Bear Claw live in a lodge he can take down and carry on pony's back and go where the grass is green. Charley's squaw make him build a big cage out of trees and stones to hold her and papooses. Cage hold Charley too. Can't move it—too big for horse to carry."

"We can still go huntin' together."

"Charley hunt no more. His gun gather rust. The mountains see Charley no more. Charley too busy digging holes in the ground with a hoe."

The wind stirred the willows along the river, and from the hills far away, Charley heard a coyote crying at the rising moon.

"Maybe you're right," he muttered. "But I'm a white man. That's the way white men live."

Bear Claw's finger touched Charley's heart, tapping it three times. "Charley not white man there; Charley Indian."

Bear Claw turned, mounted his horse and rode away. Charley stood listening to the sound of splashing in the river until the Cayuse reached swimming depth, then he walked thoughtfully back toward the wagon train.

Charley said he'd just as soon fix his own breakfast, next morning, but Mrs. Reynolds insisted that he eat with them. "It'll give us a chance to get better acquainted with our new son-in-law," she said with a smile.

"Sure will be fine to have you in the family," Zeke said between bites. "Tell you what, we'll get us a piece of good bottom land an' build us a cabin where we can all live together. You purty good with an axe?"

"I kind of figgered Susan and me would have a place of our own," Charley said uncertainly.

"What for?"

"We'll live with Ma and Pa," Susan said, "for the first year or two, anyhow. You won't mind, will you, Charley?"

Charley scowled down at his plate and said he guessed he wouldn't.

There was a great bustle of activity as the emigrants yoked the oxen and broke up camp in preparation to cross the river.

Charley started to go saddle his horse, but Susan said, "Dear, would you climb in the wagon and get me that big brown box?"

Charley did.

"Say, Charley," Zeke called from the front of the wagon, "will you give me a hand with this yoke?"

Charley did that too.

"Charley," Mrs. Reynolds said, "would you mind taking this bucket down to the river and getting me some water?"

Charley looked defiantly at the empty bucket. "I was figurin' on saddlin' up," he said. "Can't Zeke get it for you?"

"Pa's got a bad back and can't carry things," Susan said quickly. "Now, run and do what Ma asked you."

Charley picked up the bucket and walked slowly down to the river. It was a beautiful morning, the sky so blue and clear that it looked as if somebody had taken a fleecy white cloud and scrubbed it clean, then polished it till it shone. Charley stared wistfully across the river, wondering what Bear Claw was doing. He sighed, filled the bucket and went back to the wagon.

"Here's your water," he told Mrs. Reynolds, slowly putting the bucket down.

Mrs. Reynolds was not looking at the bucket or at him. She was staring at something behind him. "Who's that?"

Charley blinked. "Who's what?"

"That woman you brought back."

"I didn't bring back no woman," Charley said, but he turned and looked behind him.

A young Indian squaw stood looking at him. She did not speak, but as Charley stared at her, she looked down at the ground and giggled.

Charley laughed and turned away. "Don't pay no atten-

tion to her. Injuns are powerful curious about white folks. She just wants to watch us."

"It appears to me," Susan said sharply, "that she's not watching us. She's watching you. Tell her to go away."

"Git!" Charley said, with a wave of his hand. "Make tracks! Vamoose!"

The squaw giggled again and stayed where she was.

"She doesn't understand English," Charley said apologetically.

Susan gave the woman a piercing look, then said to Charley, "I'm through with this box now. You can put it back in the wagon."

Charley stooped to pick it up. Moccasined feet padded swiftly toward him. Before he realized what was happening, the Indian woman had snatched the box out of his hand, carried it over and placed it in the wagon. Then she came back and stood where she had before, her soft eyes returning to his face. Charley slowly turned crimson.

A stricken silence fell over the Reynolds family. Zeke's jaw dropped three inches. Mrs. Reynolds opened her mouth as if to speak, but no words came. Susan stared, horrified, at Charley, then at the Indian woman.

The squaw turned so that the black head of the baby on her back was visible, and said in broken English, "See new papoose, Charley? Big, fat boy."

"Charley!" Susan screamed.

"You ornery, low-down skunk!" Zeke choked. "I oughta horsewhip you!"

"I told you, Susan! I told you!" Mrs. Reynolds cried.

Charley stood numb and dazed, unable to speak for a moment. He looked at Susan with the odd feeling of detachment that sometimes comes to a man in times of stress, and he noticed suddenly how much her chin line resembled that of her mother. A woman like her would drive a man with a mighty long whip, he reckoned. First thing he knew, she'd make him just what her ma had made Zeke; maybe he'd even get to the point where, like Zeke, the only thing he'd be able to do would be bluster and blow.

"I reckon," he said meekly, "that I am a skunk."

"Then you admit she's your wife?" Susan demanded.

"Well, not exactly. You see, we never was married by no minister."

Susan turned pale. "I—I think I'm going to faint!"

Zeke's face was a deep shade of purple as he started for

the wagon. "I'm goin' to git my gun. If you ain't gone in ten seconds—"

"I can make it in five," Charley said, and, motioning for the squaw to follow, headed at a dead run for the timber along the river, where he figured Bear Claw would be waiting with the horses.

As twilight fell, Charley lay propped up on one elbow, peacefully watching Bear Claw's squaw as she went about cooking the evening meal. Bear Claw sat cross-legged beside him, drawing a picture of a buffalo on the ground with a pointed stick.

"That's sure a fine squaw you got," Charley observed. "Never saw a woman work so hard."

"Huh!" Bear Claw grunted. "Women supposed to work."

"How did you persuade her to come into camp and act like she was my suqaw?"

"No persuade. Just tell her."

Charley gazed thoughtfully at the Cayuse woman. For some time, he'd been wondering about a thing Bear Claw had told him, and now it got to bothering him again.

"Bear Claw, you claim squaw fever is a disease—that right?"

"Bad one," the Indian said with a sharp nod.

"Once you catch it, do you get over it?"

"Not until you get squaw."

Charley sighed. That was just what he had been afraid of. "I reckon, then, I better take the cure 'fore I get talked into something I don't want at all. Say, has your wife got a sister?"

Bear Claw's eyes gleamed with the anticipation that any married man feels when he sees an opportunity to launch a bachelor friend upon the same stormy seas on which he is buffeted. "Got fine sister. Good cook, good chop wood, no talk at all."

"How many ponies?"

Bear Claw was thoughtfully silent for some time, then grunted, "Her father say fifteen. But for you, maybe make it ten."

Charley said that sounded like a bargain.

THE HEXED RIFLE

Some days during the late spring and early summer months there had been as many as fifty emigrant wagons at a time lined up for the Missouri River ferry. It had been fun to sit on the top rail of the fence and count them, fun to read the bravely optimistic legends painted on the new white canvas, fun to wave to the ox drivers and call greetings to boys his own age.

But it was October now, a week past first frost, and the westward-bound wagons came no more. You could sit on the fence for hours on end and see no movement on the winding gray road leading down to the crossing; no movement anywhere, save for a ribbon of dust skittering along before the wind or a wisp of smoke rising from the small steam-powered ferry where it lay waiting for a fare or the shifting patterns of sunshine and cloud shadow on the turgid brown river below.

Yes, autumn was a sad season, thought Johnny Martin. Maybe he'd been foolish to dog-trot three miles so he could steal a few minutes for loafing here on the fence, complete the errand his mother had sent him to town to do and still get home without her knowing he'd dallied along the way. But you never could tell. Late in the year though it was, this spot high on the bluffs of the Iowa side of the river was one the whole world passed by, seemed like, and if you came here often enough you were bound to see something mighty wonderful.

Panting slightly from his exertion, he climbed atop the fence and squinted into the pale afternoon sunlight, a thin, tall boy of ten with light golden hair and fresh blue eyes. Behind him—eastward—lay the town, the jumping-off place, the last port of call for the wagons; below lay the river, the final, defining river that separated East from West; and yonder on the far side of the Missouri, stretching forever into the gray, flat distance, lay a land big

enough, strange enough, alluring enough to give scope to even a boy's imagination. Except in dreams, Johnny had never crossed it. But, oh, in dreams!

The ferry landing on the near shore was empty. Line of sight, it'd be a mile or two to the far shore, but Johnny's keen eyes caught a movement there, focused, pondered, decided finally that the tiny blur loading onto the ferry was a three-ox-team wagon. No farmer's wagon, either, 'cause he could make out a canvas top. That meant a traveling wagon —traveling the wrong way. Traveling east. Going home. You saw them now and then, this time of year. Gaunt, thin animals with downcast heads, gaunt, sunburned people with tired eyes and a look of defeat about them, the canvas of their wagons weathered and tattered and bearing such legends as: "To hell with Californy!" "To hell with Oregon!"

It took quite a while for the ferry to puff its way across the river, even though there wasn't much current to fight this time of year, but Johnny forgot all about his errand and waited. He'd made a game of remembering all the funny things he saw written on wagon tops and this chance to get a new one was as exciting as buying a penny grab bag at the store. Eastbound ones were always funnier. You couldn't laugh at them as they passed, like you could the westbound ones; but afterwards, repeating them to the folks at home, you could, because by then you'd sort of forgotten the faces that did not smile and the eyes that did not laugh.

