

TREASURES OF TARTARY



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Key to the Treasure

It was not mere impulsiveness that sent Kirby O'Donnell into the welter of writhing limbs and whickering blades that loomed so suddenly in the semidarkness ahead of him. In that dark alley of Forbidden Shahrazar it was no light act to plunge headlong into a nameless brawl; and O'Donnell, for all his Irish love of a fight, was not disposed thoughtlessly to jeopardize his secret mission.

But the glimpse of a scarred, bearded face swept from his mind all thought and emotion save a crimson wave of fury. He acted instinctively.

Full into the midst of the flailing group, half-seen by the light of a distant cresset, O'Donnell leaped, *kindhjal* in hand. He was dimly aware that one man was fighting three or four others, but all his attention was fixed on a single tall gaunt form, dim in the shadows. His long, narrow, curved blade licked venomously at this figure, ploughing through cloth, bringing a yelp as the edge sliced skin. Something crashed down on O'Donnell's head, gun butt or bludgeon, and he reeled, and closed with someone he could not see.

His groping hand locked on a chain that encircled a bull neck, and with a straining gasp he ripped upward and felt his keen *kindhjal* slice through cloth, skin and belly muscles. An agonized groan burst from his victim's lips, and blood gushed sickeningly over O'Donnell's hand.

Through a blur of clearing sight, the American saw a broad bearded face falling away from him — not the face he had seen before. The next instant he had leaped clear of the dying man, and was slashing at the shadowy forms about him. An instant of flickering steel, and then the figures were running fleetly up the alley. O'Donnell, springing in pursuit, his hot blood lashed to murderous fury, tripped over a writhing form and fell headlong. He rose, cursing, and was aware of a man near him, panting heavily. A tall man, with a long curved blade in hand. Three forms lay in the mud of the alley.

"Come, my friend, whoever you are!" the tall man panted in *Turki*. "They have fled, but they will return with others. Let us go!"

O'Donnell made no reply. Temporarily accepting the alliance into which chance had cast him, he followed the tall stranger who ran down the winding alley with the sure foot of familiarity. Silence held them until they

emerged from a low dark arch, where a tangle of alleys debouched upon a broad square, vaguely lighted by small fires about which groups of turbaned men squabbled and brewed tea. A reek of unwashed bodies mingled with the odors of horses and camels. None noticed the two men standing in the shadow made by the angle of the mud wall.

O'Donnell looked at the stranger, seeing a tall slim man with thin dark features. Under his *khalat* which was draggled and darkly splashed, showed the silver-heeled boots of a horseman. His turban was awry, and though he had sheathed his scimitar, blood clotted the hilt and the scabbard mouth.

The keen black eyes took in every detail of the American's appearance, but O'Donnell did not flinch. His disguise had stood the test too many times for him to doubt its effectiveness.

The American was somewhat above medium height, leanly built, but with broad shoulders and corded sinews which gave him a strength out of all proportion to his weight. He was a hard-woven mass of wiry muscles and steel string nerves, combining the wolf-trap coordination of a natural fighter with a berserk fury resulting from an overflowing nervous energy. The *kindhjal* in his girdle and the scimitar at his hip were as much a part of him as his hands.

He wore the Kurdish boots, vest and girdled *khalat* like a man born to them. His keen features, bummed to bronze by desert suns, were almost as dark as those of his companion.

"Tell me thy name," requested the other. "I owe my life to thee."

"I am Ali el Ghazi, a Kurd," answered O'Donnell.

No hint of suspicion shadowed the other's countenance. Under the coiffed Arab *kafiyeh* O'Donnell's eyes blazed lambent blue, but blue eyes were not at all unknown among the warriors of the Iranian highlands.

The Turk lightly and swiftly touched the hawk-headed pommel of O'Donnell's scimitar.

"I will not forget," he promised. "I will know thee wherever we meet again. Now it were best we separated and went far from this spot, for men with knives will be seeking me — and thou too, for aiding me." And like a shadow he glided among the camels and bales and was gone.

O'Donnell stood silently for an instant, one ear cocked back toward the alley, the other absently taking in the sounds of the night. Somewhere a thin wailing voice sang to a twanging native lute. Somewhere else a feline-like burst of profanity marked the progress of a quarrel. O'Donnell breathed

deep with contentment, despite the grim Hooded Figure that stalked forever at his shoulder, and the recent rage that still seethed in his veins. This was the real heart of the East, the East which had long ago stolen his heart and led him to wander afar from his own people.

He realized that he still gripped something in his left hand, and he lifted it to the flickering light of a nearby fire. It was a length of gold chain, one of its massy links twisted and broken. From it depended a curious plaque of beaten gold, somewhat larger than a silver dollar, but oval rather than round. There was no ornament, only a boldly carved inscription which O'Donnell, with all his Eastern lore, could not decipher.

He knew that he had torn the chain from the neck of the man he had killed in that black alley, but he had no idea as to its meaning. Slipping it into his broad girdle, he strode across the square, walking with the swagger of a nomadic horseman that was so natural to him.

Leaving the square he strode down a narrow street, the overhanging balconies of which almost touched one another. It was not late. Merchants in flowing silk robes sat cross-legged before their booths, extolling the quality of their goods — Mosul silk, matchlocks from Herat, edged weapons from India, and seed pearls from Baluchistan, hawk-like Afghans and weapon-girdled Uzbeks jostled him. Lights streamed through silk-covered windows overhead, and the light silvery laughter of women rose above the noise of barter and dispute.

There was a tingle in the realization that he, Kirby O'Donnell, was the first Westerner ever to set foot in forbidden Shahrazar, tucked away in a nameless valley not many days' journey from where the Afghan mountains swept down into the steppes of the Turkomans. As a wandering Kurd, traveling with a caravan from Kabul he had come, staking his life against the golden lure of a treasure beyond men's dreams.

In the bazaars and *serais* he had heard a tale: To Shaibar Khan, the Uzbek chief who had made himself master of Shahrazar, the city had given up its ancient secret. The Uzbek had found the treasure hidden there so long ago by Muhammad Shah, king of Khuwarezm, the Land of the Throne of Gold, when his empire fell before the Mongols.

O'Donnell was in Shahrazar to steal that treasure; and he did not change his plans because of the bearded face he had recognized in the alley — the face of an old and hated enemy. Yar Akbar the Afridi, traitor and murderer.

O'Donnell turned from the street and entered a narrow arched gate which stood open as if in invitation. A narrow stair went up from a small court to a balcony. This he mounted, guided by the tinkle of a guitar and a plaintive voice singing in *Pushtu*.

He entered a room whose latticed casement overhung the street, and the singer ceased her song to greet him and make half-mocking salaam with a lithe flexing of supple limbs. He replied, and deposited himself on a divan. The furnishings of the room were not elaborate, but they were costly. The garments of the woman who watched interestedly were of silk, her satin vest sewn with seed pearls. Her dark eyes, over the filmy *yasmaq*, were lustrous and expressive, the eyes of a Persian.

"Would my lord have food — and wine?" she inquired; and O'Donnell signified assent with the lordly gesture of a Kurdish swashbuckler who is careful not to seem too courteous to any woman, however famed in intrigue she may be. He had come there not for food and drink, but because he had heard in the bazaars that news of many kinds blew on the winds through the house of Ayisha, where men from far and near came to drink her wine and listen to her songs.

She served him, and, sinking down on cushions near him, watched him eat and drink. O'Donnell's appetite was not feigned. Many lean days had taught him to eat when and where he could. Ayisha seemed to him more like a curious child than an intriguing woman, evincing so much interest over a wandering Kurd, but he knew that she was weighing him carefully behind her guileless stare, as she weighed all men who came into her house.

In that hotbed of plot and ambitions, the wandering stranger today might be the Amir of Afghanistan or the Shah of Persia tomorrow — or the morrow might see his headless body dangling as a feast for the birds.

"You have a good sword," said she. He involuntarily touched the hilt. It was an Arab blade, long, lean, curved like the crescent moon, with a brass hawk's head for a pommel.

"It has cut many a Turkoman out of the saddle," he boasted, with his mouth full, carrying out his character. Yet it was no empty boast.

"*Hai!*" She believed him and was impressed. She rested her chin on her small fists and gazed up at him, as if his dark, hawk-like face had caught her fancy.

"The Khan needs swords like yours," she said.

"The Khan has many swords," he retorted, gulping wine loudly.

“No more than he will need if Orkhan Bahadur comes against him,” she prophesied.

“I have heard of this Orkhan,” he replied. And so he had; who in Central Asia had not heard of the daring and valorous Turkoman chief who defied the power of Moscow and had cut to pieces a Russian expedition sent to subdue him? “In the bazaars they say the Khan fears him.”

That was a blind venture. Men did not speak of Shaibar Khan’s fears openly.

Ayisha laughed. “Who does the Khan fear? Once the Amir sent troops to take Shahrazar, and those who lived were glad to flee! Yet if any man lives who could storm the city, Orkhan Bahadur is that man. Only tonight the Uzbeks were hunting his spies through the alleys.”

O’Donnell remembered the Turkish accent of the stranger he had unwittingly aided. It was quite possible that the man was a Turkoman spy.

As he pondered this, Ayisha’s sharp eyes discovered the broken end of the gold chain dangling from his girdle, and with a gurgle of delight she snatched it forth before he could stop her. Then with a squeal she dropped it as if it were hot, and prostrated herself in wriggling abasement among the cushions.

He scowled and picked up the trinket.

“Woman, what are you about?” he demanded.

“Your pardon, lord!” She clasped her hands, but her fear seemed more feigned than real; her eyes sparkled. “I did not know it was *the* token. *Aie*, you have been making game of me — asking me things none could know better than yourself. Which of the Twelve are you?”

“You babble as bees hum!” He scowled, dangling the pendant before her eyes. “You speak as one of knowledge, when, by Allah, you know not the meaning of this thing.”

“Nay, but I do!” she protested. “I have seen such emblems before on the breasts of the *emirs* of the Inner Chamber. I know that it is a *talsmin* greater than the seal of the Amir, and the wearer comes and goes at will in or out of the Shining Palace.”

“But why, wench, why?” he growled impatiently.

“Nay, I will whisper what you know so well,” she answered, kneeling beside him. Her breath came soft as the sighing of the distant night wind. “It is the symbol of a Guardian of the Treasure!”

She fell away from him laughing. “Have I not spoken truly?”

He did not at once reply. His brain was dizzy, the blood pounding madly in his veins.

“Say nothing of this,” he said at last, rising. “Your life upon it.” And casting her a handful of coins at random, he hurried down the stair and into the street. He realized that his departure was too abrupt, but he was too dizzy, with the realization of what had fallen into his hands, for an entirely placid course of action.

The treasure! In his hand he held what well might be the key to it — at least a key into the palace, to gain entrance into which he had racked his brain in vain ever since coming to Shahrazar. His visit to Ayisha had borne fruit beyond his wildest dreams.

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<code> CHAPTER II

The Unholy Plan

Doubtless in Muhammad Shah’s day the Shining Palace deserved its name; even now it preserved some of its former splendor. It was separated from the rest of the city by a thick wall, and at the great gate there always stood a guard of Uzbeks with Lee-Enfield rifles, and girdles bristling with knives and pistols.

Shaibar Khan had an almost superstitious terror of accidental gunfire, and would allow only edged weapons to be brought into the palace. But his warriors were armed with the best rifles that could be smuggled into the hills.

There was a limit to O’Donnell’s audacity. There might be men on guard at the main gates who knew by sight all the *emirs* of the symbol. He made his way to a small side gate, through a loophole in which, at his imperious call, there peered a black man with the wizened features of a mute. O’Donnell had fastened the broken links together and the chain now looped his corded neck. He indicated the plaque which rested on the silk of his *khalat*; and with a deep salaam, the black man opened the gate.

O’Donnell drew a deep breath. He was in the heart of the lion’s lair now, and he dared not hesitate or pause to deliberate. He found himself in a garden which gave onto an open court surrounded by arches supported on marble pillars. He crossed the court, meeting no one. On the opposite side a grim-looking Uzbek, leaning on a spear, scanned him narrowly but said nothing. O’Donnell’s skin crawled as he strode past the somber warrior, but

the man merely stared curiously at the gold oval gleaming against the Kurdish vest.

O'Donnell found himself in a corridor whose walls were decorated by a gold frieze, and he went boldly on, seeing only soft-footed slaves who took no heed of him. As he passed into another corridor, broader and hung with velvet tapestries, his heart leaped into his mouth.

It was a tall slender man in long fur-trimmed robes and a silk turban who glided from an arched doorway and halted him. The man had the pale oval face of a Persian, with a black pointed beard, and dark shadowed eyes. As with the others his gaze sought first the *talsmin* on O'Donnell's breast — the token, undoubtedly, of a servitor beyond suspicion.

"Come with me!" snapped the Persian. "I have work for you." And vouchsafing no further enlightenment, he stalked down the corridor as if expecting O'Donnell to follow without question; which, indeed, the American did, believing that such would have been the action of the genuine Guardian of the Treasure. He knew this Persian was Ahmed Pasha, Shaibar Khan's vizir; he had seen him riding along the streets with the royal house troops.

The Persian led the way into a small domed chamber, without windows, the walls hung with thick tapestries. A small bronze lamp lighted it dimly. Ahmed Pasha drew aside the hangings, directly behind a heap of cushions, and disclosed a hidden alcove.

"Stand there with drawn sword," he directed. Then he hesitated. "Can you speak or understand any Frankish tongue?" he demanded. The false Kurd shook his head.

"Good!" snapped Ahmed Pasha. "You are here to watch, not to listen. Our lord does not trust the man he is to meet here — alone. You are stationed behind the spot where this man will sit. Watch him like a hawk. If he makes a move against the Khan, cleave his skull. If harm comes to our prince, you shall be flayed alive." He paused, glared an instant, then snarled:

"And hide that emblem, fool! Shall the whole world know you are an *emir* of the Treasure?"

"Harkening and obedience, *ya khawand*," mumbled O'Donnell, thrusting the symbol inside his garments. Ahmed jerked the tapestries together, and left the chamber. O'Donnell glanced through a tiny opening,

waiting for the soft pad of the vizir's steps to fade away before he should glide out and take up again his hunt for the treasure.