The wagon was creaking up the road from the landing now, loose iron rims clanking on shrunken wheels, the hoarse voice of the driver goading the oxen along, bull whip cracking over their heads. Walking along behind the wagon with one hand resting on the tailgate was a second man, Johnny saw, an old white-headed man with a rifle cradled in his arm. On the front seat sat a woman holding a baby, her free arm steadying a five- or six-year old boy beside her as the wagon lurched and jolted on the rutted road. But Johnny's eyes were all for the faded lettering on the loose canvas of the wagon's near side.

In God we trusted
In Californy we busted—
Hell and damnation
With Buchanan's administration—

Going back to Pennsylvania
And live off my wife's relations.

He squirmed with delight. That was a new one; a fine one, too. He'd have to remember it for sure.

The wagon stopped. The old man in buckskins came up and talked with the ox driver, shook his hand, shook hands with the woman and patted the boy on the knee. Then the wagon creaked on, the old man standing with his right hand raised in a gesture of farewell, the rifle butt resting on the ground. After a moment he turned, leaped easily over the ditch and walked toward Johnny.

"Howdy, young 'un."

"Hello."

"You acquainted around here?"

Mutely Johnny nodded. There was something about the old man that didn't fit in with his white hair at all. A sprightliness of step, a keenness of eye, an alertness of manner. He wore Indian moccasins instead of store boots, and like an Indian he walked light on the balls of his feet, not heavy on his heels white-man style. Leggins, trousers and shirt were all of buckskin, shiny with wear and grease, the long fringes of the shirt dangling a foot below a belt which supported powder horn, sheath knife and all sorts of gear. And there was something else on the belt—several dark, hairy somethings—that made Johnny's eyes near pop out of his head.

"What's the matter, young 'un?" the old man said. "Cat took yore tongue?"

"No—no sir."

"Ain't you never seen Injun hair afore?"

"Only—" Johnny gulped and tried to swallow. "Only when it was on the Indians."

The old man threw back his head and laughed, as friendly and fine a laugh as Johnny had ever heard, because it didn't make him feel embarrassed and foolish like he usually felt when laughed at by his elders; it just made him smile and feel good all over. The old man patted his knee, his sharp eyes twinkling.

"You're pure prime beaver, an' that's a fact! Now tell me quick 'fore I give you a dollar—whar'll I find a farmer in these parts name of Wesley Martin?"

"Down that road," Johnny said, turning to point south. "You cross the creek, go past the schoolhouse, go around

the hill and it's the first house on the right. You can't miss it."

He was about to go on to say that Wesley Martin was his father, that if the old man would wait until he'd run into town and done his errand he'd take him home, but his eyes fell on the scalps again and for the life of him he couldn't utter another word.

"Shore come to the right spring to git my pail filled, didn't I?" the old man said cheerfully. Frowning, he slapped his pockets. "Damn me for a Digger if I ain't plumb out of dollars. Meebee you'd jest as soon settle fer a mite of hair, though? Genuine Blackfoot, boy, an' that's a fact! I'm purely obliged to you."

With that he was gone, shuffling rapidly across the field toward the indicated road, leaving Johnny paralyzed on the fence, a genuine Blackfoot scalp in his hand.

He did not walk to town, he swaggered. With the scalp secured to his belt on one side, a short stick thrust through the belt like a sheath knife on the other, and a long stick cradled in his arms like a rifle, he moved along the street with a steely glint in his eye and a confident sneer on his lips, ready for bear or Blackfeet or whatever might pop up to dispute the way of the desperate band of trappers he was leading.

"Watch it, Kit," he muttered to Kit Carson, who was trailing at his right elbow. "Easy, Jim," he warned Jim Bridger, who was sneaking along at his left elbow. "I can smell trouble. First Blackfoot that moves, let him have it."

He kept hoping somebody would notice the trophy fastened to his belt and ask him what it was, but nobody did. The fun went out of the game by the time he reached the jail, so he left Bridger and Carson and the desperate trappers to their own devices while he stopped on the boardwalk beside a small knot of townspeople that was watching two workmen as they unloaded lumber from a wagon parked in the vacant lot beside the jail.

"Make 'er good and strong!" one of the onlookers called out. "He's got a tough neck!"

Everyone laughed. Sheriff Mark Hale came along the walk and snapped, "Break it up, boys. We can do without your advice."

After a few more wisecracks to which the sheriff did not respond the loafers moved on, except for Johnny, who,

being practically related to Mark Hale, felt himself a privileged character. Critically he watched the workmen for a moment, then turned to his brother-in-law-to-be.

"When is it, Mark?"

"When is what?"

"You know. The hanging."

For a time Mark stared off into space, his eyes bleak and unreadable, the lines of his face drawn taut by some inner strain.

"Week from Monday."

"Can I come and see it? Can I, if Dad says I can?"

"Not if I can help it."

"Aw, Mark—!"

But Mark had turned his back and was striding toward the workmen, the harsh finality in his voice making it clear to Johnny that he wasn't welcome in this vicinity, now or any time. Disgusted, Johnny shuffled on upstreet to the store, bought the gallon of molasses his mother had sent him to town for and then headed homeward, wondering what had come over Mark lately that he had to spoil everything.

Used to be Mark had been a lot of fun and they'd had some real fine times together. When it came to fishing, hunting, breaking horses and important things like that, Mark knew all there was to know, and had been only too happy to have Johnny as a companion when he wasn't in school or occupied with the endless chores his folks were always finding for him to do. But since Mark and Johnny's older sister Ruth had made it up to get married, Mark had changed—and not for the better, in Johnny's estimation. Mark had "settled down," Johnny's mother said, whatever that meant. So far as Johnny could see, it just meant the end of doing things that were fun.

Sure, he'd been real proud when Mark had got himself elected sheriff because it had made him the envy of all the boys his age to be on familiar terms with an officer of the law. And when the three Bollinger brothers had held up the bank, killed the cashier, and fought a terrific gun battle with Mark and a deputy, which ended with two of them dead and the leader of the trio, Lew Bollinger, captured, Johnny had basked in reflected glory for weeks. But a fat lot of good that had done him! What had Mark done when Johnny had tried to slip into the jail for a close look at Lew Bollinger? Slapped him on the bottom, that's what, and

sent him home! And who but Mark had caught him peeking in a courtroom window during the trial and told him to scat for home or he'd see to it he got blistered good? And now Mark wasn't even going to let him come to the hanging! Angrily Johnny kicked a clod. For all the good it was doing him, Ruth might just as well be marrying a minister!

Yes, life had gotten pretty dull of late, he brooded, and soon it would get duller, what with school and winter chores and long evenings cooped up in the house. Absently he fingered the trophy on his belt. Next to seeing a hanging, a genuine Indian scalp was something not every boy could boast about, he had to admit. But who was the old man? Why had he wanted to see Johnny's father? Summoning Bridger and Carson back out of limbo, he conferred with them; both opined that something queer, mighty queer, was in the wind, and the best thing to do was to light out fast for home. Nodding in grim agreement, he broke into a run.

When he got home the old man was leaning over the wash bench just outside the kitchen door, energetically scrubbing travel grime off his face and hands. Peter, Johnny's five-year-old brother, was manipulating the dipper, pouring fresh water from the bucket when ordered to, and both were so preoccupied that they did not see Johnny as he slipped quickly in at the kitchen door. His mother was at the stove, Ruth was setting a single place at the table and the air was pleasantly filled with the smell of frying pork. That puzzled him, for it lacked two hours till suppertime and his mother was not in the habit of serving meals at odd hours to anyone, whether they were company or family. Realizing suddenly that his errand had taken an hour more than its allotted time, he stole a look at his mother's face. Sure enough, she looked put out—real peeved, in fact.

"Here's the molasses," he said.

His mother shot him a brief glance, nodded absently, and turned back to the stove. Ruth crossed to the cupboard, paused.

"Coffee too?"

"I suppose we'll have to fix it for him," Johnny's mother said, pushing a loose strand of hair back in place. "He asked for it. Who does he think he is, anyway, coming in here and ordering a hot meal like this was a—an eating house! I've half a mind to tell him—"

"Who?" Johnny said.

Neither his mother nor sister appeared to hear. Outside, he heard water slosh on the ground, heard Peter's gleeful shout, then in came the old man with Peter mounted on his back. "Yippee, hyar's a wild Injun!" the old man shouted, cavorting around so wildly that the floor shook. "Got paint on his face an' blood in his eye an' forty-'leven scalps on his belt!"

"Please!" Mrs. Martin cried. "I've got a cake in the oven—!"

"Well, now, ain't that nice," the old man said, letting the wild Injun slide off in a heap on the floor. "An' that's pork I smell, ain't it? Ain't tasted pork for a coon's age, an' that's a fact! Set 'er out, gal, and watch this child cache 'er away. Got seven spare notches in my belt that ain't been used since God knows when—" Suddenly he broke off and stared at Johnny. "If it ain't the bright little button that give me directions! What in tarnation are you doing here?"

"I—I live here."

"Hell an' damnation! I shoulda knowed it! With them blue eyes an' that yaller hair—well, c'mere boy, an' let ole Big Nose have a squint at you!"

He stared at his mother, whose face had turned very red. "Johnny," she said, "this is your—your grandfather." Her lips tightened. "On your father's side."