But before he could move, there was a low mutter of voices, and two men entered the chamber from opposite sides. One bowed low and did not venture to seat himself until the other had deposited his fat body on the cushions, and indicated permission.

O'Donnell knew that he looked on Shaibar Khan, once the terror of the Kirghiz steppes, and now lord of Shahrazar. The Uzbek had the broad powerful build of his race, but his thick limbs were soft from easy living. His eyes held some of their old restless fire, but the muscles of his face seemed flabby, and his features were lined and purpled with debauchery. And there seemed something else — a worried, haunted look, strange in that son of reckless nomads. O'Donnell wondered if the possession of the treasure was weighing on his mind.

The other man was slender, dark, his garments plain beside the gorgeous ermine-trimmed *kaftan*, pearl-sewn girdle and green, emerald-crested turban of the Khan.

This stranger plunged at once into conversation, low voiced but animated and urgent. He did most of the talking, while Shaibar Khan listened, occasionally interjecting a question, or a grunt of gratification. The Khan's weary eyes began to blaze, and his pudgy hands knotted as if they gripped again the hilt of the blade which had carved his way to power.

And Kirby O'Donnell forgot to curse the luck which held him prisoner while precious time drifted by. Both men spoke a tongue the American had not heard in years — a European language. And scanning closely the slim dark stranger, O'Donnell admitted himself baffled. If the man were, as he suspected, a European disguised as an Oriental, then O'Donnell knew he had met his equal in masquerade.

For it was European politics he talked, European politics that lay behind the intrigues of the East. He spoke of war and conquest, and vast hordes rolling down the Khybar Pass into India; to complete the overthrow, said the dark slender man, of a rule outworn.

He promised power and honors to Shaibar Khan, and O'Donnell, listening, realized that the Uzbek was but a pawn in his game, no less than those others he mentioned. The Khan, narrow of vision, saw only a mountain kingdom for himself, reaching down into the plains of Persia and

India, and backed by European guns — not realizing those same guns could just as easily overwhelm him when the time was ripe.

But O'Donnell, with his western wisdom, read behind the dark stranger's words, and recognized there a plan of imperial dimensions, and the plot of a European power to seize half of Asia. And the first move in that game was to be the gathering of warriors by Shaibar Khan. How? With the treasure of Khuwarezm! With it he could buy all the swords of Central Asia.

So the dark man talked and the Uzbek listened like an old wolf who harks to the trampling of the musk oxen in the snow. O'Donnell listened, his blood freezing as the dark man casually spoke of invasions and massacres; and as the plot progressed and became more plain in detail, more monstrous and ruthless in conception, he trembled with a mad urge to leap from his cover and slash and hack both these bloody devils into pieces with the scimitar that quivered in his nervous grasp. Only a sense of self-preservation stayed him from this madness; and presently Shaibar Khan concluded the audience and left the chamber, followed by the dark stranger. O'Donnell saw this one smile furtively, like a man who has victory in his grasp.

O'Donnell started to draw aside the curtain, when Ahmed Pasha came padding into the chamber. It occurred to the American that it would be better to let the vizir find him at his post. But before Ahmed could speak, or draw aside the curtain, there sounded a rapid pattering of bare feet in the corridor outside, and a man burst into the room, wild eyed and panting. At the sight of him a red mist wavered across O'Donnell's sight. It was Yar Akbar!

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<code> CHAPTER III

Wolf Pack

The Afridi fell on his knees before Ahmed Pasha. His garments were tattered; blood seeped from a broken tooth and clotted his straggly beard.

"Oh, master," he panted, "the dog has escaped!"

"Escaped!" The vizir rose to his full height, his face convulsed with passion. O'Donnell thought that he would strike down the Afridi, but his arm quivered, fell by his side.

"Speak!" The Persian's voice was dangerous as the hiss of a cobra.

“We hedged him in a dark alley,” Yar Akbar babbled. “He fought like *Shaitan*. Then others came to his aid — a whole nest of Turkomans, we thought, but mayhap it was but one man. He too was a devil! He slashed my side — see the blood! For hours since we have hunted them, but found no trace. He is over the wall and gone!” In his agitation Yar Akbar plucked at a chain about his neck; from it depended an oval like that held by O’Donnell. The American realized that Yar Akbar, too, was an emir of the Treasure. The Afridi’s eyes burned like a wolf’s in the gloom, and his voice sank.

“He who wounded me slew Othman,” he whispered fearfully, “and despoiled him of the *talsmin*!”

“Dog!” The vizir’s blow knocked the Afridi sprawling. Ahmed Pasha was livid. “Call the other *emirs* of the Inner Chamber, swiftly!”

Yar Akbar hastened into the corridor, and Ahmed Pasha called:

“Ohe! You who hide behind the hangings — come forth!” There was no reply, and pale with sudden suspicion, Ahmed drew a curved dagger and with a pantherish spring tore the tapestry aside. The alcove was empty.

As he glared in bewilderment, Yar Akbar ushered into the chamber as unsavory a troop of ruffians as a man might meet, even in the hills: Uzbeks, Afghans, Gilzais, Pathans, scarred with crime and old in wickedness. Ahmed Pasha counted them swiftly. With Yar Akbar there were eleven.

“Eleven,” he muttered. “And dead Othman makes twelve. All these men are known to you, Yar Akbar?”

“My head on it!” swore the Afridi. “These be all true men.”

Ahmed clutched his beard.

“Then, by God, the One True God,” he groaned, “that Kurd I set to guard the Khan was a spy and a traitor.” And at that moment a shriek and a clash of steel re-echoed through the palace.

When O’Donnell heard Yar Akbar gasping out his tale to the vizir, he knew the game was up. He did not believe that the alcove was a blind niche in the wall; and, running swift and practiced hands over the panels, he found and pressed a hidden catch. An instant before Ahmed Pasha tore aside the tapestry, the American wriggled his lean body through the opening and found himself in a dimly lighted chamber on the other side of the wall. A black slave dozed on his haunches, unmindful of the blade that hovered over his ebony neck, as O’Donnell glided across the room, and through a curtained doorway.

He found himself back in the corridor into which one door of the audience chamber opened, and crouching among the curtains, he saw Yar Akbar come up the hallway with his villainous crew. He saw, too, that they had come up a marble stair at the end of the hall.

His heart leaped. In that direction, undoubtedly, lay the treasure — now supposedly unguarded. As soon as the *emirs* vanished into the audience chamber where the vizir waited, O'Donnell ran swiftly and recklessly down the corridor.

But even as he reached the stairs, a man sitting on them sprang up, brandishing a tulwar. A black slave, evidently left there with definite orders, for the sight of the symbol on O'Donnell's breast did not halt him. O'Donnell took a desperate chance, gambling his speed against the cry that rose in the thick black throat.

He lost. His scimitar licked through the massive neck and the Soudani rolled down the stairs, spurting blood. But his yell had rung to the roof.

And at that yell the *emirs* of the gold came headlong out of the audience chamber, giving tongue like a pack of wolves. They did not need Ahmed's infuriated shriek of recognition and command. They were men picked for celerity of action as well as courage, and it seemed to O'Donnell that they were upon him before the Negro's death yell had ceased to echo.

He met the first attacker, a hairy Pathan, with a long lunge that sent his scimitar point through the thick throat even as the man's broad tulwar went up for a stroke. Then a tall Uzbek swung his heavy blade like a butcher's cleaver. No time to parry; O'Donnell caught the stroke near his own hilt, and his knees bent under the impact.

But the next instant the *kindhjal* in his left hand ripped through the Uzbek's entrails, and with a powerful heave of his whole body, O'Donnell hurled the dying man against those behind him, bearing them back with him. Then O'Donnell wheeled and ran, his eyes blazing defiance of the death that whickered at his back.

Ahead of him another stair led up. O'Donnell reached it one long bound ahead of his pursuers, gained the steps and wheeled, all in one motion, slashing down at the heads of the pack that came clamoring after him.

Shaibar Khan's broad pale face peered up at the melee from the curtains of an archway, and O'Donnell was grateful to the Khan's obsessional fear that had barred firearms from the palace. Otherwise, he would already have been shot down like a dog. He himself had no gun; the pistol with which he

had started the adventure had slipped from its holster somewhere on that long journey, and lay lost among the snows of the Himalayas.

No matter; he had never yet met his match with cold steel. But no blade could long have held off the ever-increasing horde that swarmed up the stair at him.

He had the advantage of position, and they could not crowd past him on the narrow stair; their very numbers hindered them. His flesh crawled with the fear that others would come down the stair and take him from behind, but none came. He retreated slowly, plying his dripping blades with berserk frenzy. A steady stream of taunts and curses flowed from his lips, but even in his fury he spoke in the tongues of the East, and not one of his assailants realized that the madman who opposed them was anything but a Kurd.

He was bleeding from a dozen flesh cuts, when he reached the head of the stairs which ended in an open trap. Simultaneously the wolves below him came clambering up to drag him down. One gripped his knees, another was hewing madly at his head. The others howled below them, unable to get at their prey.

O'Donnell stooped beneath the sweep of a tulwar and his scimitar split the skull of the wielder. His *kindhjal* he drove through the breast of the man who clung to his knees, and kicking the clinging body away from him, he reeled up through the trap. With frantic energy, he gripped the heavy iron-bound door and slammed it down, falling across it in semicollapse.

The splintering of wood beneath him warned him and he rolled clear just as a steel point crunched up through the door and quivered in the starlight. He found and shot the bolt, and then lay prostrate, panting for breath. How long the heavy wood would resist the attacks from below he did not know.

He was on a flat-topped roof, the highest part of the palace. Rising, he stumbled over to the nearest parapet, and looked down, onto lower roofs. He saw no way to get down. He was trapped.

It was the darkness just before dawn. He was on a higher level than the walls or any of the other houses in Shahrazar. He could dimly make out the sheer of the great cliffs which flanked the valley in which Shahrazar stood, and he saw the starlight's pale glimmer on the slim river which trickled past the massive walls. The valley ran southeast and northwest.

And suddenly the wind, whispering down from the north, brought a burst of crackling reports. Shots? He stared northwestward, toward where,

he knew, the valley pitched upward, narrowing to a sheer gut, and a mud-walled village dominated the pass. He saw a dull red glow against the sky. Again came reverberations.

Somewhere in the streets below sounded a frantic clatter of flying hoofs that halted before the palace gate. There was silence then, in which O'Donnell heard the splintering blows on the trap door, and the heavy breathing of the men who struck them. Then suddenly they ceased as if the attackers had dropped dead; utter silence attended a shrilling voice, indistinct through distance and muffling walls. A wild clamor burst forth in the streets below; men shouted, women screamed.

No more blows fell on the trap. Instead there were noises below — the rattle of arms, tramp of men, and a voice that held a note of hysteria shouting orders.

O'Donnell heard the clatter of galloping horses, and saw torches moving through the streets, toward the northwestern gate. In the darkness up the valley he saw orange jets of flame and heard the unmistakable reports of firearms.

Shrugging his shoulders, he sat down in an angle of the parapet, his scimitar across his knees. And there weary Nature asserted itself, and in spite of the clamor below him, and the riot in his blood, he slept.

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<code> CHAPTER IV

Furious Battle!

He did not sleep long, for dawn was just stealing whitely over the mountains when he awoke. Rifles were cracking all around, and crouching at the parapet, he saw the reason. Shahrazar was besieged by warriors in sheepskin coats and fur *kalpaks*. Herds of their horses grazed just beyond rifle fire, and the warriors themselves were firing from every rock and tree. Numbers of them were squirming along the half-dry river bed, among the willows, sniping at the men on the walls, who gave back their fire.

The Turkomans of Orkhan Bahadur! That blaze in the darkness told of the fate of the village that guarded the pass. Turks seldom made night raids; but Orkhan was nothing if not original.

The Uzbeks manned the walls, and O'Donnell believed he could make out the bulky shape and crested turban of Shaibar Khan among a cluster of peacock-clad nobles. And as he gazed at the turmoil in the streets below, the

belief grew that every available Uzbek in the city was on the walls. This was no mere raid; it was a tribal war of extermination.

O'Donnell's Irish audacity rose like heady wine in his veins, and he tore aside the splintered door and gazed down the stairs. The bodies still lay on the steps, stiff and unseeing. No living human met his gaze as he stole down the stairs, scimitar in hand. He gained the broad corridor, and still he saw no one. He hurried down the stair whereon he had slain the black slave, and reached a broad chamber with a single tapestried door.

There was the sudden crash of a musket; a spurt of flame stabbed at him. The ball whined past him and he covered the space with a long leap, grappled a snarling, biting figure behind the tapestry and dragged it into the open. It was Ahmed Pasha.

"Accursed one!" The vizir fought like a mad dog. "I guessed you would come skulking here — Allah's curse on the hashish that has made my hand unsteady —"

His dagger girded through O'Donnell's garments, drawing blood. Under his silks the Persian's muscles were like taut wires. Employing his superior weight, the American hurled himself hard against the other, driving the vizir's head back against the stone wall with a stunning crack. As the Persian relaxed with a groan, O'Donnell's left hand wrenched from his grasp and lurched upward, and the keen *kindhjal* encountered flesh and bone.

The American lifted the still twitching corpse and thrust it behind the tapestry, hiding it as best he could. A bunch of keys at the dead man's girdle caught his attention, and they were in his hand as he approached the curtained door.

The heavy teakwood portal, bound in arabesqued copper, would have resisted any onslaught short of artillery. A moment's fumbling with the massive keys, and O'Donnell found the right one. He passed into a narrow corridor dimly lighted by some obscure means. The walls were of marble, the floor of mosaics. It ended at what seemed to be a blank carved wall, until O'Donnell saw a thin crack in the marble.

Through carelessness or haste, the secret door had been left partly open. O'Donnell heard no sound, and was inclined to believe that Ahmed Pasha had remained to guard the treasure alone. He gave the vizir credit for wit and courage.

O'Donnell pulled open the door — a wide block of marble revolving on a pivot — and halted short, a low cry escaping his lips. He had come full upon the treasure of Khuwarezm, and the sight stunned him!