Grandfather Martin laughed, chucked Ruth under the chin, tousled Johnny's hair and sat down at the table. "Damn my whiskers if Wes ain't done real fine by his ole pa, the spell I been gone! Why, last time I seen him he wa'nt much bigger'n the young 'un here, an' now I come home an' find him with a woman of his own an' a family nigh grown! It's enough to make a man feel plumb old! Would too iff'n I didn't feel so young. Run out the grub, gal, my belly's gnawin' at my backbone, damned if it ain't—"

"Grandfather Martin, please!" Johnny's mother protested angrily. "The children—"

"They hungry too? Well, feed 'em!"

"No, no, I mean your—your language. Wesley and I have never allowed profanity to be used in our home."

"Good idee, it shore is. Been runnin' on a loose rope fer a spell, I have. Damn me, I reckon I'll take a mite of breakin' in. The grub, gal, the grub!"

Food proved an effective silencer so far as conversation was concerned, though the chomping of jaws and the

smacking of lips that accompanied the disposal of an incredible amount of pork chops, gravy and homemade bread made Johnny stare in utter fascination at his grandfather, mindful of the many times his parents had warned him that bolting one's food in such a manner was not only impolite but bound to produce dire results on the digestive processes.

A strange excitement ran over him. Other boys his age had grandfathers, of course, and years ago when he had been very young he had had one too, but he could remember him only dimly as a withered old man with a bad cough and bleary eyes whom the family had visited a time or two in some town many miles away. Long since, that grandfather had dropped out of his existence, and somehow the thought that he might have another had never occurred to him.

Grandfather Martin mopped up the last drop of gravy with a piece of bread, washed it down with his third cup of coffee and then leaned back with a contented sigh. "Right good vittles, gal. Now iff'n I could have a wee smidgen of that cake I'd crawl off an' die happy."

"It isn't done," Johnny's mother said sharply. "Anyhow, it's not for the family, it's for the church supper tomorrow night."

"Smells too good for church people, damned if it—uh, blessed if it don't!" Grandfather Martin let out his belt a couple more notches and belched. "Where'd you say Wes was?"

"Doing some carpenter work for a neighbor."

"Dad's working out a cow," Johnny said proudly.

"How's that?"

"Our milk cow died," Mrs. Martin explained, "and a neighbor is going to give us another in exchange for Wesley's help." She glanced pointedly at the empty meat platter. "Feeding so many mouths isn't easy, these days. But Wesley takes his responsibilities seriously—which is more than I can say for some men."

"Wes always was a steady boy. Shore was." Grandpa Martin fished out tobacco pouch and pipe and fired up, absently dropping the used match to the floor. "Some men are the other way, though, jest like you said. Shuck off their women anytime the notion strikes 'em. Like a trapper I knowed. Used to git him a new Injun squaw come spring every year. First, 'twas a leetle Crow gal, then a Nez Percé,

then a Shoshone, then jest whatever happened t'be handy." He chuckled. "Funniest thing you ever did see. Why, it got to where ole Slash-Neck—that's what the Injuns called him—couldn't ride into a village nowhere 'thout a young 'un bobbin' up t' call him Pa—!"

A coughing fit made Ruth turn away, and Mrs. Martin cut in hastily, "Johnny, I'm sure your grandfather would like to look around the place. Why don't you take him outside and show him the barn and—and things?"

"Want to?" Johnny said eagerly.

"Well, now, that's right kind of you. Reckon I could do with a leetle walk t'sort of shake down that bait of grub an' make room for supper."

Peter tried to tag along but they had barely gotten out of the house when Mrs. Martin sharply called him back, so Johnny had his grandfather all to himself on the inspection tour of barn, pigpen and chicken house. Having helped his father construct the buildings, he proudly pointed out how solid and tight and weatherproof they all were, but Grandpa Martin didn't appear interested.

"Look at that rooster strut," he laughed. "Jest like a Blackfoot buck painted up an' ready to go on the prowl for hair. An' that fool hog there. Got a face like a Shoshone chief I knowed once. Only this here Injun was maybe some fatter an' could grunt a shade louder. Say, Kit an' me shore pulled a good 'un on ole Too-Fat-An'-Lazy-To-Breathe, we did. We'd been three days without a bite to eat, understand, an' we come ridin' into this here Shoshone village—"

" 'Kit'?" Johnny interrupted. "Not—not Kit Carson?"

"Yeah. Now Kit was a scrawny little runt an' he looked about as harmless as a bee in butter, but when it come t'bein' pushed around—"

"You knew Kit Carson?"

" 'Course I knowed him. Well, ole Too-Fat-To-Breathe had a whole lodge full of fresh meat an' there we was starvin'—"

"I read about him in a book."

"That fool Shoshone—they put him in a book?"

"No, no! Kit Carson."

Grandpa Martin blinked down at him, scowling. "Now what'd Kit ever do to git hisself put in a book?"

"Oh, lots of things. This book I read was by Captain Frémont and it told all about the mountains and trails and

rivers he discovered and all about Kit Carson and Jim Bridger and the way they guided him—"

"Hold on thar, youngster! You men t'tell me that leetle popinjay Johnny Frémont went home an' wrote hisself a book? Well, I'll be blessed! Damned if it wouldn't be nice t'be able to read. I'd shore like t'see what that leetle rooster's got to say about all the lies we fed him an' the times he got lost when he was too bullheaded to take our advice—" Grandpa Martin shook his head, chuckling. "I mind well the time Old Gabe got him goin' on his glass mountain story. Gabe could pull the long bow some, he could, an' Johnny Frémont was green as grass an' ready to believe anything but the truth—"

"You *really* knew Kit Carson?" Johnny said reverently.

"Well, I should say I did, and I ain't much ashamed to admit it. Fact is, boy, I traded Kit out of his rifle a few years back an' I'm still carryin' it."

"You are?"

"Shore. Ain't a bad gun, neither, though now an' then it will shoot a hair low if the air's damp. You'll git on t'that though, when you've shot it for a while. Say, plagued if I didn't leave my tobaccy on the kitchen table! Run fetch it for me 'fore I give you a dollar an' a red blanket."

In a wonderful sort of a daze Johnny hurried to the house. The rifle was still leaning against the wall just outside the door, and hardly daring to breathe he stopped and ran his fingers lightly along the barrel and the dark walnut stock. His attention was suddenly drawn to a rough spot in the wood, and bending closer he saw something that made him tingle from head to toe. Carved crudely on the stock were the letters "K.C." *Kit Carson!* This had been Kit's gun and now belonged to his very own grandfather and if his ears hadn't betrayed him Grandpa Martin was going to let him shoot it sometime!

Blind with happiness, he went into the house, picked up the tobacco pouch and was starting out the kitchen door when he became aware of his mother's voice speaking to Ruth.

"We took it for granted he was dead. Oh, we have had a few letters—written for him, of course, he never cared enough about school to learn how to read and write—but it's been years since the last one. Now if he thinks he's going to move in on us—"

"Grandpa Martin, you mean?" Johnny interrupted.

"Yes," his mother said shortly.

"He's going to stay, isn't he?"

Mrs. Martin did not answer. Chilled by a sudden fear, he said, "Mom, he is going to stay, isn't he? I want him to."

His mother frowned and demanded, "Johnny, what is this awful thing tied to your belt?"

"Aw, nothing—much."

"It looks like a piece of rotten hide." She sniffed. "Smells like it, too. Johnny, I've told you time and again not to bring those filthy muskrat skins into the house."

"It's not a muskrat skin," he said hotly. "It's a scalp—a genuine Blackfoot scalp, damn me for a Digger if it ain't!"

There fell an awful silence, then with a stricken glance at his mother's face he bolted for the kitchen door.

"Johnny!" he heard her call after him as he fled toward the barn. "When your father gets home—!"

He didn't get the hiding, after all. Maybe that was because his mother was so upset she forgot to tell his father about it when he got home shortly before dark, or maybe it was because his father was too tired to bother, or maybe the matter just got overlooked in the general excitement of the sudden return of Grandpa Martin. Anyhow, it was skipped—and he didn't figure it was his place to point out the oversight.

Ordinarily, evenings in the house were quiet, orderly ones, but this particular evening things sort of got out of hand. What with all the talking and joking Grandfather Martin did, supper was an hour late. Chores were left undone so long they had to be done by lantern light, and Peter, by the simple act of huddling wide-eyed and silent in convenient corners, evaded being put to bed until two hours past his usual time. When Mark Hale came to call, the dishes were still unwashed, and Mark lowered himself no end in Johnny's eyes by picking up a dish towel and helping Ruth with them. Grandpa Martin got a big kick out of that.

"He'll make a good squaw, Ruthie gal—skin me an' call me a bear rug if he won't!"

On courting nights the family always stayed out of the front parlor in order that Ruth and Mark might have a little privacy, but Grandpa Martin barged right in on them and monopolized the whole evening yarning with Mark, while

Ruth sat angrily knitting. This flustered Mrs. Martin so she didn't even notice when Johnny's dog, Bo, slipped into the house, filched a hambone and sneaked into the bedroom Ruth and Peter shared to gnaw on it. All in all, there hadn't been such an uproar in the house since Johnny could remember.

It was midnight by the time Mark left and the household finally went to bed. Late though it was, Johnny wasn't the least bit sleepy. Wide awake and alert, he lay on his cot in the lean-to next to his parents' bedroom and considered the wonderful prospects that had opened up before him. It was hard to believe that sleeping under this very roof—on the parlor floor, as a matter of fact, there being no extra bed for him—lay somebody who had done all those things he had so often dreamed of doing himself, who had known, *actually known,* the men whose names were legend to the whole world.