The dim light must have come through hidden interstices in the colored dome of the circular chamber in which he stood. It illumined a shining pyramidal heap upon a dais in the center of the floor, a platform that was a great round slab of pure jade. And on that jade gleamed tokens of wealth beyond the dreams of madness. The foundations of the pile consisted of blocks of virgin gold and upon them lay, rising to a pinnacle of blazing splendor, ingots of hammered silver, ornaments of golden enamel, wedges of jade, pearls of incredible perfection, inlaid ivory, diamonds that dazzled the sight, rubies like clotted blood, emeralds like drops of green fire, pulsing sapphires — O'Donnell's senses refused to accept the wonder of what he saw. Here, indeed, was wealth sufficient to buy every sword in Asia. A sudden sound brought him about. Someone was coming down the corridor outside, someone who labored for breath and ran staggeringly. A quick glance around, and O'Donnell slipped behind the rich gilt-worked arras which masked the walls. A niche where, perhaps, had stood an idol in the old pagan days, admitted his lean body, and he gazed through a slit cut in the velvet.

It was Shaibar Khan who came into the chamber. The Khan's garments were torn and splashed darkly. He stared at his treasure with haunted eyes, and he groaned. Then he called for Ahmed Pasha.

One man came, but it was not the vizir who lay dead in the outer corridor. It was Yar Akbar, crouching like a great gray wolf, beard bristling in his perpetual snarl.

"Why was the treasure left unguarded?" demanded Shaibar Khan petulantly. "Where is Ahmed Pasha?"

"He sent us on the wall," answered Yar Akbar, hunching his shoulders in servile abasement. "He said he would guard the treasure himself."

"No matter!" Shaibar Khan was shaking like a man with an ague. "We are lost. The people have risen against me and opened the gates to that devil Orkhan Bahadur. His Turkomans are cutting down my Uzbeks in the streets. But he shall not have the treasure. See ye that golden bar that juts from the wall, like a sword hilt from the scabbard? I have but to pull that, and the treasure falls into the subterranean river which runs below this palace, to be

lost forever to the sight of men. Yar Akbar, I give you a last command — pull that bar!”

Yar Akbar moaned and wrung his beard, but his eyes were red as a wolf’s, and he turned his ear continually toward the outer door.

“Nay, lord, ask of me anything but that!”

“Then I will do it!” Shaibar Khan moved toward the bar, reached out his hand to grasp it. With a snarl of a wild beast, Yar Akbar sprang on his back, grunting as he struck. O’Donnell saw the point of the Khyber knife spring out of Shaibar Khan’s silk-clad breast, as the Uzbek chief threw wide his arms, cried out chokingly, and tumbled forward to the floor. Yar Akbar spurned the dying body with a vicious foot.

“Fool!” he croaked. “I will buy my life from Orkhan Bahadur. Aye, this treasure shall gain me much honor with him, now the other *emirs* are dead — “

He halted, crouching and glaring, the reddened knife quivering in his hairy fist. O’Donnell had swept aside the tapestry and stepped into the open. “*Y’Allah!*” ejaculated the Afridi. “The dog-Kurd!”

“Look more closely, Yar Akbar,” answered O’Donnell grimly, throwing back his *kafiyeh* and speaking in English. “Do you not remember the Gorge of Izz ed din and the scout trapped there by your treachery? One man escaped, you dog of the Khyber.”

Slowly a red flame grew in Yar Akbar’s eyes.

“El Shirkuh!” he muttered, giving O’Donnell his Afghan name — the Mountain Lion. Then, with a howl that rang to the domed roof, he launched himself through the air, his three-foot knife gleaming.

O’Donnell did not move his feet. A supple twist of his torso avoided the thrust, and the furiously driven knife hissed between left arm and body, tearing his *khalat*. At the same instant O’Donnell’s left forearm bent up and under the lunging arm that guided the knife. Yar Akbar screamed, spat on the *kindhjal*’s narrow blade. Unable to halt his headlong rush, he caromed bodily against O’Donnell, bearing him down.

They struck the floor together, and Yar Akbar, with a foot of trenchant steel in his vitals, yet reared up, caught O’Donnell’s hair in a fierce grasp, gasped a curse, lifted his knife — and then his wild beast vitality failed him, and with a convulsive shudder he rolled clear and lay still in a spreading pool of blood.

O'Donnell rose and stared down at the bodies upon the floor, then at the glittering heap on the jade slab. His soul yearned to it with the fierce yearning that had haunted him for years. Dared he take the desperate chance of hiding it under the very noses of the invading Turkomans? If he could, he might escape, to return later, and bear it away. He had taken more desperate chances before.

Across his mental vision flashed a picture of a slim dark stranger who spoke a European tongue. It was lure of the treasure which had led Orkhan Bahadur out of his steppes; and the treasure in his hands would be as dangerous as it was in the hands of Shaibar Khan. The Power represented by the dark stranger could deal with the Turkoman as easily as with the Uzbek.

No; one Oriental adventurer with that treasure was as dangerous to the peace of Asia as another. He dared not run the risk of Orkhan Bahadur finding that pile of gleaming wealth — sweat suddenly broke out on O'Donnell's body as he realized, for once in his life, a driving power mightier than his own desire. The helpless millions of India were in his mind as, cursing sickly, he gripped the gold bar and heaved it!

With a grinding boom something gave way, the jade slab moved, turned, tilted, and disappeared, and with it vanished, in a final iridescent burst of dazzling splendor, the treasure of Khuwarezm. Far below came a sullen splash, and the sound of waters roaring in the darkness; then silence, and where a black hole had gaped there showed a circular slab of the same substance as the rest of the floor.

O'Donnell hurried from the chamber. He did not wish to be found where the Turkomans might connect him with the vanishing of the treasure they had battled to win. Let them think, if they would, that Shaibar Khan and Yar Akbar had disposed of it somehow, and slain one another. As he emerged from the palace into an outer court, lean warriors in sheepskin *kaftans* and high fur caps were swarming in. Cartridge belts crossed on their breasts, and *yataghans* hung at their girdles. One of them lifted a rifle and took deliberate aim at O'Donnell.

Then it was struck aside, and a voice shouted:

"By Allah, it is my friend Ali el Ghazi!" There strode forward a tall man whose *kalpak* was of white lambskin, and whose *kaftan* was trimmed with ermine. O'Donnell recognized the man he had aided in the alley.

“I am Orkhan Bahadur!” exclaimed the chief with a ringing laugh. “Put up your sword, friend; Shahrazar is mine! The heads of the Uzbeks are heaped in the market square! When I fled from their swords last night, they little guessed my warriors awaited my coming in the mountains beyond the pass! Now I am prince of Shahrazar, and thou art my cup-companion. Ask what thou wilt, yea, even a share of the treasure of Khuwarezm — when we find it.”

“When you find it!” O’Donnell mentally echoed, sheathing his scimitar with a Kurdish swagger. The American was something of a fatalist. He had come out of this adventure with his life at least, and the rest was in the hands of Allah.

“*Alhamdolillah!*” said O’Donnell, joining arms with his new cup-companion.

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<code> SON OF THE WHITE WOLF

The Battle Standard

The commander of the Turkish outpost of El Ashrat was awakened before dawn by the stamp of horses and jingle of accoutrements. He sat up and shouted for his orderly. There was no response, so he rose, hurriedly jerked on his garments, and strode out of the mud hut that served as his headquarters. What he saw rendered him momentarily speechless.

His command was mounted, in full marching formation, drawn up near the railroad that it was their duty to guard. The plain to the left of the track where the tents of the troopers had stood now lay bare. The tents had been loaded on the baggage camels which stood fully packed and ready to move out. The commandant glared wildly, doubting his own senses, until his eyes rested on a flag borne by a trooper. The waving pennant did not display the familiar crescent. The commandant turned pale.

"What does this mean?" he shouted, striding forward. His lieutenant, Osman, glanced at him inscrutably. Osman was a tall man, hard and supple as steel, with a dark keen face.

"Mutiny, *effendi*," he replied calmly. "We are sick of this war we fight for the Germans. We are sick of Djemal Pasha and those other fools of the Council of Unity and Progress, and, incidentally, of you. So we are going the hills to build a tribe of our own."

"Madness!" gasped the officer, tugging at his revolver. Even as he drew it, Osman shot him through the head.

The lieutenant sheathed the smoking pistol and turned to the troopers. The ranks were his to a man, won to his wild ambition under the very nose of the officer who now lay there with his brains oozing.

"Listen!" he commanded.

In the tense silence they all heard the low, deep reverberation in the west.

"British guns!" said Osman. "Battering the Turkish Empire to bits! The New Turks have failed. What Asia needs is not a new party, but a new race! There are thousands of fighting men between the Syrian coast and the Persian highlands, ready to be roused by a new word, a new prophet! The East is moving in her sleep. Ours is the duty is to awaken her!"

"You have all sworn to follow me into the hills. Let us return to the ways of our pagan ancestors who worshipped the White Wolf on the steppes

of High Asia before they bowed to the creed of Mohammed!

“We have reached the end of the Islamic Age. We abjure Allah as a superstition fostered by an epileptic Meccan camel driver. Our people have copied Arab ways too long. But we hundred men are *Turks!* We have burned the Koran. We bow not toward Mecca, nor swear by their false Prophet. And now follow me as we planned — to establish ourselves in a strong position in the hills and to seize Arab women for our wives.”

“Our sons will be half-Arab,” someone protested.

“A man is the son of his father,” retorted Osman. “We Turks have always looted the *harims* of the world for our women, but our sons are always Turks.

“Come! We have arms, horses, supplies. If we linger we shall be crushed with the rest of the army between the British on the coast and the Arabs the Englishman Lawrence is bringing up from the south. On to El Awad! The sword for the men — captivity for the women!”

His voice cracked like a whip as he snapped the orders that set the lines in motion. In perfect order they moved off through the lightening dawn toward the range of saw-edged hills in the distance. Behind them the air still vibrated with the distant rumble of the British artillery. Over them waved a banner that bore the head of a white wolf — the battle-standard of most ancient Turan.

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<code> CHAPTER II

Massacre

When Fraulein Olga von Bruckmann, known as a famous German secret agent, arrived at the tiny Arab hill-village of El Awad, it was in a drizzling rain, that made the dusk a blinding curtain over the muddy town.

With her companion, an Arab named Ahmed, she rode into the muddy street, and the villagers crept from their hovels to stare in awe at the first white woman most of them had ever seen.

A few words from Ahmed and the *shaykh* salaamed and showed her to the best mud hut in the village. The horses were led away to feed and shelter, and Ahmed paused long enough to whisper to his companion:

“El Awad is friendly to the Turks. Have no fear. I shall be near, in any event.”

“Try and get fresh horses,” she urged. “I must push on as soon as possible.”

“The *shaykh* swears there isn’t a horse in the village in fit condition to be ridden. He may be lying. But at any rate our own horses will be rested enough to go on by dawn. Even with fresh horses it would be useless to try to go any farther tonight. We’d lose our way among the hills, and in this region there’s always the risk of running into Lawrence’s Bedouin raiders.”

Olga knew that Ahmed knew she carried important secret documents from Baghdad to Damascus, and she knew from experience that she could trust his loyalty. Removing only her dripping cloak and riding boots, she stretched herself on the dingy blankets that served as a bed. She was worn out from the strain of the journey.

She was the first white woman ever to attempt to ride from Baghdad to Damascus. Only the protection accorded a trusted secret agent by the long arm of the German-Turkish government, and her guide’s zeal and craft, had brought her thus far in safety.

She fell asleep, thinking of the long weary miles still to be traveled, and even greater dangers, now that she had come into the region where the Arabs were fighting their Turkish masters. The Turks still held the country, that summer of 1917, but lightning-like raids flashed across the desert, blowing up trains, cutting tracks and butchering the inhabitants of isolated posts. Lawrence was leading the tribes northward, and with him was the mysterious American, *El Borak*, whose name was one to hush children.

She never knew how long she slept, but she awoke suddenly and sat up, in fright and bewilderment. The rain still beat on the roof, but there mingled with it shrieks of pain or fear, yells and the staccato crackling of rifles. She sprang up, lighted a candle and was just pulling on her boots when the door was hurled open violently.

Ahmed reeled in, his dark face livid, blood oozing through the fingers that clutched his breast.

“The village is attacked!” he cried chokingly. “Men in Turkish uniform! There must be some mistake! They know El Awad is friendly! I tried to tell their officer that we are friends, but he shot me! We must get away, quick!”

A shot cracked in the open door behind him and a jet of fire spurted from the blackness. Ahmed groaned and crumpled. Olga cried out in horror, staring wide-eyed at the figure who stood before her. A tall, wiry man in Turkish uniform blocked the door. He was handsome in a dark, hawk-like way, and he eyed her in a manner that brought the blood to her cheeks.

“Why did you kill that man?” she demanded. “He was a trusted servant of your country.”

“I have no country,” he answered, moving toward her. Outside the firing was dying away and women’s voices were lifted piteously. “I go to build one, as my ancestor Osman did.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she retorted. “But unless you provide me with an escort to the nearest post, I shall report you to your superiors, and — “

He laughed wildly at her. “I have no superiors, you little fool! I am an empire builder, I tell you! I have a hundred armed men at my disposal. I’ll build a new race in these hills.” His eyes blazed as he spoke.

“You’re mad!” she exclaimed.

“Mad? It’s you who are mad not to recognize the possibilities as I have! This war is bleeding the life out of Europe. When it’s over, no matter who wins, the nations will lie prostrate. Then it will be Asia’s turn!

“If Lawrence can build up an Arab army to fight for him, then certainly I, an Ottoman, can build up a kingdom among my own peoples! Thousands of Turkish soldiers have deserted to the British. They and more will desert again to me, when they hear that a Turk is building anew the empire of ancient Turan.”

“Do what you like,” she answered, believing he had been seized by the madness that often grips men in time of war when the world seems crumbling and any wild dream looks possible. “But at least don’t interfere with my mission. If you won’t give me an escort, I’ll go on alone.”

“You’ll go with me!” he retorted, looking down at her with hot admiration.

Olga was a handsome girl, tall, slender but supple, with a wealth of unruly golden hair. She was so completely feminine that no disguise would make her look like a man, not even the voluminous robes of an Arab, so she had attempted none. She trusted instead to Ahmed’s skill to bring her safely through the desert.

“Do you hear those screams? My men are supplying themselves with wives to bear soldiers for the new empire. Yours shall be the signal honor of being the first to go into Sultan Osman’s *seraglio*!”

“You do not dare!” She snatched a pistol from her blouse.

Before she could level it he wrenched it from her with brutal strength.

“Dare!” He laughed at her vain struggles. “What do I not dare? I tell you a new empire is being born tonight! Come with me! There’s no time for lovemaking now. Before dawn we must be on the march for Sulaiman’s Walls. The star of the White Wolf rises!”

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<code> CHAPTER III

The Call of Blood

The sun was not long risen over the saw-edged mountains to the east, but already the heat was glazing the cloudless sky to the hue of white-hot steel. Along the dim road that split the immensity of the desert a single shape moved. The shape grew out of the heat-hazes of the south and resolved itself into a man on a camel.

The man was no Arab. His boots and khakis, as well as the rifle-butt jutting from beneath his knee, spoke of the West. But with his dark face and hard frame he did not look out of place, even in that fierce land. He was Francis Xavier Gordon, El Borak, whom men loved, feared or hated, according to their political complexion, from the Golden Horn to the headwaters of the Ganges.

He had ridden most of the night, but his iron frame had not yet approached the fringes of weariness. Another mile, and he sighted a yet dimmer trail straggling down from a range of hills to the east. Something was coming along this trail — a crawling something that left a broad dark smear on the hot flints.

Gordon swung his camel into the trail and a moment later bent over the man who lay there gasping stertorously. It was a young Arab, and the breast of his *abba* was soaked in blood.

“Yusef!” Gordon drew back the wet *abba*, glanced at the bared breast, then covered it again. Blood oozed steadily from a blue-rimmed bullet-hole. There was nothing he could do. Already the Arab’s eyes were glazing. Gordon stared up the trail, seeing neither horse nor camel anywhere. But the dark smear stained the stones as far as he could see.

“My God, man, how far have you crawled in this condition?”

“An hour — many hours — I do not know!” panted Yusef. “I fainted and fell from the saddle. When I came to I was lying in the trail and my horse was gone. But I knew you would be coming up from the south, so I crawled — crawled! Allah, how hard are thy stones!”

Gordon set a canteen to his lips and Yusef drank noisily, then clutched Gordon's sleeve with clawing fingers.

"El Borak, I am dying and that is no great matter, but there is the matter of vengeance — not for me, *ya sidi*, but for innocent ones. You know I was on furlough to my village, El Awad. I am the only man of El Awad who fights for Arabia. The elders are friendly to the Turks. But last night the Turks burned El Awad! They marched in before midnight and the people welcomed them — while I hid in a shed.

"Then without warning they began slaying! The men of El Awad were unarmed and helpless. I slew one soldier myself. Then they shot me and I dragged myself away — found my horse and rode to tell the tale before I died. Ah, Allah, I have tasted of perdition this night!"

"Did you recognize their officer?" asked Gordon.

"I never saw him before. They called this leader of theirs Osman Pasha. Their flag bore the head of a white wolf. I saw it by the light of the burning huts. My people cried out in vain that they were friends.

There was a German woman and a man of Hauran who came to El Awad from the east, just at nightfall. I think they were spies. The Turks shot him and took her captive. It was all blood and madness."

"Mad indeed!" muttered Gordon. Yusef lifted himself on an elbow and groped for him, a desperate urgency in his weakening voice.

"El Borak, I fought well for the Emir Feisal, and for Lawrence *effendi*, and for you! I was at Yenbo, and Wejh, and Akaba. Never have I asked a reward! I ask now: justice and vengeance! Grant me this plea: Slay the Turkish dogs who butchered my people!"

Gordon did not hesitate.

"They shall die," he answered.

Yusef smiled fiercely, gasped: "*Allaho akbat!*" then sank back dead.

Within the hour Gordon rode eastward. The vultures had already gathered in the sky with their grisly foreknowledge of death, then flapped sullenly away from the cairn of stones he had piled over the dead man, Yusef.

Gordon's business in the north could wait. One reason for his dominance over the Orientals was the fact that in some ways his nature closely resembled theirs. He not only understood the cry for vengeance, but he sympathized with it. And he always kept his promise.

But he was puzzled. The destruction of a friendly village was not customary, even by the Turks, and certainly they would not ordinarily have mishandled their own spies. If they were deserters they were acting in an unusual manner, for most deserters made their way to Feisal. And what was that wolf's head banner?

Gordon knew that certain fanatics in the New Turks party were trying to erase all signs of Arab culture from their civilization. This was an impossible task, since that civilization itself was based on Arabic culture; but he had heard that in Istambul the radicals even advocated abandoning Islam and reverting to the paganism of their ancestors. But he had never believed the tale.

The sun was sinking over the mountains of Edom when Gordon came to ruined El Awad, in a fold of the bare hills. For hours before he had marked its location by black dots dropping in the blue sky. That they did not rise again told him that the village was deserted except for the dead.

As he rode into the dusty street, several vultures flapped heavily away. The hot sun had dried the mud, curdled the red pools in the dust. He sat in his saddle a while, staring silently.

He was no stranger to the handiwork of the Turk. He had seen much of it in the long fighting up from Jeddah on the Red Sea. But even so, he felt sick. The bodies lay in the street, headless, disemboweled, hewn asunder — bodies of children, old women and men. A red mist floated before his eyes, so that for a moment the landscape seemed to swim in blood. The slayers were gone; but they had left a plain road for him to follow.

What the signs they had left did not show him, he guessed. The slayers had loaded their female captives on baggage camels, and had gone eastward, deeper into the hills. Why they were following that road he could not guess, but he knew where it led — to the long-abandoned Walls of Sulaiman, by way of the Well of Achmet.

Without hesitation he followed. He had not gone many miles before he passed more of their work — a baby, its brains oozing from its broken head. Some kidnapped woman had hidden her child in her robes until it had been wrenched from her and brained on the rocks, before her eyes.

The country became wilder as he went. He did not halt to eat, but munched dried dates from his pouch as he rode. He did not waste time worrying over the recklessness of his action — one lone American dogging the crimson trail of a Turkish raiding party.

He had no plan; his future actions would depend on the circumstances that arose. But he had taken the death-trail and he would not turn back while he lived. He was no more foolhardy than his grandfather who single-handed trailed an Apache war party for days through the Guadalupe and returned to the settlement on the Pecos with scalps hanging from his belt.

The sun had set and dusk was closing in when Gordon topped a ridge and looked down on the plain whereon stands the Well of Achmet with its straggling palm grove. To the right of that cluster stood the tents, horse lines and camel lines of a well-ordered force. To the left stood a hut used by travelers as a *khan*. The door was shut and a sentry stood before it. While he watched, a man came from the tents with a bowl of food which he handed in at the door.

Gordon could not see the occupant, but he believed it was the German girl of whom Yusef had spoken, though why they should imprison one of their own spies was one of the mysteries of this strange affair. He saw their flag, and could make out a splotch of white that must be the wolf's head. He saw, too, the Arab women, thirty-five or forty of them herded into a pen improvised from bales and pack-saddles. They crouched together dumbly, dazed by their misfortunes.

He had hidden his camel below the ridge, on the western slope, and he lay concealed behind a clump of stunted bushes until night had fallen. Then he slipped down the slope, circling wide to avoid the mounted patrol, which rode leisurely about the camp. He lay prone behind a boulder till it had passed, then rose and stole toward the hut. Fires twinkled in the darkness beneath the palms, and he heard the wailing of the captive women.

The sentry before the door of the hut did not see the cat-footed shadow that glided up to the rear wall. As Gordon drew close he heard voices within. They spoke in Turkish.

One window was in the back wall. Strips of wood had been fastened over it, to serve as both pane and bars. Peering between them, Gordon saw a slender girl in a travel-worn riding habit standing before a dark-faced man in a Turkish uniform. There was no insignia to show what his rank had been. The Turk played with a riding whip and his eyes gleamed with cruelty in the light of a candle on a camp table.

"What do I care for the information you bring from Baghdad?" he was demanding. "Neither Turkey nor Germany means anything to me. But it seems you fail to realize your own position. It is mine to command, you to

obey! You are my prisoner, my captive, my slave! It's time you learned what that means. And the best teacher I know is the whip!"

He fairly spat the last word at her and she paled.

"You dare not subject me to this indignity!" she whispered weakly.

Gordon knew this man must be Osman Pasha. He drew his heavy automatic from its scabbard under his armpit and aimed at the Turk's breast through the crack in the window. But even as his finger closed on the trigger he changed his mind. There was the sentry at the door, and a hundred other armed men, within hearing, whom the sound of a shot would bring on the run. He grasped the window bars and braced his legs.

"I see I must dispel your illusions," muttered Osman, moving toward the girl who cowered back until the wall stopped her. Her face was white. She had dealt with many dangerous men in her hazardous career, and she was not easily frightened. But she had never met a man like Osman. His face was a terrifying mask of cruelty; the ferocity that gloats over the agony of a weaker thing shone in his eyes.

Suddenly he had her by the hair, dragging her to him, laughing at her scream of pain. Just then Gordon ripped the strips off the window. The snapping of the wood sounded loud as a gunshot and Osman wheeled, drawing his pistol, as Gordon came through the window.

The American lit on his feet, and leveled his automatic, checking Osman's move. The Turk froze, his pistol lifted shoulder high, muzzle pointing at the roof. Outside the sentry called anxiously.

"Answer him!" grated Gordon below his breath. "Tell him everything is all right. And drop that gun!"

The pistol fell to the floor and the girl snatched it up.

"Come here, *Fraulein!*"

She ran to him, but in her haste she crossed the line of fire. In that fleeting moment when her body shielded his, Osman acted. He kicked the table and the candle toppled and went out, and simultaneously he dived for the floor. Gordon's pistol roared deafeningly just as the hut was plunged into darkness. The next instant the door crashed inward and the sentry bulked against the starlight, to crumple as Gordon's gun crashed again and yet again.

With a sweep of his arm, Gordon found the girl and drew her toward the window. He lifted her through as if she had been a child, and climbed through after her. He did not know whether his blind slug had struck Oman

or not. The man was crouching silently in the darkness, but there was no time to strike a match and see whether he was living or dead. But as they ran across the shadowy plain, they heard Osman's voice lifted in passion.

By the time they reached the crest of the ridge, the girl was winded. Only Gordon's arm about her waist, half-dragging, half-carrying her, enabled her to make the last few yards of the steep incline. The plain below them was alive with torches and shouting men. Osman was yelling for them to run down the fugitive, and his voice came faintly to them on the ridge.

"Take them alive, curse you! Scatter and find them! It's El Borak!" An instant later he was yelling, with an edge of panic in his voice: "Wait. Come back! Take cover and make ready to repel an attack! He may have a horde of Arabs with him!"

"He thinks first of his own desire, and only later of the safety of his men," muttered Gordon. "I don't think he'll ever get very far. Come on."

He led the way to the camel, helped the girl into the saddle, then leaped up himself. A word, a tap of the camel wand, and the beast ambled silently off down the slope.

"I know Osman caught you at El Awad," said Gordon. "But what's he up to? What's his game?"

"He was a lieutenant stationed at El Ashraf," she answered. "He persuaded his company to mutiny, kill their commander, and desert. He plans to fortify the Walls of Sulaiman, and build a new empire. I thought at first he was mad, but he isn't. He's a devil."

"The Walls of Sulaiman?" Gordon checked his mount and sat for a moment motionless in the starlight.

"Are you game for an all-night ride?" he asked presently.

"Anywhere! As long as it is far away from Osman!" There was a hint of hysteria in her voice.

"I doubt if your escape will change his plans. He'll probably lie about Achmet all night under arms expecting an attack. In the morning he will decide that I was alone, and pull out for the Walls.

"Well, I happen to know that an Arab force is there, waiting for an order from Lawrence to move on to Ageyli. Three hundred Juheina camel-riders, sworn to Feisal. Enough to eat Osman's gang. Lawrence's messenger should reach them some time between dawn and noon. There is a chance we can get there before the Juheina pull out. If we can, we'll turn them on Osman and wipe him out, with his whole pack.

“It won’t upset Lawrence’s plans for the Juheina to get to Ageyli a day late, and Osman must be destroyed. He’s a mad dog running loose.”

“His ambition sounds mad,” she murmured. “But when he speaks of it, with his eyes blazing, it’s easy to believe he might even succeed.”

“You forget that crazier things have happened in the desert,” he answered, as he swung the camel eastward. “The world is being made over here, as well as in Europe. There’s no telling what damage this Osman might do, if left to himself. The Turkish Empire is falling to pieces, and new empires *have* risen out of the ruins of old ones.

“But if we can get to Sulaiman before the Juheina march, we’ll check him. If we find them gone, we’ll be in a pickle ourselves. It’s a gamble, our lives against his. Are you game?”

“Till the last card falls!” she retorted. His face was a blur in the starlight, but she sensed rather than saw his grim smile of approval.

The camel’s hoofs made no sound as they dropped down the slope and circled far wide of the Turkish camp. Like ghosts on a ghost-camel they moved across the plain under the stars. A faint breeze stirred the girl’s hair. Not until the fires were dim behind them and they were again climbing a hill-road, did she speak.

“I know you. You’re the American they call El Borak, the Swift. You came down from Afghanistan when the war began. You were with King Hussein even before Lawrence came over from Egypt. Do you know who I am?”

“Yes.”

“Then what’s my status?” she asked. “Have you rescued me or captured me? Am I a prisoner?”

“Let us say companion, for the time being,” he suggested. “We’re up against a common enemy. No reason why we shouldn’t make common cause, is there?”

“None!” she agreed, and leaning her blond head against his hard shoulder, she went soundly to sleep.

A gaunt moon rose, pushing back the horizons, flooding craggy slopes and dusty plains with leprous silver. The vastness of the desert seemed to mock the tiny figures on their tiring camel, as they rode blindly on toward what Fate they could not guess.