Queer, he thought, but Mark Hale seemed like an awfully dull clod now. Grandpa Martin apparently liked him, though. In fact, most of Grandpa's talk had been addressed to him, particularly after Mark had admitted that he'd once considered going west and had asked a lot of questions about the prospects in California and Oregon.

Through the thin partition near his head, Johnny heard the corn-shuck mattress in his parents' bedroom rustle, then his mother's voice.

"Wesley—are you still awake?"

"Yes."

"What are we going to do with him?"

"I don't know. It took me so by surprise." There was a silence. "What do you think?"

"He can't stay here—that's perfectly clear."

"He's my father, Sarah. He's getting old."

"Your father! What kind of a father has he been? Didn't he push you off on relatives when you were no bigger than Johnny and go traipsing off God knows where? Did he ever contribute a dime to your support? Did he take the least bit of interest in what happened to you?"

"He never was much of a family man. And after Mother died—"

"Don't make excuses for him, Wesley."

"I'm not. It's just—well, he is my father."

"Wesley, I won't have him in the house! The language he uses—already Johnny's picking it up. Those greasy

clothes, those awful stories he tells! Didn't you hear him encouraging Mark to throw up everything and go to Oregon or some terrible place like that? What if Mark should decide to go—and take Ruth?"

"Mark's settled down. He won't do anything foolish."

"Just the same—"

"Sarah, please, I'm tired. We'll see how it works out. Dad's always had an itchy foot. Maybe he won't stay long. And if he does plan to stay—well, he'll have to pull his own weight, that's all."

Not stay? The thought terrified Johnny. As silence settled over the house, he lay long awake, determined to do everything he could to make sure Grandpa Martin stayed forever.

At breakfast the next morning, Grandpa Martin said cheerfully, "Well, Wes, you goin' to work on the cow some more today?"

"Yes."

"Which end you workin' on now, hind er fore?"

"She'll all be paid for in a couple more days."

Grandpa Martin helped himself to another slice of ham. "Minds me of the story about the two Chinamen that bought a cow. Figgered they'd go halfers, they did. Well sir, Wing he allowed he'd take the front end, figgerin' thataway he wouldn't have to clean up the stable—"

"Grandfather, please, the children!" Mrs. Martin pleaded.

"Ain't a thing off-color about this story," Grandpa Martin said imperturbably. "Nary a thing. Well, Ling was some clever hisself, so he allowed he'd take the back half. Things went along like that fer a week, Wing feedin' the front half, Ling gettin' all the milk. One day Wing ketches on he's gettin' the short end of the deal, so he says to Ling, 'Lookee hyar, 'pears t' me I'd ought to have half the milk.' Ling wouldn't hear t' that an' they had quite a squabble. An' you know how it finally ended up?"

"How?" Peter said, enthralled.

"Why, Wing left the stable door open and let the front half of that fool cow run away. The back half followed an' ain't been seen since!"

Peter and Johnny thought the story very funny, but they were the only ones who laughed. Tight-lipped, Mrs. Mar-

tin rose and started clearing the table. "We're low on kindling wood, Wesley."

"Johnny can split some for you."

"There aren't any logs in the woodpile left for him to split. You'll have to hitch up the team and wagon and bring some up from the creek before you go this morning. They're too heavy for Johnny to handle."

Johnny shot a quick glance at Grandpa Martin. "Grandpa'll help me. Won't you, Grandpa?"

"Eh?"

"You'll help me fetch some wood, won't you, if I show you where it is?"

"Fetchin' wood is jest naturally squaw work, boy, but if you're so minded I reckon old Big Nose could help you this once." His faded old eyes went to the window. "Tell you what. We'll take along my gun an' that fool dog of yours an' maybe shoot us a deer for supper. Pork's fine fer fillin' but it takes wild meat t' put color in a man's blood."

It was a clear, sunny morning, the ground sparkling with last night's frost. Johnny drove the team, Bo sat beside him quivering with happiness, and Grandpa Martin slouched on the far end of the wagon seat holding the long rifle between his knees. For a while Johnny was silent, covertly studying his grandfather's face, trying to puzzle out something that had been bothering him.

"Grandpa," he said at last.

"Eh?"

"Why do you call yourself Big Nose?"

" 'Cause that's the name the Injuns give me."

"But your nose isn't big at all."

" 'Course it ain't. It jest smells big."

Johnny thought that over for a moment. "You mean you can smell things a long ways off like the Indians do?"

"Ain't never seen an Injun nowhere could outsmell me, young 'un, an' that's a fact. Saved my hide many a time, I'll tell you."

"Could you teach me how to smell like you do?"

Grandpa Martin chuckled. "Sure could. Goin' to teach you a lot of things, Johnny boy, if yore ma don't run me off first." His squinted-up eyes swept the rolling gray line of horizon. "How much land yore pa got here?"

"Oh, it's a big farm. A hundred and sixty acres."

"A big farm?" Grandpa snorted. "Guess some people'd think so. What d'ye raise?"

"Corn, rye, a little hay in the bottom. Pigs and chickens too. Only the drought took most of the corn this year. Dad says he'd like to get into catle, but it costs an awful lot to start a herd and the good range land is all taken up."

"Don't you believe it!" Grandpa Martin grunted. He raised a hand and pointed west. "Lookee down yonder, boy, at the river. Got two sides, ain't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Jest what I told Ruth's man last night. Strikes me he's got gumption. Mark has, if only he'd quit listenin' to the womenfolks. Give me a little time to work on him—I'll get him to Oregon yet. Your pa an' ma, too, maybe."

"And me?" Johnny said breathlessly.

"Why, I was figgerin' on stuffin' you an' Peter down the first prairie dog hole we come to, boy! Say, the timber yonder along the creek oughta be crawlin' with deer. We'll leave the wagon this side of that dead cottonwood an' then poke around an' see what we can find."

Going to Oregon was a fine thing to dream about, but Johnny soon realized it was a pretty hopeless dream. Because the more Grandpa Martin talked the less Johnny's mother and father seemed inclined to believe anything he said. Johnny thought he was wonderful, of course, and so did Peter, but so far as Johnny's mother was concerned he was just a lazy old man who'd rather hunt than mow hay, rather eat than chop wood, rather wander in to town and loaf away the day yarning with other ne'er-do-wells than fix fence or help with the chores. His careless scattering of pipe ashes and used matches about the house, his stubborn refusal to bathe and exchange his greasy buckskins for civilized clothes, his lack of table manners and his questionable jokes were hardly calculated to add to his welcome. Worst of all, so far as she was concerned, was his influence on Johnny.

"I can't get a lick of work out of that boy any more," she complained to Johnny's father. "I send him out to do something, your father tags along—and that's the last I see of either of them for the rest of the day."

"I'll speak to Dad."

"You'd certainly better. Why, he's teaching Johnny to be a regular little savage. Making him bows and arrows. Teaching him how to shoot that old gun of his. Telling him the

wildest kind of stories—why, yesterday I caught him showing Johnny how the Indians scalped people!"

No, Johnny had to admit that his grandfather wasn't likely to get far convincing his mother that the family ought to pull up stakes and go to Oregon, come spring. Nor Ruth either. In fact, Ruth was so angry with Grandpa Martin that she wouldn't even look at him any more, let alone say a civil word to him. Johnny guessed that was because she blamed him for the argument she'd had with Mark.

How it had started he didn't know; all he knew was that there had been words, that Mark had threatened to quit his job, that he'd stalked out of the house one night muttering he'd be damned if he'd let anybody, even Ruth, tie him down to a life of plugging along in a rut when he had a chance to go someplace and amount to something. Ruth had fled to her room in tears.

A couple of days later, Johnny's father took him to town with him, dropped in at the jail and had a long talk with Mark, making Johnny wait outside. The scaffold for next Monday's hanging was finished and Johnny killed a few minutes inspecting it closely, wondering how Lew Bollinger would look dancing at the rope's end, wishing Mark and his father were in a better humor so that he could persuade them to let him come in and see the big event.

"Hey, kid!"

The voice came from a small barred window high up in the side of the frame jail building. Two huge hands gripped the bars and dimly behind them he could see a dark, heavy face and a pair of scowling eyes. Torn between fright and curiosity, he stared.

"C'mere, kid, I ain't goin' to hurt you."

The voice was hoarse and thick and compelling, drawing him against his will toward the window. "What—what do you want?"

"Come closer. C'mon, I'll give you a dollar just to do me a little favor."

"What kind of a favor?"

One of the hands vanished, then reappeared holding a scrap of paper. "I want some tobacco, that's all. You just take this note an' money to a friend of mine—"

A wagon came down the street. Hands and face vanished, and without waiting for them to reappear Johnny fled to the other side of the jail, where he sat down trembling. He

guessed that had been Lew Bollinger himself, and he wasn't about to risk the hiding he knew he'd get if he had any truck with *him,* even if only to fetch some innocent item like tobacco.

The office window was just above him. Squatting there on the sunny side of the jail, he heard voices raised in argument.

"But it isn't as if I had anything to lose!" Mark was saying angrily. "Poor as it is, you've got a piece of land to farm. All I've got is this piddling sheriff's job, and you know what *it* pays. If we get married and stay here, Ruth and I will never have anything. But there's land in Oregon —good range land with grass and water free for the taking. If a man put a few cattle on it—"

"Where would you get them?"