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<code> CHAPTER IV

Wolves of the Desert

Olga awoke as dawn was breaking. She was cold and stiff, in spite of the cloak Gordon had wrapped about her, and she was hungry. They were riding through a dry gorge with rock-strewn slopes rising on either hand, and the camel's gait had become a lurching walk. Gordon halted it, slid off without making it kneel, and took its rope.

"It's about done, but the Walls aren't far ahead. Plenty of water there — food, too, if the Juheina are still there. There are dates in that pouch."

If he felt the strain of fatigue he did not show it as he strode along at the camel's head. Olga rubbed her chill hands and wished for sunrise.

"The Well of Harith," Gordon indicated a walled enclosure ahead of them. "The Turks built that wall, years ago, when the Walls of Sulaiman were an army post. Later they abandoned both positions."

The wall, built of rocks and dried mud, was in good shape; and inside the enclosure there was a partly ruined hut. The well was shallow, with a mere trickle of water at the bottom.

"I'd better get off and walk too," Olga suggested.

"These flints would cut your boots and feet to pieces. It's not far now. Then the camel can rest all it needs."

"And if the Juheina aren't there — " She left the sentence unfinished.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Maybe Osman won't come up before the camel's rested."

"I believe he'll make a forced march," she said, not fearfully, but calmly stating an opinion. "His beasts are good. If he drives them hard, he can get here before midnight. Our camel won't be rested enough to carry us by that time. And we couldn't get away on foot, in this desert."

He laughed, and respecting her courage, did not try to make light of their position.

"Well," he said quietly, "let's hope the Juheina are still there!"

If they were not, she and Gordon were caught in a trap of hostile, waterless desert, fanged with the long guns of predatory tribesmen.

Three miles further east the valley narrowed and the floor pitched upward, dotted by dry shrubs and boulders. Gordon pointed suddenly to a faint ribbon of smoke feathering up into the sky.

"Look! The Juheina are there!"

Olga gave a deep sigh of relief. Only then, did she realize how desperately she had been hoping for some such sign. She felt like shaking a

triumphant fist at the rocky waste about her, as if at a sentient enemy, sullen and cheated of its prey.

Another mile and they topped a ridge and saw a large enclosure surrounding a cluster of wells. There were Arabs squatting about their tiny cooking fires. As the travelers came suddenly into view within a few hundred yards of them, the Bedouins sprang up, shouting. Gordon drew his breath suddenly between clenched teeth.

“They are not Juheina! They’re Rualla! Allies of the Turks!”

Too late to retreat. A hundred and fifty wild men were on their feet, glaring, rifles cocked.

Gordon did the next best thing and went leisurely toward them. To look at him one would have thought that he had expected to meet these men here, and anticipated nothing but a friendly greeting. Olga tried to imitate his tranquility, but she knew their lives hung on the crook of a trigger finger. These men were supposed to be her allies, but her recent experience made her distrust Orientals. The sight of these hundreds of wolfish faces filled her with sick dread.

They were hesitating, rifles lifted, nervous and uncertain as surprised wolves, then:

“*Allah!*” howled a tall, scarred warrior. “It is El Borak!”

Olga caught her breath as she saw the man’s finger quiver on his rifle-trigger. Only a racial urge to gloat over his victim kept him from shooting the American, then and there.

“El Borak!” The shout was a wave that swept the throng.

Ignoring the clamor, the menacing rifles, Gordon made the camel kneel and lifted Olga off. She tried, with fair success, to conceal her fear of the wild figures that crowded about them, but her flesh crawled at the blood-lust burning redly in each wolfish eye.

Gordon’s rifle was in its boot on the saddle, and his pistol was out of sight, under his shirt. He was careful not to reach for the rifle — a move which would have brought a hail of bullets — but having helped the girl down, he turned and faced the crowd casually, his hands empty. Running his glance over the fierce faces, he singled out a tall stately man in the rich garb of a *shaykh*, who was standing somewhat apart.

“You keep poor watch, Mitkhal ibn Ali,” said Gordon. “If I had been a raider your men would be lying in their blood by this time.”

Before the *shaykh* could answer, the man who had first recognized Gordon thrust himself violently forward, his face convulsed with hate.

"You expected to find friends here, El Borak!" he exulted. "But you come too late! Three hundred Juheina dogs rode north an hour before dawn! We saw them go, and came up after they had gone. Had they known of your coming, perhaps they would have stayed to welcome you!"

"It's not to you I speak, Zangi Khan, you Kurdish dog," retorted Gordon contemptuously, "but to the Rualla — honorable men and fair foes!"

Zangi Khan snarled like a wolf and threw up his rifle, but a lean Bedouin caught his arm.

"Wait!" he growled. "Let El Borak speak. His words are not wind."

A rumble of approval came from the Arabs. Gordon had touched their fierce pride and vanity. That would not save his life, but they were willing to listen to him before they killed him.

"If you listen, he will trick you with cunning words!" shouted the angered Zangi Khan furiously. "Slay him now, before he can do us harm!"

"Is Zangi Khan *shaykh* of the Rualla that he gives his commands while Mitkhal stands silent?" asked Gordon with biting irony.

Mitkhal reacted to his taunt exactly as Gordon knew he would.

"Let El Borak speak!" he ordered. "I command here, Zangi Khan! Do not forget that."

"I do not forget, *ya sidi*," the Kurd assured him, but his eyes burned red at the rebuke. "I but spoke in zeal for your safety."

Mitkhal gave him a slow, searching glance which told Gordon that there was no love lost between the two men. Zangi Khan's reputation as a fighting man meant much to the younger warriors. Mitkhal was more fox than wolf, and he evidently feared the Kurd's influence over his men. As an agent of the Turkish government Zangi's authority was theoretically equal to Mitkhal's. Actually this amounted to little, for Mitkhal's tribesmen took orders from their *shaykh* only. But it put Zangi in a position to use his personal talents to gain an ascendancy — an ascendancy Mitkhal feared would relegate him to a minor position.

"Speak, El Borak," ordered Mitkhal. "But speak swiftly. It may be," he added, "Allah's will that the moments of your life are few."

"Death marches from the west," said Gordon abruptly. "Last night a hundred Turkish deserters butchered the people of El Awad."

"*Wallah!*" swore a tribesman. "El Awad was friendly to the Turks!"

“A lie!” cried Zangi Khan. “Or if true, the dogs of deserters slew the people to curry favor with Feisal.”

“When did men come to Feisal with the blood of children on their hands?” retorted Gordon. “They have foresworn Islam and worship the White Wolf. They carried off the young women and the old women, the men and the children they slew like dogs.”

A murmur of anger rose from the Arabs. The Bedouins had a rigid code of warfare, and they did not kill women or children. It was the unwritten law of the desert, old when Abraham came up out of Chaldea.

But Zangi Khan cried out in angry derision, blind to the resentful looks cast at him. He did not understand that particular phase of the Bedouins’ code, for his people had no such inhibition. Kurds in war killed women as well as men.

“What are the women of El Awad to us?” he sneered.

“Your heart I know already,” answered Gordon with icy contempt. “It is to the Rualla that I speak.”

“A trick!” howled the Kurd. “A lie to trick us!”

“It is no lie!” Olga stepped forward boldly. “Zangi Khan, you know that I am an agent of the German government. Osman Pasha, leader of these renegades burned El Awad last night, as El Borak has said. Osman murdered Ahmed ibn Shalaan, my guide, among others. He is as much our enemy as he is an enemy of the British.”

She looked to Mitkhal for help, but the *shaykh* stood apart, like an actor watching a play in which he had not yet received his cue.

“What if it is the truth?” Zangi Khan snarled, muddled by his hate and fear of El Borak’s cunning. “What is El Awad to us?”

Gordon caught him up instantly.

“This Kurd asks what is the destruction of a friendly village! Doubtless, naught to him! But what does it mean to you, who have left your herds and families unguarded? If you let this pack of mad dogs range the land, how can you be sure of the safety of your wives and children?”

“What would you have, El Borak?” demanded a gray-bearded raider.

“Trap these Turks and destroy them. I’ll show you how.”

It was then that Zangi Khan lost his head completely.

“Heed him not!” he screamed. “Within the hour we must ride northward! The Turks will give us ten thousand British pounds for his head!”

Avarice burned briefly in the men's eyes, to be dimmed by the reflection that the reward, offered for El Borak's head, would be claimed by the *shaykh* and Zangi. They made no move and Mitkhal stood aside with an air of watching a contest that did not concern himself.

"Take his head!" screamed Zangi, sensing hostility at last, and thrown into a panic by it.

His demoralization was completed by Gordon's taunting laugh.

"You seem to be the only one who wants my head, Zangi! Perhaps you can take it!"

Zangi howled incoherently, his eyes glaring red, then threw up his rifle, hip-high. Just as the muzzle came up, Gordon's automatic crashed thunderously. He had drawn so swiftly not a man there had followed his motion. Zangi Khan reeled back under the impact of hot lead, toppled sideways and lay still.

In an instant, a hundred cocked rifles covered Gordon. Confused by varying emotions, the men hesitated for the fleeting instant it took Mitkhal to shout:

"Hold! Do not shoot!"

He strode forward with the air of a man ready to take the center of the stage at last, but he could not disguise the gleam of satisfaction in his shrewd eyes.

"No man here is kin to Zangi Khan," he said offhandedly. "There is no cause for blood feud. He had eaten the salt, but he attacked our prisoner, whom he thought unarmed."

He held out his hand for the pistol, but Gordon did not surrender it.

"I'm not your prisoner," said he. "I could kill you before your men could lift a finger. But I didn't come here to fight you. I came asking aid to avenge the children and women of my enemies. I risk my life for your families. Are you dogs, to do less?"

The question hung in the air unanswered, but he had struck the right chord in their barbaric bosoms, that were always ready to respond to some wild deed of reckless chivalry. Their eyes glowed and they looked at their *shaykh* expectantly.

Mitkhal was a shrewd politician. The butchery at El Awad meant much less to him than it meant to his younger warriors. He had associated with so-called civilized men long enough to lose much of his primitive integrity. But he always followed the side of public opinion, and was shrewd enough

to lead a movement he could not check. Yet, he was not to be stampeded into a hazardous adventure.

"These Turks may be too strong for us," he objected.

"I'll show you how to destroy them with little risk," answered Gordon. "But there must be covenants between us, Mitkhal."

"These Turks must be destroyed," said Mitkhal, and he spoke sincerely there, at least. "But there are too many blood feuds between us, El Borak, for us to let you get out of our hands."

Gordon laughed.

"You can't whip the Turks without my help, and you know it. Ask your young men what they desire!"

"Let El Borak lead us!" shouted a young warrior instantly. A murmur of approval paid tribute to Gordon's widespread reputation as a strategist.

"Very well!" Mitkhal took the tide. "Let there be truce between us — with conditions! Lead us against the Turks. If you win, you and the woman shall go free. If we lose, we take your head!"

Gordon nodded, and the warriors yelled in glee. It was just the sort of a bargain that appealed to their minds, and Gordon knew it was the best he could make.

"Bring bread and salt!" ordered Mitkhal, and a giant black slave moved to do his bidding. "Until the battle is lost or won there is truce between us, and no Rualla shall harm you, unless you spill Rualla blood."

Then he thought of something else and his brow darkened as he thundered:

"Where is the man who watched from the ridge?"

A terrified youth was pushed forward. He was a member of a small tribe tributary to the more important Rualla.

"Oh, *shaykh*," he faltered, "I was hungry and stole away to a fire for meat —"

"Dog!" Mitkhal struck him in the face. "Death is thy portion for failing in thy duty."

"Wait!" Gordon interposed. "Would you question the will of Allah? If the boy had not deserted his post he would have seen us coming up the valley, and your men would have fired on us and killed us. Then you would not have been warned of the Turks, and would have fallen prey to them before discovering they were enemies. Let him go and give thanks to Allah, Who sees all!"

It was the sort of sophistry that appeals to the Arab mind. Even Mitkhal was impressed.

“Who knows the mind of Allah?” he conceded. “Live, Musa, but next time perform the will of Allah with a vigilance and a mind to orders. And now, El Borak, let us discuss battle-plans while food is prepared.”

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<code> CHAPTER V

Treachery

It was not yet noon when Gordon halted the Rualla beside the Well of Harith. Scouts sent westward reported no sign of the Turks, and the Arabs went forward with the plans made before leaving the Walls — plans outlined by Gordon and agreed to by Mitkhal. First the tribesmen began gathering rocks and hurling them into the well.

“The water’s still beneath,” Gordon remarked to Olga, “but it’ll take hours of hard work to clean out the well so that anybody can get to it. The Turks can’t do it under our rifles. If we win, we’ll clean it out ourselves, so the next travelers won’t suffer.”

“Why not take refuge in the *sangar* ourselves?” she asked.

“Too much of a trap. That’s what we’re using it for. We’d have no chance with them in open fight, and if we laid an ambush out in the valley, they’d simply fight their way through us. But when a man’s shot at in the open, his first instinct is to make for the nearest cover. So I’m hoping to trick them into going into the *sangar*. Then we’ll bottle them up and pick them off at our leisure. Without water they can’t hold out long. We shouldn’t lose a dozen men, if any.”

“It seems strange to see you solicitous about the lives of these Rualla, who are your enemies, after all,” she laughed.

“Instinct, maybe. No man fit to lead wants to lose any more of them than he can help. Just now these men are my allies, and it’s up to me to protect them as well as I can. I’ll admit I’d rather be fighting with the Juheina. Feisal’s messenger must have started for the Walls hours before I supposed he would.”

“And if the Turks surrender, what then?”

“I’ll try to get them to Lawrence — all but Osman Pasha.” Gordon’s face darkened. “That man hangs if he falls into my hands.”

“How will you get them to Lawrence? The Rualla won’t take them.”

"I haven't the slightest idea. But let's catch our hare before we start broiling him. Osman may whip the daylights out of us."

"It means your head if he does," she warned, with a shudder.

"Well, it's worth ten thousand pounds to the Turks," he laughed, and moved to inspect the partly ruined hut. Olga followed him.

Mitkhal, directing the blocking of the well, glanced sharply at them, then noted that a number of men were between them and the gate, and turned back to his overseeing.