"In California. Your father says cattle are cheap as dirt there. I've got a few hundred dollars saved up. I'm young and strong and able to take care of myself. I could hook on with a wagon train next spring and work my way out to California, buy a hundred head of cattle, drive them up to Oregon . . ."

The voices subsided. After a while his father came out and they drove home, his father's face lined with worry. Johnny said hesitantly, "Is Mark really going to Oregon?"

"I don't know what he's going to do," his father snapped. "And I don't particularly care."

The cow had at last been paid for, but having agreed to work in town for the rest of the week Johnny's father asked Grandpa Martin at breakfast next morning if he would mind going over to the neighbor's, getting the cow and leading it home.

"Shore, I'll go fetch her," Grandpa Martin said amiably.

"Better send Johnny with him," Mrs. Martin said tartly, "if you want to make sure the cow gets here."

They got the cow home without incident, Johnny leading it, Grandpa Martin walking along beside him telling stories about how puzzled the Injuns out Oregon way had been the first time they had seen domesticated milk cows, how one chief had paid a fantastic price for a cow because an unscrupulous trader had spiked a bucket of milk with a quart of whisky, given it to the fool Injun and told him the concoction was what the cow gave several gallons a day of if pastured on the right kind of grass. Cows, in his opinion,

were more nuisance than they were worth, even if you were peculiar enough to have a taste for milk, which he damned sure didn't have. All the fuss made over this lumbering, awkward, dun-colored, four-legged milk factory by Johnny's mother, Ruth and Johnny's father irritated him no end.

"A plumb nuisance, that's all she'll be," he said at supper that evening. "Eat her fool head off, bawl to be milked mornin' an' night, an' what'll she give you? Milk! Nothin' but milk!"

"Butter, too," Johnny said.

"Who'd eat butter if he could get bear fat? Now there's somethin' to put muscle on a man's bones. No sir, you kin have all the milk an' butter in the world if you'll jest give me wild meat an' cold spring water an' a chunk of good greasy bear fat t' soak my bread down with."

Johnny's mother gave him a cold smile. "I'd be happy to cook and serve all the wild meat the family could eat—if only we had a hunter to bring it home. But all I've seen so far are a couple of tough old jackrabbits."

Johnny flushed and Grandpa Martin scowled down at his plate. That was something of a sore spot with both of them. "Beats me," Grandpa Martin muttered. "Seen all the deer sign in the world, lately, but can't catch hide n'r hoofs n'r hair. Reckon our luck's plumb hexed, eh, Johnny?"

"Reckon so," Johnny agreed, then looked guiltily at his mother. "I mean, it sure is."

"I'm afraid you're wasting your time hunting deer," Johnny's father said, shaking his head. "The country's getting too settled for deer. But there'll be ducks on the river shortly. I'll take a day off, get out my shotgun and kill us a mess."

"Scatterguns! Ducks!" Grandpa Martin snorted his contempt for both, then launched into a story about the time he'd wintered on the upper Yellowstone and him and Joe Meek had gone into a cave where six grizzly bears were hibernating. But his heart didn't seem to be in the story. Long about the time the fourth bear had been disposed of he just let the story peter off and die, and without even waiting for dessert he got up and went outside, where Johnny found him a while later, leaning on the pigpen fence staring off to the west in the dusk.

"You feel all right?" Johnny asked.

"Got a honin' fer wild meat, boy, that's all's wrong with me. Goin' to git it too. Mark my word, 'fore the week's out

I'll show yore ma an' pa old Big Nose kin keep the larder full."

The cow disappeared the second night after she'd been brought home. How it happened Johnny wasn't sure, but he guessed he and Grandpa Martin would have to take the blame. They'd been the last ones out of the barn and must have forgot to close up because when Johnny's father had gone out to milk next morning he'd found both gate and door wide open. Which bit of carelessness made him understandably angry.

"Can't see there's no call to throw a fit over one lettle old cow," Grandpa Martin said calmly. "But if you got to have the fool thing back, I reckon Johnny an' me kin track her down fer you. Can't we, Johnny boy?"

They set out right after breakfast. Bo wanted to go along but Johnny's mother insisted that he be left behind, declaring she didn't want the cow scared to death by a silly dog yapping at its heels. The ground was frozen hard and so far as Johnny could see there weren't any tracks at all, but after snooping around for a moment outside the barnyard gate Grandpa Martin grunted, "Thar 'tis. Headed straight fer the creek, she did. C'mon, boy, we'll ketch her in no time, then we'll poke around an' see if we can't shoot us a deer."

Some distance below the house the trail of the missing cow led into the timber along the creek. Grandpa Martin was leading the way down the slope and had just pushed through a wild plum thicket when he paused again to study the ground. "Crossed here, she did. Made a beeline fer home." Suddenly he gripped Johnny's arm and lowered his voice. "Whoa! Deer sign. Fresh, too, or I'm a Digger!"

Sniffing like an eager coon dog, he turned and headed down the creek, moving silently as a shadow over dead sticks and fallen leaves. Johnny tugged at his elbow and whispered, "What about the cow?"

"Time fer her later. Walk easy, boy, an' don't pester me with gabble."

They had moved no more than a hundred yards when Grandpa Martin froze. Immediately Johnny followed suit. He could see nothing, hear nothing, but Grandpa Martin's nose was twitching something fierce, the muzzle of the long rifle in his hands slowly swinging around in a questing arc. Then suddenly Johnny saw it. A movement in a thicket on

the far side of the creek. A brief glimpse of the dull brown coat of an animal.

The crack of the rifle made him jump. There was a violent thrashing in the thicket, then Grandpa Martin was leaping a fallen tree, sliding down the slope and wading the shallow stream, chortling with glee.

"Got him, sure as sin! C'mon, Johnny boy, c'mon!"

Grandpa had got him, all right. Only it wasn't a him, Johnny discovered to his horror as he caught up with his grandfather on the far side of the thicket. It was a her. And it wasn't a deer. It was a cow.

Their cow.

Grandpa Martin rubbed his eyes. Johnny stared at the cow. "She's—she's dead?"

"Purty dead, seems like."

"What'll we do?"

Grandpa Martin sat down on a log and slowly reloaded the rifle, a queer, suspicious look in his eyes. "Hexed, that's what it is. Plumb hexed."

"What'll we do?" Johnny repeated.

"Do?" Grandpa Martin rubbed his chin. "Why, first we'll skin it, I reckon, an' bury the hide. Then we'll cut it up into quarters and pack it home."

"And *eat* it?"

"Why not? Shame t' waste all that meat. 'Course cow meat won't taste quite as good as deer meat would have, but I don't reckon the family'll know the difference." He prodded the dead animal with his foot, looking at Johnny out of the corner of his eyes. "Unless we tell 'em, that is."

"You mean we'll just say it's deer meat?"

"That's the general idee."

"What'll we say about the cow?"

"I'll do some thinkin' on that," Grandpa Martin said uncomfortably. "Yes sir, I shorely will."

Then he took out his knife and went to work.

Supper that evening was something of an ordeal for Johnny, though Grandpa Martin's appetite seemed as good as ever. Somehow he parried the questions Johnny's mother shot at him, managing to give her the impression that the cow had been found safe and sound at the neighbors but was so tired from her wanderings that it would be best not to try to bring her home for a day or two. If it hadn't been that Mrs. Martin was so surprised and pleased at having

fresh meat on the table for a change, she might have been less satisfied with his explanation, but as it was she seemed to regard Grandpa Martin with a more kindly eye now that he had proved his prowess as a hunter. Johnny's father, fortunately, was working late and had not yet come home.

"More meat, Grandfather?" Johnny's mother said pleasantly, passing the plate.

"Don't mind if I do. Real tasty, ain't it?"

"It is good. Johnny, another piece?"

"No—no thank you."

"Aren't you feeling well? You've hardly touched your supper."

Johnny mumbled that he felt fine, cut off another bit of steak and put it into his mouth, though the first bite still hadn't gotten any further down than his Adam's apple. There were sounds of a horse coming into the yard. Presently his father appeared in the kitchen doorway. Mrs. Martin rose to greet him.

"Hurry and wash up, Wesley. We've got fresh meat for supper. Grandfather killed a deer."

Johnny's father did not move. "Did he?"

"Shore did," Grandpa Martin said imperturbably. "Got her first shot, too, eh, Johnny? Shot her smack in the gizzard an' she dropped dead in her tracks."

"You found the cow?"

"What cow?" Grandpa Martin said vacantly.

"Our cow. Did you find her?"

"Oh, that cow. Why, yes, we found her."

"Where?"

"Sit down, Wes, sit down an' eat."

"I asked you about the cow."

"You don't have to worry about her, son. She's plumb took care of—after a manner of speaking."

Johnny's father took one hand from behind his back and held out a teeth-worried chunk of hide. "I'm glad to hear that. I found Bo outside with this piece of hide he'd dug up someplace. It looks fresh. In fact, it looks exactly like a piece of hide off the cow you went out to find."

There fell an awful silence. Johnny's father's eyes bored into him. "Well, Johnny?"

"I—we—"

"Don't lie to me."

Johnny stared miserably down at his plate, saying nothing. Grandpa Martin pushed back his chair and rose.

"Don't pester the boy, Wes. It wa'nt his fault. Shore, I killed the fool cow. Thought it was a deer. Now sit an' eat —the world ain't goin' to stop turnin' 'cause there's one cow less in it."