"*Hsss*, El Borak!" It was a tense whisper, just as Gordon and Olga turned to leave the hut. An instant later they located a tousled head thrust up from behind a heap of rubble. It was the boy Musa, who obviously had slipped into the hut through a crevice in the back wall.

"Watch from the door and warn me if you see anybody coming," Gordon muttered to Olga. "This lad may have something to tell."

"I have_, *effendi*!" The boy was trembling with excitement. "I overheard the *shaykh* talking secretly to his black slave, Hassan. I saw them walk away among the palms while you and the woman were eating, at the Walls, and I crept after them, for I feared they meant you mischief — and you saved my life."

"El Borak, listen! Mitkhal means to slay you, whether you win this battle for him or not! He was glad you slew the Kurd, and he is glad to have your aid in wiping out these Turks. But he lusts for the gold the other Turks will pay for your head. Yet he dares not break his word and the covenant of the salt openly. So, if we win the battle, Hassan is to shoot you, and swear you fell by a Turkish bullet!"

The boy rushed on with his story:

"Then Mitkhal will say to the people: 'El Borak was our guest and ate our salt. But now he is dead, through no fault of ours, and there is no use wasting the reward. So, we will take off his head and take it to Damascus, and the Turks will give us ten thousand pounds.'"

Gordon smiled grimly at Olga's horror. That was typical Arab logic.

"It didn't occur to Mitkhal that Hassan might miss his first shot and not get a chance to shoot again, I suppose?" he suggested.

"Oh, yes, *effendi*, Mitkhal thinks of everything. If you kill Hassan, Mitkhal will swear you broke the covenant yourself, by spilling the blood of a Rualla, or a Rualla's servant, which is the same thing, and will feel free to order you beheaded."

There was genuine humor in Gordon's laugh.

"Thanks, Musa! If I saved your life, you've paid me back. Better get out now, before somebody sees you talking to us."

"What shall we do?" exclaimed Olga, pale to the lips.

"You're in no danger," he assured her.

She colored angrily.

"I wasn't thinking of that! Do you think I have less gratitude than that Arab boy? That *shaykh* means to murder you, don't you understand? Let's steal camels, and run for it!"

"Run where? If we did, they'd be on our heels in no time, deciding I'd lied to them about everything. Anyway, we wouldn't have a chance. They're watching us too closely. Besides, I wouldn't run if could. I started to wipe out Osman Pasha, and this is the best chance I see to do it. Come on. Let's get out in the *sangar* before Mitkhal gets suspicious."

As soon as the well was blocked the men retired to the hillsides. Their camels were hidden behind the ridges, and the men crouched behind rocks and among the stunted shrubs along the slopes. Olga refused Gordon's offer to send her with an escort back to the Walls, and stayed with him taking up a position behind a rock, Osman's pistol in her belt. They lay flat on the ground and the heat of the sun-baked flints seeped through their garments.

Once she turned her head, and shuddered to see the blank black countenance of Hassan regarding them from some bushes a few yards behind them. The black slave, who knew no law but his master's command, was determined not to let Gordon out of his sight.

She spoke of this in a low whisper to the American.

"Sure," he murmured. "I saw him. But he won't shoot till he knows which way the fight's going, and is sure none of the men are looking."

Olga's flesh crawled in anticipation of more horrors. If they lost the fight the enraged Ruallas would tear Gordon to pieces, supposing he survived the encounter. If they won, his reward would be a treacherous bullet in the back.

The hours dragged slowly by. Not a flutter of cloth, no lifting of an impatient head betrayed the presence of the wild men on the slopes. Olga began to feel her nerves quiver. Doubts and forebodings gnawed maddeningly at her.

"We took position too soon! The men will lose patience. Osman can't get here before midnight. It took us all night to reach the Well."

“Bedouins never lose patience when they smell loot,” he answered. “I believe Osman will get here before sundown. We made poor time on a tiring camel for the last few hours of that ride. I believe Osman broke camp before dawn and pushed hard.”

Another thought came to torture her.

“Suppose he doesn’t come at all? Suppose he has changed his plans and gone somewhere else? The Rualla will believe you lied to them!”

“Look!”

The sun hung low in the west, a fiery, dazzling ball. She blinked, shading her eyes.

Then the head of a marching column grew out of the dancing heat waves: lines of horsemen, grey with dust, files of heavily laden baggage camels, with the captive women riding them. The standard hung loose in the breathless air; but once, when a vagrant gust of wind, hot as the breath of perdition, lifted the folds, the white wolf’s head was displayed.

Crushing proof of idolatry and heresy! In their agitation, the Rualla almost betrayed themselves. Even Mitkhal turned pale.

“Allah! Sacrilege! Forgotten of God. Hell shall be thy portion!”

“Easy!” hissed Gordon, feeling the semi-hysteria that ran down the lurking lines. “Wait for my signal. They may halt to water their camels at the Well.”

Osman must have driven his people like a fiend all day. The women drooped on the loaded camels; the dust-caked faces of the soldiers were drawn. The horses reeled with weariness. But it was soon evident that they did not intend halting at the Well with their goal, the Walls of Sulaiman, so near. The head of the column was even with the *sangar* when Gordon fired. He was aiming at Osman, but the range was long, the sun glare on the rocks dazzling. The man behind Osman fell, and at the signal the slopes came alive with spurting flame.

The column staggered. Horses and men went down and stunned soldiers gave back a ragged fire that did no harm. They did not even see their assailants save as bits of white cloth bobbing among the boulders.

Perhaps discipline had grown lax during the grind of that merciless march. Perhaps panic seized the tired Turks. At any rate, the column broke and men fled toward the *sangar* without waiting for orders. They would have abandoned the baggage camels had not Osman ridden among them.

Cursing and striking with the flat of his saber, he made them drive the beasts in with them.

"I hoped they'd leave the camels and women outside," grunted Gordon. "Maybe they'll drive them out when they find there's no water."

The Turks took their positions in good order, dismounting and ranging along the wall. Some dragged the Arab women off the camels and drove them into the hut. Others improvised a pen for the animals with stakes and ropes between the back of the hut and the wall. Saddles were piled in the gate to complete the barricade.

The Arabs yelled taunts as they poured in a hail of lead, and a few leaped up and danced derisively, waving their rifles. But they stopped that when a Turk drilled one of them cleanly through the head. When the demonstrations ceased, the besiegers offered scanty targets to shoot at.

However, the Turks fired back frugally and with no indication of panic, now that they were under cover and fighting the sort of a fight they understood. They were well protected by the wall from the men directly in front of them, but those facing north could be seen by the men on the south ridge, and vice versa. But the distance was too great for consistently effective shooting at these marks by the Arabs.

"We don't seem to be doing much damage," remarked Olga presently.

"Thirst will win for us," Gordon answered. "All we've got to do is to keep them bottled up. They probably have enough water in their canteens to last through the rest of the day. Certainly no longer. Look, they're going to the well now."

The well stood in the middle of the enclosure, in a comparatively exposed area, as seen from above. Olga saw men approaching it with canteens in their hands, and the Arabs, with sardonic enjoyment, refrained from firing at them. They reached the well, and then the girl saw the change that came over them. It ran through their band like an electric shock. The men along the walls reacted by firing wildly. A furious yelling rose, edged with hysteria, and men began to run madly about the enclosure. Some toppled, hit by shots dropping from the ridges.

"What are they doing?" Olga started to her knees, and was instantly jerked down again by Gordon. The Turks were running into the hut. If she had been watching Gordon she would have sensed the meaning of it, for his dark face grew suddenly grim.

“They’re dragging the women out!” she exclaimed. “I see Osman waving his saber. What? Oh, God! They’re butchering the women!”

Above the crackle of shots rose terrible shrieks and the sickening *chack* of savagely driven blows. Olga turned sick and hid her face. Osman had realized the trap into which he had been driven, and his reaction was that of a mad dog. Recognizing defeat in the blocked well, facing the ruin of his crazy ambitions by thirst and Bedouin bullets, he was taking this vengeance on the whole Arab race.

On all sides the Arabs rose howling, driven to frenzy by the sight of that slaughter. That these women were of another tribe made no difference. A stern chivalry was the foundation of their society, just as it was among the frontiersmen of early America. There was no sentimentalism about it. It was real and vital as life itself.

The Rualla went berserk when they saw women of their race falling under the swords of the Turks. A wild yell shattered the brazen sky, and recklessly breaking cover, the Arabs pelted down the slopes, howling like fiends. Gordon could not check them, nor could Mitkhal. Their shouts fell on deaf ears. The walls vomited smoke and flame as withering volleys raked the oncoming hordes. Dozens fell, but enough were left to reach the wall and sweep over it in a wave that neither lead nor steel could halt.

And Gordon was among them. When he saw he could not stop the storm he joined it. Mitkhal was not far behind him, cursing his men as he ran. The *shaykh* had no stomach for this kind of fighting, but his leadership was at stake. No man who hung back in this charge would ever be able to command the Rualla again.

Gordon was among the first to reach the wall, leaping over the writhing bodies of half a dozen Arabs. He had not blazed away wildly as he ran like the Bedouins, to reach the wall with an empty gun. He held his fire until the flame spurts from the barrier were almost burning his face, and then emptied his rifle in a point-blank fusillade that left a bloody gap where there had been a line of fierce dark faces an instant before. Before the gap could be closed he had swarmed over and in, and the Rualla poured after him.

As his feet hit the ground a rush of men knocked him against the wall and a blade, thrusting for his life, broke against the rocks. He drove his shortened butt into a snarling face, splintering teeth and bones, and the next instant a surge of his own men over the wall cleared a space about him. He threw away his broken rifle and drew his pistol.

The Turks had been forced back from the wall in a dozen places now, and men were fighting all over the *sangar*. No quarter was asked — none given. The pitiful headless bodies sprawled before the bloodstained hut had turned the Bedouins into hot-eyed demons. The guns were empty now, all but Gordon's automatic. The yells had died down to grunts, punctuated by death-howls. Above these sounds rose the chopping impact of flailing blades, the crunch of fiercely driven rifle butts. So grimly had the Bedouins suffered in that brainless rush, that now they were outnumbered, and the Turks fought with the fury of desperation.

It was Gordon's automatic, perhaps, that tipped the balance. He emptied it without haste and without hesitation, and at that range he could not miss. He was aware of a dark shadow forever behind him, and turned once to see black Hassan following him, smiting methodically right and left with a heavy scimitar already dripping crimson. Even in the fury of strife, Gordon grinned. The literal-minded Soudanese was obeying his instructions to keep at El Borak's heels. As long as the battle hung in doubt, he was Gordon's protector — ready to become his executioner the instant the tide turned in their favor.

"Faithful servant," called Gordon sardonically. "Have care lest these Turks cheat you of my head!"

Hassan grinned, speechless. Suddenly blood burst from his thick lips and he buckled at the knees. Somewhere in that rush down the hill his black body had stopped a bullet. As he struggled on all fours a Turk ran in from the side and brained him with a rifle-butt. Gordon killed the Turk with his last bullet. He felt no grudge against Hassan. The man had been a good soldier, and had obeyed orders given him.

The *sangar* was a shambles. The men on their feet were less than those on the ground, and all were streaming blood. The white wolf standard had been torn from its staff and lay trampled under vengeful feet. Gordon bent, picked up a saber and looked about for Osman. He saw Mitkhal, running toward the horse-pen, and then he yelled a warning, for he saw Osman.

The man broke away from a group of struggling figures and ran for the pen. He tore away the ropes and the horses, frantic from the noise and smell of blood, stampeded into the *sangar*, knocking men down and trampling them. As they thundered past, Osman, with a magnificent display of agility, caught a handful of flying mane and leaped on the back of the racing steed.

Mitkhal ran toward him, yelling furiously, and snapping a pistol at him. The *shaykh*, in the confusion of the fighting, did not seem to be aware that the gun was empty, for he pulled the trigger again and again as he stood in the path of the oncoming rider. Only at the last moment did he realize his peril and leap back. Even so, he would have sprung clear had not his sandal heel caught in a dead man's *abba*.

Mitkhal stumbled, avoided the lashing hoofs, but not the down-flailing saber in Osman's hand. A wild cry went up from the Rualla as Mitkhal fell, his turban suddenly crimson. The next instant Osman was out of the gate and riding like the wind — straight up the hillside to where he saw the slim figure of the girl to whom he now attributed his overthrow.

Olga had come out from behind the rocks and was standing in stunned horror watching the fight below. Now she awoke suddenly to her own peril at the sight of the madman charging up the slope. She drew the pistol Gordon had taken from him and opened fire. She was not a very good shot. Three bullets missed, the fourth killed the horse, and then the gun jammed. Gordon was running up the slope as the Apaches of his native Southwest run, and behind him streamed a swarm of Rualla. There was not a loaded gun in the whole horde.

Osman took a shocking fall when his horse turned a somersault under him, but rose, bruised and bloody, with Gordon still some distance away. But the Turk had to play hide-and-seek for a few moments among the rocks with his prey before he was able to grasp her hair and twist her screaming to her knees, and then he paused an instant to enjoy her despair and terror. That pause was his undoing.

As he lifted his saber to strike off her head, steel clanged loud on steel. A numbing shock ran through his arm, and his blade was knocked from his hand. His weapon rang on the hot flints. He whirled to face the blazing slits that were El Borak's eyes. The muscles stood out in cords and ridges on Gordon's sun burnt forearm in the intensity of his passion.

"Pick it up, you filthy dog," he said between his teeth.

Osman hesitated, stooped, caught up the saber and slashed at Gordon's legs without straightening. Gordon leaped back, then sprang in again the instant his toes touched the earth. His return was as paralyzingly quick as the death-leap of a wolf. It caught Osman off balance, his sword extended. Gordon's blade hissed as it cut the air, slicing through flesh, gritting through bone.

The Turk's head toppled from the severed neck and fell at Gordon's feet, the headless body collapsing in a heap. With an excess spasm of hate, Gordon kicked the head savagely down the slope.

"Oh!" Olga turned away and hid her face. But the girl knew that Osman deserved any fate that could have overtaken him. Presently she was aware of Gordon's hand resting lightly on her shoulder and she looked up, ashamed of her weakness. The sun was just dipping below the western ridges. Musa came limping up the slope, bloodstained but radiant.