The storm broke then and to Johnny it was misery to sit there and watch Grandpa Martin take it without a word of complaint. When it was over, Grandpa Martin said, "It's a small, mean life that makes a body fret so over one piddlin' cow."

Then he gathered up all his gear and moved out to the barn, mildly observing, "Kind of cramped in the parlor."

When he had gone, Johnny's father sat down at the table and stared at the floor, his face still flushed, maybe with anger, maybe with shame, it was hard to tell. Johnny's mother said, "What are we going to do with him, Wesley? What *are* we going to do?"

Later, Johnny slipped out of the house and went to the barn, where he found Grandpa Martin sitting cross-legged on the floor with the rifle laid across his knees, his face haggard and troubled in the light of a lantern suspended from a nail on the wall above him. Not speaking, Johnny squatted before him. For a long while, Grandpa Martin gave no sign he saw him, then the white head lifted and the faded eyes regarded him quizzically.

"Shore fixed things good, didn't I?"

"It wasn't your fault. Anybody could mistake a cow for a deer."

"Not an' brag about bein' a hunter, they couldn't. No sir, Johnny boy, this child never took a shot in his life 'thout knowin' certain sure what he was shootin' at. That was a deer I seen." Anger flashed in his eyes and he slapped the stock of the rifle hard with an open palm. "Great day! I know what done it! 'Twas the hex that thievin' Crow laid on me out Green River way changed it into a cow jest as I cracked down on it!"

"Hex?"

"Didn't I tell you about that?"

"No sir."

Grandpa Martin looked carefully around, as if half expecting to find ghostly figures eavesdropping in the shadowy darkness beyond the circle of lantern light, then he lowered his voice and leaned closer. "Don't say nothin' about this to yore folks. They're good church people, I reckon, and

wouldn't take kindly to me tellin' you about Injun black medicine. Promise me you won't say nothin'."

A queer, shivery feeling came over Johnny, but he shook his head vigorously. "I won't say a word."

"Well, sir, comin' hyar from Oregon I had a leetle trouble with a band of Crows. Out hoss-stealin', they was, though they pretended to be friendly to me. Traveled three days with 'em, I did, ate with 'em, slept with 'em, all nice an' sociable as you please. They was a medicine man with 'em had a mean eye. Name of 'Thunder-on-the-River.' Ugly as sin an' twice as ornery, he was. Kept tryin' t' trade me out of my gun, but of course I wouldn't trade. So one night he up an' stole it."

"How did you get it back?"

"Why, you might say I scared it out of him. You see, I had an empty pill bottle on me, and what I did was uncork it, blow it full of tobaccy smoke and stop it up tight. This hyar medicine man was in his lodge with my rifle across his knees, mumblin' Injun gabble to it, but that didn't scare me none. I jest walked in, showed him the bottle and said I'd have that there rifle back or else."

"Or else, what?"

"Else I'd uncork my bottle and let loose a plague of smallpox that'd wipe out every Injun in camp. If there's one thing'll scare an Injun plumb out of his wits, it's the pox. So he give back my rifle. But he hexed it good, ain't no doubt about that. Sort of suspected it for some time, I have, now I know for certain sure."

Johnny stared down at the gun, afraid of it suddenly.

"What—what can you do if it is hexed?"

"Simplest thing is to throw it into the deepest river you kin find. 'Cause you can't trust a hexed rifle a-tall. Meebee she'll shoot true three, four times in a row—then jest when your hide depends on her she'll misfire. Squint down her barrel an' you never can be sure what you see is really there. Meebee it jest *looks* like it's there. Meebee it's only a mirage."

Grandpa Martin shook his head, gingerly rubbing the barrel of the gun. "Why, I mind well the time Old Gabe got hold of a hexed rifle. Went bear huntin' with it, he did, an' killed two of the finest, biggest grizzlies you ever seen. Leastwise, he thought he killed 'em. Anyhow, he skinned 'em, brought home the hides and tacked 'em up to dry. Only 'stead of dryin' they jest gradually disappeared till

they wasn't even there no more. You know why? 'Cause them bears had jest been mirages all the time."

"You're going to throw your rifle—Kit Carson's rifle—in the river?"

"Shore would hate to. But I don't know if I'd ought to risk tryin' to take off the hex. Injun black medicine is plumb powerful, sometimes, an' it takes mighty strong medicine to take off the curse. Man gits to foolin' around he can git into a peck of trouble." Frowning, Grandpa Martin fondled the gun. "Damned if I don't think I'll try it, though. Better clear out, boy—no call fer you to git messed up in this."

"But I want to help," Johnny said quickly. "Can't I?"

Grandpa Martin stared at him for a moment, then slowly nodded. "All right. But remember, not a word to nobody. Now here's what we'll have to do. . . ."

Gathering the necessary materials took most of the night, Johnny managing to slip away from the house by going to bed with his clothes on at the usual hour, waiting till the household had settled down to sleep, then stealing back out to the barn unobserved. One by one he and his grandfather put the strange assortment of ingredients into a small iron pot, Johnny filled with awe and fear at the fiercely intent look in his grandfather's eyes.

"Somethin' that flies, first," Grandpa Martin mumbled. "Feathers off'n an eagle, er hawk'd do, but whar we goin' to get 'em this time of night?"

"I've got a stuffed bluejay," Johnny said eagerly. "Would that do?"

Grandpa Martin allowed it would; into the pot went two bluejay feathers.

"Somethin' that walks on four legs, now—"

"There's Bo."

In went two hairs pulled out of the dog's tail, Grandpa doing the pulling, Johnny the muzzling so Bo's protesting howl wouldn't disturb the family.

"Somethin' that walks on two legs—"

Toenail clippings answered that. Then came a toad for things that hop, a worm for things that crawl, a minnow for things that swim, and on and on down the seemingly endless list. At last Grandpa Martin nodded in satisfaction.

"Now pour water over the whole mess, sprinkle it good with lightnin' dust—"

"With what?"

"Lightnin' dust."

"Where'll we find that?"

"Go down t' the creek an' look fer a tree that's been hit by lightnin' an' burned a leetle. Scrape off a handful of the charred stuff—that's yore lightnin' dust. Hurry, boy, we ain't got much time. Got t' bile this stuff an hour or two an' then rub 'er on the rifle right at the first crack of dawn."

"Then what happens?"

"Why, I got t' carry the blamed thing with me wherever I go, eat with it, sleep with it—can't let it git whar I can't touch it. Got t' keep it loaded an' primed an' ready t' shoot. Only I dassen't shoot it fer a whole month. 'Cause if I did—" Solemnly Grandpa Martin shook his head. "Run along, boy! Run along an' git that lightnin' dust 'fore I give you two red blankets and a spotted pony!"

Johnny started toward the barn door, but his curiosity was too much for him. "Please, Grandpa, can't you tell me what would happen if you *did* shoot it?"

"Could, but I ain't about to! Git, boy, git!"

Frightened as much by the terrible thing he saw in his grandfather's eyes as by the urgent tone of his voice, Johnny got.

The atmosphere at breakfast next morning was a trifle strained. In the first place, Johnny had incurred his parents' displeasure by oversleeping, then when he finally was roused enough to start dressing he fell asleep again with one shoe on and the other off and had to be shaken before he could overcome his grogginess and stagger out to do the chores. Secondly, the matter of the cow still hung over the household, though everyone studiously avoided the subject. Thirdly, Grandpa Martin initiated an unpleasant scene by sitting down at the breakfast table with his rifle between his knees.

"Would you mind leaving that gun outside?" Johnny's father said, tight-lipped.

" 'Tain't hurtin' nobody."

"Now look here, Dad—"

"I said 'tain't hurtin' nobody. Shut up an' pass the biscuits."

The subject was dropped, but Johnny did not miss the puzzled looks that were exchanged between his father and mother. After breakfast, when Grandpa Martin had gone

back out to the barn, he overheard his mother's murmured, "Wesley, I've been wondering. Do you suppose your father is—well, you know."

"Is what, Sarah?"

"Is he—well, all right? In the head. He's acting so queerly."

Looking troubled, Johnny's father shook his head. "Of course he's all right. Johnny, go bring up the team. Then wash up and put on your good clothes. We've got to be starting for church."

Sunday! He'd forgotten all about its being Sunday, Johnny thought disgustedly as he drowsily went down to the pasture after the horses. With only an hour's sleep last night, he'd not be able to hold his eyes open more than ten minutes in church, sure as sin, and then he'd really be in trouble.

The horses were hitched to the buggy; his father, mother and Peter got in the front seat, Ruth and himself in the back. Grandpa Martin came out of the barn, still in his greasy buckskins, still carrying the rifle. Johnny's mother shot him a worried glance.

"Wesley, is it safe to leave him here alone? Shouldn't we take him to church with us?"

"I suppose we should."

The invitation was extended, and much to Johnny's surprise Grandpa Martin accepted and climbed into the buggy. "Might as well go. Don't reckon hearin' a mite of preachin'll hurt me none. Might even do me some good."

"Dad, that gun—"

"Don't figger t' shoot the preacher, son. Let's go."

As the buggy jolted along toward town, Johnny kept looking at his grandfather out of the corner of his eye, wondering in spite of himself if his mother might not be right. Certainly she'd swear she was right if she had seen what he had seen last night. Now in the clear light of day it did seem sort of foolish. Feathers and worms and lightning dust. Wild tales of Indian medicine men, and the wild, strange gleam in his grandfather's eyes as he had hunkered down before the boiling pot, muttering words that sounded like pure gibberish. Yes, it was queer as it could be; only—

Only that *had* been Kit Carson's gun; and Grandpa Martin *had* lived for years with the Indians; and maybe like he said the Indians did know a powerful lot of things when it came to making medicine; and anybody who'd done all the

things Grandpa Martin had done sure wasn't apt to mistake a fool cow for a deer unless he *had* been hexed. Fascinated, Johnny stared at the rifle, and involuntarily one hand reached out to touch it.

"Don't do that, boy!" Grandpa Martin said sharply.

Chastened, he withdrew the hand. After a moment he said, "Grandpa."

"Well?"

"If you did shoot it—"

"I ain't about to."

That was all Johnny could get out of him.

In town, Johnny's father parked the buggy in front of the church, the family got out and started to go into the house of worship. Other people were filing in, all in their stiff Sunday best clothes and their solemn Sunday best faces, though now and then there were small smiles and hurried whsipers at the incongruous picture Grandpa Martin made in his buckskins with the long rifle cradled in his arms. Reluctant to make a scene, Johnny's father whispered, "Leave the rifle in the buggy, Dad, please."

"It goes whar I go," Grandpa Martin said stubbornly.

"But you can't take it into church! You just can't!"

"Well, then, reckon I'll jest sit outside an' wait. Don't reckon the preachin'd do me much good nohow."

"I'll wait with him," Johnny said eagerly.

"You'll do nothing of the kind," his mother said sharply. "Come along, everyone, we'll be late."

Reluctantly Johnny followed the family into the church, turning at the door for one last backward glance at Grandpa Martin, who had squatted cross-legged against the building where the sun warmed it, rifle across his knees, eyes peering vacantly off into the distance. Down the block a way and across the street the new scaffold stood bleak and ominous in the vacant lot beside the jail, and as Johnny seated himself in the pew between his mother and father he made a mighty vow to stay awake every minute, not to whisper to Peter, not to squirm, not to do anything that might get him in bad—just on the off chance that by behaving himself he might persuade his father to let him go see the hanging tomorrow.

The service seemed endless. It started out lively enough, what with singing, responses and all, but then the preacher took over and from then on the battle to stay awake was fierce. The text was something about creating no molten

images, and for a while Johnny kept himself uneasy and wide awake by pretending the preacher knew all about the mess of feathers and worms and lightning dust he and Grandpa Martin had stirred up last night and was preaching straight at him; but as soon as he found out that molten images were made of brass the pretense fell apart. He and Grandpa Martin hadn't put any brass in the pot, that was for sure.

He counted the times the preacher struck the pulpit with his closed fist. He blinked his eyes and counted the rafters, counted the people, counted the times Mark Hale, sitting stiff and angry-looking across the aisle, glanced at Ruth when she wasn't looking, and the times Ruth glanced at him when he wasn't looking. They were mad at each other good, he guessed. There had been a time when that would have bothered him, but now he didn't much care. Dressed in his black Sunday suit, minus his gun and badge, Mark looked just like any other churchgoer—stuffy, dull, solemn as all get-out.

His eyelids grew heavy. Slowly his head dropped. Got to keep awake. Got to . . .

Somewhere a shot sounded.

The preacher's voice broke in the middle of an adverb. Heads craned around as Mark Hale, leaping up as though he'd been sitting on a coiled steel spring, went running up the aisle and out the front door. From the street came a hoarse shout.

"He's loose! Lew Bollinger's loose!"

Things happened in a confused rush. As one man, the whole congregation got up and headed for the door, men shouting for the women to stay inside, calling out, "A gun, a gun! Who's got a gun?"

Being in one of the back pews and quick on his feet, Johnny got to the door before his parents could stop him. But Ruth had moved even more quickly, following Mark a fraction of an instant after he had gone running up the aisle, crying for him to wait. He hadn't waited. Tumbling down the front steps now, Johnny saw him running across the street toward the jail, saw the bulky figure of a man appear there, saw a six-shooter lift.

The gun roared. In mid-stride, Mark crumpled to the ground in the middle of the street. Skirts swirled past Johnny, then Ruth was running toward Mark, toward that awful figure with the raised gun. She did not even appear

to see him. Reaching Mark, she stooped, tugged at his shoulder. The man in the jail door took two quick strides forward, seized her, jerked her to her feet and whirled her around to face the crowd spilling into the street, thrusting the six-shooter hard into the small of her back.

"Stop where you are, all of you!"

It was like a nightmare, an awful, throat-choking nightmare. The sudden hush that dropped over the crowd. The bright autumn sunlight spilling down on the street. The tall yellow timbers of the new scaffold. And Ruth, yonder, and Mark sprawled in the dust in his Sunday suit—and the savage face of Lew Bollinger showing above Ruth's flowered Sunday hat.

"For God's sake!" Johnny's father said in an agonized voice, "don't anybody move!"

The tableau held for a long moment. Slowly Johnny got to his feet, aware that Grandpa Martin was standing with his back to the front wall of the church, the rifle not in his hands now but resting beside him, butt on the ground, barrel parallel to his body, concealed from the man across the way. For an instant a wild hope flared in Johnny, then quickly died. Grandpa Martin had a gun, yes, but he wouldn't dare use it—not with Ruth in the way and Lew Bollinger's six-shooter cocked and pressed against her back.

"Boy!" Lew Bollinger called.

"Me?" Johnny faltered.

"Yeah. Untie that bay team and rig. Bring it here. Quick!"

His feet felt like they were anchored to the ground. Then he became aware of his father's voice urging him to obey, and he forced himself to move. Untying the team with trembling fingers, he led it across the street, turned it around in front of the jail where Lew Bollinger ordered him to, handed the reins to Ruth.

"Now, git!" Bollinger said.

He backed away. White as chalk, Ruth climbed into the buggy and sat with the reins in her hands, Bollinger beside her with the gun pressed against her. Glancing briefly at the scaffold, Bollinger let his thick lips part in a grimace.

"I told 'em they'd never hang me! Move along, gal, and don't spare the whip!"

The buggy went whirling down the street in a cloud of dust, past the stunned crowd in front of the church, wheeled

out of sight at the lower end of town. Then the silence was broken by a hundred voices.

"Head them off!"

"A gun, a gun—my God, who's got a gun!"

"Don't crowd him, men—he'll kill her sure!"

Men ran for their saddle horses, for their buggies; others started out afoot. There was a struggle on the church steps as several women tried to make Johnny's mother come inside, but she tore away from them, leaped into the buggy beside his father and went tearing off with him, leaning forward in the seat and urging him to drive faster. Not sure what to do, Johnny stood for a moment irresolute. Then a calm voice beside him made him look around.

"Where's he headin', Johnny boy?"

"To the ferry."

"S'pose that ferryman'll have sense enough to pull out from shore an' leave him stranded?"

"He'll be asleep, likely. He usually is. Anyhow, he wouldn't have any reason to suspect anything was wrong."

"Reckon you're right. Well, c'mon, then. Meebee we kin git there in time to do somethin'."

It occurred to Johnny as they ran down the street that by cutting directly across the fields they could save much of the distance the road added in its winding loops down the bluffs. Not enough to head off the buggy, maybe; still, they'd get there before the ferry had time to cast loose and move out into the river. Even so, he couldn't see there was much they could do.

Minutes later the ferry landing was in sight, the boat still tied to the wharf, a thin curling plume of smoke showing that it had steam up. There was the buggy Lew Bollinger had forced Ruth to drive; there was Bollinger himself, standing on the wharf with the ferryman cowed before him, Ruth between himself and the gathering crowd pouring down the road. Grandpa Martin laid a hand on Johnny's arm and drew him to a halt.

"Hold it, young 'un. Reckon we got t' do some figgerin'."

They dropped to their knees in the dead, dry weeds and peered downward at the landing some three or four hundred yards away, Grandpa Martin's eyes sharp and bright and calculating. With the river to his back and escape now a certainty Lew Bollinger was in no particular hurry. Knowing the crowd was helpless, exulting over it, he made demands with which they had no choice but to comply. First,

money. One by one he made the men come forward and empty the contents of their wallets on the ground, to be gathered up by the frightened ferryman. Then horses, three of the best saddle horses in the crowd. These, too, the ferryman was forced to lead onto the wharf. Then Bollinger waved for the crowd to move back, gestured the ferryman aboard and started backing slowly across the wharf himself, pulling Ruth with him.

"That ditch yonder," Grandpa Martin said. "S'pose a man could stay hid if he crawled down it a piece?"

"I guess so."

"Let's give it a try."

"Grandpa!" Johnny said in alarm. "What are you going to do?"

Instead of answering, Grandpa Martin crawled over to the ditch, slid down into it, and swiftly started worming his way down the hill. Scared voiceless, Johnny followed.

How long they crawled he never knew. It couldn't have been very long, but it seemed like hours. And then suddenly Grandpa Martin stopped. Slowly, cautiously, he raised his body inch by inch, the rifle extended before him. At last he froze. Behind him, Johnny stared.

Beyond the crowd he could see Lew Bollinger and Ruth at the far end of the wharf. A hundred yards away, they were, maybe more. Ruth's eyes were half closed, her face drained of all color. Above her Sunday hat showed a hand-sized patch of Lew Bollinger's forehead. That was all the target there was. If the rifle was hexed . . . if it did shoot low . . . if Grandpa were crazy . . . The dully glittering barrel came to rest.