"The dogs are all dead, *effendi!*" he cried, industriously shaking a plundered watch, in an effort to make it run. "Such of our warriors as still live are faint from strife, and many sorely wounded. There is none to command now but thou."

"Sometimes problems settle themselves," mused Gordon. "But at a ghastly price. If the Rualla hadn't made that rush, which was the death of Hassan and Mitkhal — oh, well, such things are in the hands of Allah, as the Arabs say. A hundred better men than I have died today, but by the decree of some blind Fate, I live."

Gordon looked down on the wounded men. He turned to Musa.

"We must load the wounded on camels," he said, "and take them to the camp at the Walls where there's water and shade. Come."

As they started down the slope, he said to Olga:

"I'll have to stay with them till they're settled at the Walls, then I must start for the coast. Some of the Rualla will be able to ride, though, and you need have no fear of them. They'll escort you to the nearest Turkish outpost."

She looked at him in surprise.

"Then I'm not your prisoner?"

He laughed.

"I think you can help Feisal more by carrying out your original instructions of supplying misleading information to the Turks! I don't blame you for not confiding even in me. You have my deepest admiration, for you're playing the most dangerous game a woman can."

"Oh!" She felt a sudden warm flood of relief and gladness that he should know she was not really an enemy. Musa was well out of earshot. "I might have known you were high enough in Feisal's councils to know that I really am —"

“Gloria Willoughby, the cleverest, most daring secret agent the British government employs,” he murmured. The girl impulsively placed her slender fingers in his, and hand in hand they went down the slope together.

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<code> BLACK VULMEA’S VENGEANCE

CHAPTER I

Out of the *Cockatoo's* cabin staggered Black Terence Vulmea, pipe in one hand and flagon in the other. He stood with booted legs wide, teetering slightly to the gentle lift of the lofty poop. He was bareheaded and his shirt was open, revealing his broad hairy chest. He emptied the flagon and tossed it over the side with a gusty sigh of satisfaction, then directed his somewhat blurred gaze on the deck below. From poop ladder to forecastle it was littered by sprawling figures. The ship smelt like a brewery. Empty barrels, with their heads stove in, stood or rolled between the prostrate forms. Vulmea was the only man on his feet. From galley-boy to first mate the rest of the ship's company lay senseless after a debauch that had lasted a whole night long. There was not even a man at the helm.

But it was lashed securely and in that placid sea no hand was needed on the wheel. The breeze was light but steady. Land was a thin blue line to the east. A stainless blue sky held a sun whose heat had not yet become fierce.

Vulmea blinked indulgently down upon the sprawled figures of his crew, and glanced idly over the larboard side. He grunted incredulously and batted his eyes. A ship loomed where he had expected to see only naked ocean stretching to the skyline. She was little more than a hundred yards away, and was bearing down swiftly on the *Cockatoo*, obviously with the intention of laying her alongside. She was tall and square rigged, her white canvas flashing dazzlingly in the sun. From the maintruck the flag of England whipped red against the blue. Her bulwarks were lined with tense figures, bristling with boarding-pikes and grappling irons, and through her open ports the astounded pirate glimpsed the glow of the burning matches the gunners held ready.

"All hands to battle-quarters!" yelled Vulmea confusedly. Reverberant snores answered the summons. All hands remained as they were.

"Wake up, you lousy dogs!" roared their captain. "Up, curse you! A king's ship is at our throats!"

His only response came in the form of staccato commands from the frigate's deck, barking across the narrowing strip of blue water.

"Damnation!"

Cursing luridly he lurched in a reeling run across the poop to the swivel-gun which stood at the head of the larboard ladder. Seizing this he swung it

about until its muzzle bore full on the bulwark of the approaching frigate. Objects wavered dizzily before his bloodshot eyes, but he squinted along its barrel as if he were aiming a musket.

“Strike your colors, you damned pirate!” came a hail from the trim figure that trod the warship’s poop, sword in hand.

“Go to Hell!” roared Vulmea, and knocked the glowing coals of his pipe into the vent of the gun-breech. The falcon crashed, smoke puffed out in a white cloud, and the double handful of musket balls with which the gun had been charged mowed a ghastly lane through the boarding party clustered along the frigate’s bulwark. Like a clap of thunder came the answering broadside and a storm of metal raked the *Cockatoo*’s decks, turning them into a red shambles.

Sails ripped, ropes parted, timbers splintered, and blood and brains mingled with the pools of liquor spilt on the decks. A round shot as big as a man’s head smashed into the falcon, ripping it loose from the swivel and dashing it against the man who had fired it. The impact knocked him backward headlong across the poop where his head hit the rail with a crack that was too much even for an Irish skull. Black Vulmea sagged senseless to the boards. He was as deaf to the triumphant shouts and the stamp of victorious feet on his red-streaming decks as were his men who had gone from the sleep of drunkenness to the black sleep of death without knowing what had hit them.

Captain John Wentyard, of his Majesty’s frigate the *Redoubtable*, sipped his wine delicately and set down the glass with a gesture that in another man would have smacked of affectation. Wentyard was a tall man, with a narrow, pale face, colorless eyes, and a prominent nose. His costume was almost sober in comparison with the glitter of his officers who sat in respectful silence about the mahogany table in the main cabin.

“Bring in the prisoner,” he ordered, and there was a glint of satisfaction in his cold eyes.

They brought in Black Vulmea, between four brawny sailors, his hands manacled before him and a chain on his ankles that was just long enough to allow him to walk without tripping. Blood was clotted in the pirate’s thick black hair. His shirt was in tatters, revealing a torso bronzed by the sun and rippling with great muscles. Through the stern windows, he could see the topmasts of the *Cockatoo*, just sinking out of sight. That close-range broadside had robbed the frigate of a prize. His conquerors were before him

and there was no mercy in their stares, but Vulmea did not seem at all abashed or intimidated. He met the stern eyes of the officers with a level gaze that reflected only a sardonic amusement. Wentyard frowned. He preferred that his captives cringe before him. It made him feel more like Justice personified, looking unemotionally down from a great height on the sufferings of the evil.

“You are Black Vulmea, the notorious pirate?”

“I’m Vulmea,” was the laconic answer.

“I suppose you will say, as do all these rogues,” sneered Wentyard, “that you hold a commission from the Governor of Tortuga? These privateer commissions from the French mean nothing to his Majesty. You — “

“Save your breath, fish-eyes!” Vulmea grinned hardly. “I hold no commission from anybody. I’m not one of your accursed swashbucklers who hide behind the name of buccaneer. I’m a pirate, and I’ve plundered English ships as well as Spanish — and be damned to you, heron-beak!”

The officers gasped at this effrontery, and Wentyard smiled a ghastly, mirthless smile, white with the anger he held in rein.

“You know that I have the authority to hang you out of hand?” he reminded the other.

“I know,” answered the pirate softly. “It won’t be the first time you’ve hanged me, John Wentyard.”

“What?” The Englishman stared.

A flame grew in Vulmea’s blue eyes and his voice changed subtly in tone and inflection; the brogue thickened almost imperceptibly.

“On the Galway coast it was, years ago, captain. You were a young officer then, scarce more than a boy — but with all your present characteristics already fully developed. There were some wholesale evictions, with the military to see the job was done, and the Irish were mad enough to make a fight of it — poor, ragged, half-starved peasants, fighting with sticks against full-armed English soldiers and sailors. After the massacre there was the usual hangings, and there was a boy crept into a thicket to watch — a lad of ten, who didn’t even know what it was all about. You spied him, John Wentyard, and had your dogs drag him forth and string him up alongside the kicking bodies of the others. ‘He’s Irish,’ you said as they heaved him aloft. ‘Little snakes grow into big ones.’ I was that boy. I’ve looked forward to this meeting, you English dog!”

Vulmea still smiled, but the veins knotted in his temples and the great muscles stood out distinctly on his manacled arms. Ironed and guarded though the pirate was, Wentyard involuntarily drew back, daunted by the stark and naked hate that blazed from those savage eyes.

“How did you escape your just desserts?” he asked coldly, recovering his poise.

Vulmea laughed shortly.

“Some of the peasants escaped the massacre and were hiding in the thickets. As soon as you left they came out, and not being civilized, cultured Englishmen, but only poor, savage Irishry, they cut me down along with the others, and found there as still a bit of life in me. We Gaels are hard to kill, as you Britons have learned to your cost.”

“You fell into our hands easily enough this time,” observed Wentyard.

Vulmea grinned. His eyes were grimly amused now, but the glint of murderous hate still lurked in their deeps.

“Who’d have thought to meet a king’s ship in these western seas? It’s been weeks since we sighted a sail of any kind, save for the carrack we took yesterday, with a cargo of wine bound for Panama from Valparaiso. It’s not the time of year for rich prizes. When the lads wanted a drinking bout, who was I to deny them? We drew out of the lanes the Spaniards mostly follow, and thought we had the ocean to ourselves. I’d been sleeping in my cabin for some hours before I came on deck to smoke a pipe or so, and saw you about to board us without firing a shot.”

“You killed seven of my men,” harshly accused Wentyard.

“And you killed all of mine,” retorted Vulmea. “Poor devils, they’ll wake up in Hell without knowing how they got there.”

He grinned again, fiercely. His toes dug hard against the floor, unnoticed by the men who gripped him on either side. The blood was rioting through his veins, and the berserk feel of his great strength was upon him. He knew he could, in a sudden, volcanic explosion of power, tear free from the men who held him, clear the space between him and his enemy with one bound, despite his chains, and crush Wentyard’s skull with a smashing swing of his manacled fists. That he himself would die an instant later mattered not at all. In that moment he felt neither fears nor regrets — only a reckless, ferocious exultation and a cruel contempt for these stupid Englishmen about him. He laughed in their faces, jaying in the knowledge that they did not know why he laughed. So they thought to chain the tiger,

did they? Little they guessed of the devastating fury that lurked in his catlike thews.

He began filling his great chest, drawing in his breath slowly, imperceptibly, as his calves knotted and the muscles of his arms grew hard. Then Wentyard spoke again.

"I will not be overstepping my authority if I hang you within the hour. In any event you hang, either from my yardarm or from a gibbet on the Port Royal wharves. But life is sweet, even to rogues like you, who notoriously cling to every moment granted them by outraged society. It would gain you a few more months of life if I were to take you back to Jamaica to be sentenced by the governor. This I might be persuaded to do, on one condition."

"What's that?" Vulmea's tensed muscles did not relax; imperceptibly he began to settle into a semi-crouch.

"That you tell me the whereabouts of the pirate, Van Raven."

In that instant, while his knotted muscles went pliant again, Vulmea unerringly gauged and appraised the man who faced him, and changed his plan. He straightened and smiled.

"And why the Dutchman, Wentyard?" he asked softly. "Why not Tranicos, or Villiers, or McVeigh, or a dozen others more destructive to English trade than Van Raven? Is it because of the treasure he took from the Spanish plate-fleet? Aye, the king would like well to set his hands on that hoard, and there's a rich prize would go the captain lucky or bold enough to find Van Raven and plunder him. Is that why you came all the way around the Horn, John Wentyard?"

"We are at peace with Spain," answered Wentyard acidly. "As for the purposes of an officer in his Majesty's navy, they are not for you to question."

Vulmea laughed at him, the blue flame in his eyes.

"Once I sank a king's cruiser off Hispaniola," he said. "Damn you and your prating of 'His Majesty'! Your English king is no more to me than so much rotten driftwood. Van Raven? He's a bird of passage. Who knows where he sails? But if it's treasure you want, I can show you a hoard that would make the Dutchman's loot look like a peat-pool beside the Caribbean Sea!"

A pale spark seemed to snap from Wentyard's colorless eyes, and his officers leaned forward tensely. Vulmea grinned hardily. He knew the

credulity of navy men, which they shared with landsmen and honest mariners, in regard to pirates and plunder. Every seaman not himself a rover, believed that every buccaneer had knowledge of vast hidden wealth. The loot the men of the Red Brother took from the Spaniards, rich enough as it was, was magnified a thousand times in the telling, and rumor made every swaggering sea-rat the guardian of a treasure-trove.

Coolly plumbing the avarice of Wentyard's hard soul, Vulmea said: "Ten days' sail from here there's a nameless bay on the coast of Ecuador. Four years ago Dick Harston, the English pirate and I anchored there, in a quest of a hoard of ancient jewels called the Fangs of Satan. An Indian swore he had found them, hidden in a ruined temple in an uninhabited jungle a day's march inland, but superstitious fear of the old gods kept him from helping himself. But he was willing to guide us there.

"We marched inland with both crews, for neither of us trusted the other. To make a long tale short, we found the ruins of an old city, and beneath an ancient, broken altar, we found the jewels — rubies, diamonds, emeralds, sapphires, bloodstones, big as hen eggs, making a quivering flame of fire about the crumbling old shrine!"

The flame grew in Wentyard's eyes. His white fingers knotted about the slender stem of his wine glass.

"The sight of them was enough to madden a man," Vulmea continued, watching the captain narrowly. "We camped there for the night, and, one way or another, we fell out over the division of the spoil, though there was enough to make every man of us rich for life. We came to blows, though, and whilst we fought among ourselves, there came a scout running with word that a Spanish fleet had come into the bay, driven our ships away, and sent five hundred men ashore to pursue us. By Satan, they were on us before the scout ceased the telling! One of my men snatched the plunder away and hid it in the old temple, and we scattered, each band for itself. There was no time to take the plunder. We barely got away with our naked lives. Eventually I, with most of my crew, made my way back to the coast and was picked up by my ship which came slinking back after escaping from the Spaniards.

"Harston gained his ship with a handful of men, after skirmishing all the way with the Spaniards who chased him instead of us, and later was slain by savages on the coast of California.

“The Dons harried me all the way around the Horn, and I never had an opportunity to go back after the loot — until this voyage. It was there I was going when you overhauled me. The treasure’s still there. Promise me my life and I’ll take you to it.”

“That is impossible,” snapped Wentyard. “The best I can promise you is trial before the governor of Jamaica.”

“Well,” said Vulmea, “Maybe the governor might be more lenient than you. And much may happen between here and Jamaica.”