Desperately Johnny tried to cry out in protest as the trigger finger tightened. But no sound passed his lips. Then the old gun spoke.

A figure reeled forward, sagged at the knees, crumpled to the wharf. The bulky, heavy figure of a man—in the exact center of whose forehead had suddenly appeared a hole. Lew Bollinger, true to his vow, had escaped the hangman's noose—forever.

Rising to one knee, Grandpa Martin lowered the rifle and absent-mindedly pulled his scalping knife half out of its sheath, then regretfully shook his head, muttering, "Nope, don't reckon it'd do a-tall, bein' Sunday an' all—"

Calmly he went to work reloading the gun.

Grandpa Martin made a fine hero, a perfect hero And it didn't take away from his luster one bit, so far as the community, the family, and Ruth were concerned, when he insisted that Mark Hale was the one who'd really been the hero, what with the way he'd made for Lew Bollinger barehanded when he'd gone running out of the church and seen him there in the jail door.

"T'ain't no trick at all t' shoot a standin' target when you got a true-shootin' gun like mine," Grandpa Martin said modestly. "But Mark, now—well, Ruthie gal, he's got the hair of the grizzly bar in him for sure. Leetle old flea-bite like a bullet hole in his middle ain't goin' t' keep him down fer long, er I'm a Digger! Hang tight t'him, Ruthie—he'll amount t' somethin' iff'n he gits half a chance."

"He'll have it," Ruth answered, her eyes fierce and sharp and determined. "Oh, Grandpa, believe me, he'll have it!"

So far as Johnny was concerned, of course, Grandpa Martin had been a hero all along, but he wasn't a bit displeased that everyone else agreed with him now. Because long before that exciting day was over, he saw that nobody would ever be inclined to doubt his grandfather's stories now. Not even his father and mother. And with a whole winter of long, cold evenings ahead, with nothing to do but sit in front of the fire and talk about Oregon, who could tell how his parents would feel, come spring? Anyhow, it was a fine thing to dream on.

But one thing troubled him. That evening after supper, helping his grandfather gather up his gear and move back into the house from the barn, he voiced his question.

"Grandpa."

"Eh?"

"Do you really think your rifle was—was hexed?"

"Likely it was, boy."

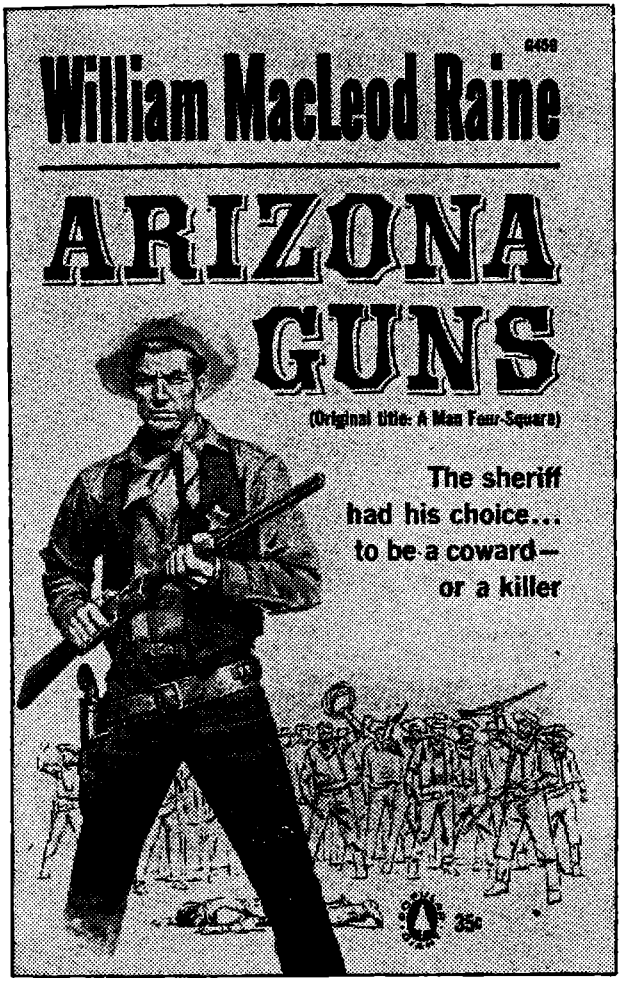
"But you said you dassen't shoot it for a month, or something awful would happen. What was it you thought would happen?"

A faraway look came into Grandpa Martin's eyes, and his voice grew soft. "Why, Johnny boy, the Injuns say iff'n you shoot a hexed gun, 'fore a month's gone by after you've rubbed on the cure, it'll drink human blood first shot. Which cures the hex for sure." Chuckling, he tousled Johnny's hair. "T' tell the truth, I wasn't *real* sure the fool thing was hexed. Meebee, I got t' thinkin', I was just gettin'

so old an' nearsighted I couldn't tell the difference twixt a deer an' a cow. Kind of worried me, it did. So afore I shot, I jest naturally closed my eyes—"

"You—you *what?*"

"Closed my eyes an' said a leetle prayer. Then I opened 'em an' let fly." Picking up his blankets, he started for the barn door. "Seems t' work, too. Next time we go deer-huntin', remind me t' try it agin."



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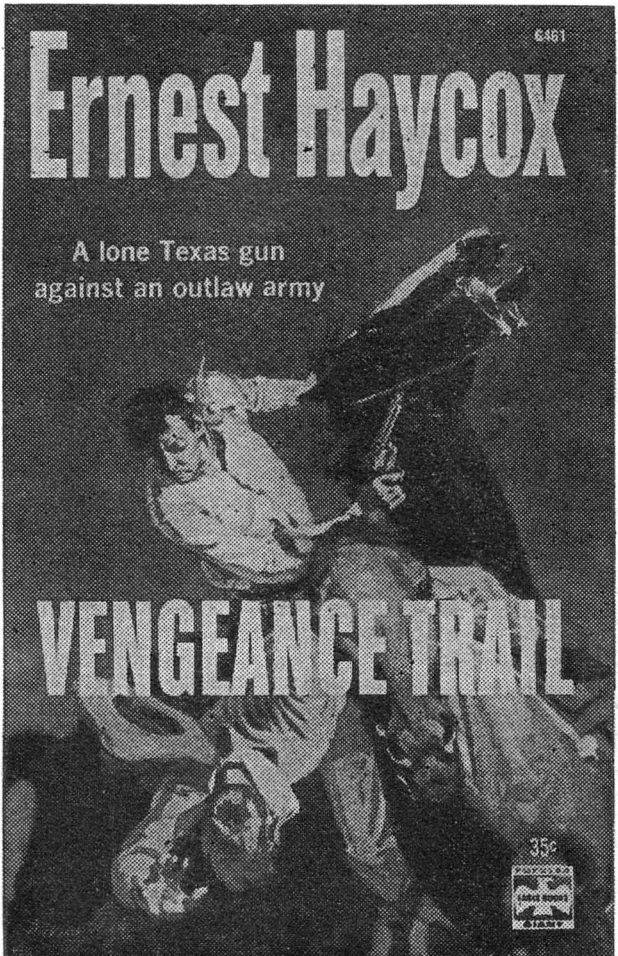

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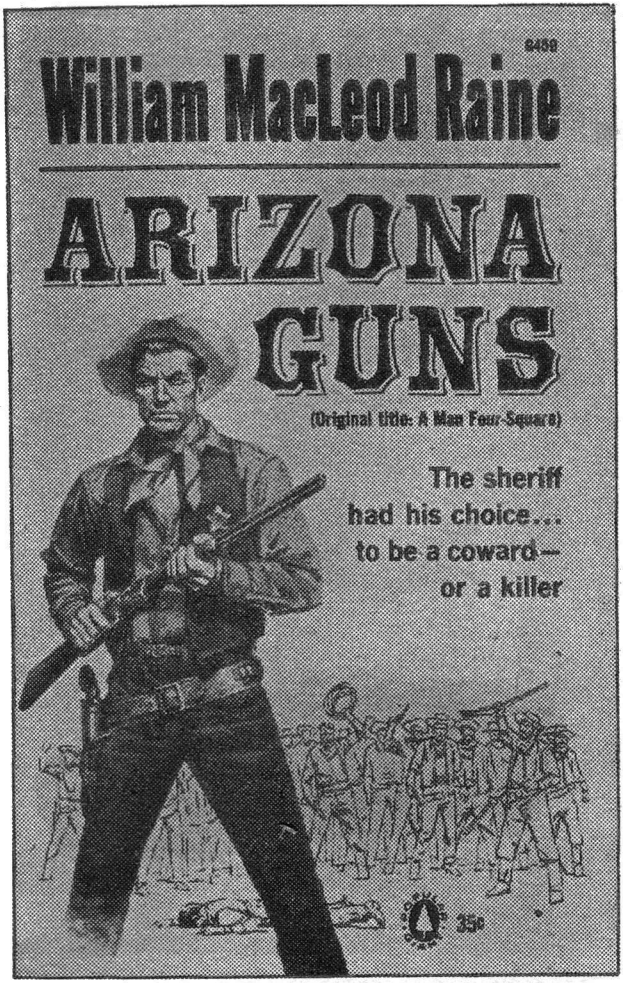

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