Wentyard did not reply, but spread a map on the broad table.

“Where is this bay?”

Vulmea indicated a certain spot on the coast. The sailors released their grip on his arms while he marked it, and Wentyard’s head was within reach, but the Irishman’s plans were changed, and they included a chance for life — desperate, but nevertheless a chance.

“Very well. Take him below.”

Vulmea went out with his guards, and Wentyard sneered coldly.

“A gentleman of his Majesty’s navy is not bound by a promise to such a rogue as he. Once the treasure is aboard the *Redoubtable*, gentlemen, I promise you he shall swing from a yardarm.”

Ten days later the anchors rattled down in the nameless bay Vulmea had described.

CHAPTER II

It seemed desolate enough to have been the coast of an uninhabited continent. The bay was merely a shallow indentation of the shoreline. Dense jungle crowded the narrow strip of white sand that was the beach. Gay-plumed birds flitted among the broad fronds, and the silence of primordial savagery brooded over all. But a dim trail led back into the twilight vistas of green-walled mystery.

Dawn was a white mist on the water when seventeen men marched down the dim path. One was John Wentyard. On an expedition designed to find treasure, he would trust the command to none but himself. Fifteen were soldiers, armed with hangers and muskets. The seventeenth was Black Vulmea. The Irishman’s legs, perforce, were free, and the irons had been removed from his arms. But his wrists were bound before him with cords, and one end of the cord was in the grip of a brawny marine whose other hand held a cutlass ready to chop down the pirate if he made any move to escape.

“Fifteen men are enough,” Vulmea had told Wentyard. “Too many! Men go mad easily in the tropics, and the sight of the Fangs of Satan is enough to madden any man, king’s man or not. The more that see the jewels, the greater chance of mutiny before you raise the Horn again. You don’t need more than three or four. Who are you afraid of? You said England was at peace with Spain, and there are no Spaniards anywhere near this spot, in any event.”

“I wasn’t thinking of Spaniards,” answered Wentyard coldly. “I am providing against any attempt you might make to escape.”

“Well,” laughed Vulmea, “do you think you need fifteen men for that?”

“I’m taking no chances,” was the grim retort. “You are stronger than two or three ordinary men, Vulmea, and full of wiles. My men will march with pieces ready, and if you try to bolt, they will shoot you down like the dog you are — should you, by any chance, avoid being cut down by your guard. Besides, there is always the chance of savages.”

The pirate jeered.

“Go beyond the Cordilleras if you seek real savages. There are Indians there who cut off your head and shrink it no bigger than your fist. But they never come on this side of the mountains. As for the race that built the temple, they’ve all been dead for centuries. Bring your armed escort if you want to. It will be of no use. One strong man can carry away the whole hoard.”

“One strong man!” murmured Wentyard, licking his lips as his mind reeled at the thought of the wealth represented by a load of jewels that required the full strength of a strong man to carry. Confused visions of knighthood and admiralty whirled through his head. “What about the path?” he asked suspiciously. “If this coast is uninhabited, how comes it there?”

“It was an old road, centuries ago, probably used by the race that built the city. In some places you can see where it was paved. But Harston and I were the first to use it for centuries. And you can tell it hasn’t been used since. You can see where the young growth has sprung up above the scars of the axes we used to clear a way.”

Wentyard was forced to agree. So now, before sunrise, the landing party was swinging inland at a steady gait that ate up the miles. The bay and the ship were quickly lost to sight. All morning they tramped along through steaming heat, between green, tangled jungle walls where gay-hued birds flitted silently and monkeys chattered. Thick vines hung low across the

trail, impeding their progress, and they were sorely annoyed by gnats and other insects. At noon they paused only long enough to drink some water and eat the ready-cooked food they had brought along. The men were stolid veterans, inured to long marches, and Wentyard would allow them no more rest than was necessary for their brief meal. He was afire with savage eagerness to view the hoard Vulmea had described.

The trail did not twist as much as most jungle paths. It was overgrown with vegetation, but it gave evidence that it had once been a road, well built and broad. Pieces of paving were still visible here and there. By mid-afternoon the land began to rise slightly to be broken by low, jungle-choked hills. They were aware of this only by the rising and dipping of the trail. The dense walls on either hand shut off their view.

Neither Wentyard nor any of his men glimpsed the furtive, shadowy shapes which now glided along through the jungle on either hand. Vulmea was aware of their presence, but he only smiled grimly and said nothing. Carefully and so subtly that his guard did not suspect it, the pirate worked at the cords on his wrists, weakening and straining the strands by continual tugging and twisting. He had been doing this all day, and he could feel them slowly giving way.

The sun hung low in the jungle branches when the pirate halted and pointed to where the old road bent almost at right angles and disappeared into the mouth of a ravine.

“Down that ravine lies the old temple where the jewels are hidden.”

“On, then!” snapped Wentyard, fanning himself with his plumed hat. Sweat trickled down his face, wilting the collar of his crimson, gilt-embroidered coat. A frenzy of impatience was on him, his eyes dazzled by the imagined glitter of the gems Vulmea had so vividly described. Avarice makes for credulity, and it never occurred to Wentyard to doubt Vulmea’s tale. He saw in the Irishman only a hulking brute eager to buy a few months more of life. Gentlemen of his Majesty’s navy were not accustomed to analyzing the character of pirates. Wentyard’s code was painfully simple: a heavy hand and a roughshod directness. He had never bothered to study or try to understand outlaw types.

They entered the mouth of the ravine and marched on between cliffs fringed with overhanging fronds. Wentyard fanned himself with his hat and gnawed his lip with impatience as he stared eagerly about for some sign of the ruins described by his captive. His face was paler than ever, despite the

heat which reddened the bluff faces of his men, tramping ponderously after him. Vulmea's brown face showed no undue moisture. He did not tramp; he moved with the sure, supple tread of a panther, and without a suggestion of a seaman's lurching roll. His eyes ranged the walls above them and when a frond swayed without a breath of wind to move it, he did not miss it.

The ravine was some fifty feet wide, the floor carpeted by a low, thick growth of vegetation. The jungle ran densely along the rims of the walls, which were some forty feet high. They were sheer for the most part, but here and there natural ramps ran down into the gulch, half-covered with tangled vines. A few hundred yards ahead of them they saw that the ravine bent out of sight around a rocky shoulder. From the opposite wall there jutted a corresponding crag. The outlines of these boulders were blurred by moss and creepers, but they seemed too symmetrical to be the work of nature alone.

Vulmea stopped, near one of the natural ramps that sloped down from the rim. His captors looked at him questioningly.

"Why are you stopping?" demanded Wentyard fretfully. His foot struck something in the rank grass and he kicked it aside. It rolled free and grinned up at him — a rotting human skull. He saw glints of white in the green all about him — skulls and bones almost covered by the dense vegetation.

"Is this where you piratical dogs slew each other?" he demanded crossly. "What are you waiting on? What are you listening for?"

Vulmea relaxed his tense attitude and smiled indulgently.

"That used to be a gateway there ahead of us," he said. "Those rocks on each side are really gate pillars. This ravine was a roadway, leading to the city when people lived there. It's the only approach to it, for it's surrounded by sheer cliffs on all sides." He laughed harshly. "This is like the road to Hell, John Wentyard: easy to go down — not so easy to go up again."

"What are you maundering about?" snarled Wentyard, clapping his hat viciously on his head. "You Irish are all babblers and mooncalves! Get on with —"

From the jungle beyond the mouth of the ravine came a sharp twang. Something whined venomously down the gulch, ending its flight with a vicious thud. One of the soldiers gulped and started convulsively. His musket clattered to the earth and he reeled, clawing at his throat from which protruded a long shaft, vibrating like a serpent's head. Suddenly he pitched to the ground and lay twitching.

“Indians!” yelled Wentyard, and turned furiously on his prisoner. “Dog! Look at that! You said there were no savages hereabouts!”

Vulmea laughed scornfully.

“Do you call them savages? Bah! Poor-spirited dogs that skulk in the jungle, too fearful to show themselves on the coast. Don’t you see them slinking among the trees? Best give them a volley before they grow too bold.”

Wentyard snarled at him, but the Englishman knew the value of a display of firearms when dealing with natives, and he had a glimpse of brown figures moving among the green foliage. He barked an order and fourteen muskets crashed, and the bullets rattled among the leaves. A few severed fronds drifted down; that was all. But even as the smoke puffed out in a cloud, Vulmea snapped the frayed cords on his wrists, knocked his guard staggering with a buffet under the ear, snatched his cutlass and was gone, running like a cat up the steep wall of the ravine. The soldiers with their empty muskets gaped helplessly after him, and Wentyard’s pistol banged futilely, an instant too late. From the green fringe above them came a mocking laugh.

“Fools! You stand in the door of Hell!”

“Dog!” yelled Wentyard, beside himself, but with his greed still uppermost in his befuddled mind. “We’ll find the treasure without your help!”

“You can’t find something that doesn’t exist,” retorted the unseen pirate. “There never were any jewels. It was a lie to draw you into a trap. Dick Harston never came here. I came here, and the Indians butchered all my crew in that ravine, as those skulls in the grass there testify.”

“Liar!” was all Wentyard could find tongue for. “Lying dog! You told me there were no Indians hereabouts!”

“I told you the headhunters never came over the mountains,” retorted Vulmea. “They don’t either. I told you the people who built the city were all dead. That’s so, too. I didn’t tell you that a tribe of brown devils live in the jungle near here. They never go down to the coast, and they don’t like to have white men come into the jungle. I think they were the people who wiped out the race that built the city, long ago. Anyway, they wiped out my men, and the only reason I got away was because I’d lived with the red men of North America and learned their woodcraft. You’re in a trap you won’t get out of, Wentyard!”

“Climb that wall and take him!” ordered Wentyard, and half a dozen men slung their muskets on their backs and began clumsily to essay the rugged ramp up which the pirate had run with such catlike ease.

“Better trim sail and stand by to repel boarders,” Vulmea advised him from above. “There are hundreds of red devils out there — and no tame dogs to run at the crack of a caliver, either.”

“And you’d betray white men to savages!” raged Wentyard.

“It goes against my principles,” the Irishman admitted, “but it was my only chance for life. I’m sorry for your men. That’s why I advised you to bring only a handful. I wanted to spare as many as possible. There are enough Indians out there in the jungle to eat your whole ship’s company. As for you, you filthy dog, what you did in Ireland forfeited any consideration you might expect as a white man. I gambled on my neck and took my chances with all of you. It might have been me that arrow hit.”

The voice ceased abruptly, and just as Wentyard was wondering if there were no Indians on the wall above them, the foliage was violently agitated, there sounded a wild yell, and down came a naked brown body, all asprawl, limbs revolving in the air. It crashed on the floor of the ravine and lay motionless — the figure of a brawny warrior, naked but for a loincloth of bark. The dead man was deep chested, broad shouldered and muscular, with features not unintelligent, but hard and brutal. He had been slashed across the neck.

The bushes waved briefly, and then again, further along the rim, which agitation Wentyard believed marked the flight of the Irishman along the ravine wall, pursued by the companions of the dead warrior, who must have stolen up on Vulmea while the pirate was shouting his taunts.

The chase was made in deadly silence, but down in the ravine conditions were anything but silent. At the sight of the falling body a blood-curdling ululation burst forth from the jungle outside the mouth of the ravine, and a storm of arrows came whistling down it. Another man fell, and three more were wounded, and Wentyard called down the men who were laboriously struggling up the vine-matted ramp. He fell back down the ravine, almost to the bend where the ancient gate posts jutted, and beyond that point he feared to go. He felt sure that the ravine beyond the Gateway was filled with lurking savages. They would not have hemmed him in on all sides and then left open an avenue of escape.

At the spot where he halted there was a cluster of broken rocks that looked as though as they might once have formed the walls of a building of some sort. Among them Wentyard made his stand. He ordered his men to lie prone, their musket barrels resting on the rocks. One man he detailed to watch for savages creeping up the ravine from behind them, the others watched the green wall visible beyond the path that ran into the mouth of the ravine. Fear chilled Wentyard's heart. The sun was already lost behind the trees and the shadows were lengthening. In the brief dusk of the tropic twilight, how could a white man's eye pick out a swift, flitting brown body, or a musket ball find its mark? And when darkness fell — Wentyard shivered despite the heat.

Arrows kept singing down the ravine, but they fell short or splintered on the rocks. But now bowmen hidden on the walls drove down their shafts, and from their vantage point the stones afforded little protection. The screams of men skewered to the ground rose harrowingly. Wentyard saw his command melting away under his eyes. The only thing that kept them from being instantly exterminated was the steady fire he had them keep up at the foliage on the cliffs. They seldom saw their foes; they only saw the fronds shake, had an occasional glimpse of a brown arm. But the heavy balls, ripping through the broad leaves, made the hidden archers wary, and the shafts came at intervals instead of in volleys. Once a piercing death yell announced that a blind ball had gone home, and the English raised a croaking cheer.

Perhaps it was this which brought the infuriated warriors out of the jungle. Perhaps, like the white men, they disliked fighting in the dark, and wanted to conclude the slaughter before night fell. Perhaps they were ashamed longer to lurk hidden from a handful of men.

At any rate, they came out of the jungle beyond the trail suddenly, and by the scores, not scrawny primitives, but brawny, hard-muscled warriors, confident of their strength and physically a match for even the sinewy Englishmen. They came in a wave of brown bodies that suddenly flooded the ravine, and others leaped down the walls, swinging from the lianas. They were hundreds against the handful of Englishmen left. These rose from the rocks without orders, meeting death with the bulldog stubbornness of their breed. They fired a volley full into the tide of snarling faces that surged upon them, and then drew hangers and clubbed empty muskets. There was no time to reload. Their blast tore lanes in the onswEEPing

human torrent, but it did not falter; it came on and engulfed the white men in a snarling, slashing, smiting whirlpool.

Hangers whirled and bit through flesh and bone, clubbed muskets rose and fell, spattering brains. But copper-headed axes flashed dully in the twilight, war-clubs made a red ruin of the skulls they kissed, and there were a score of red arms to drag down each struggling white man. The ravine was choked with a milling, eddying mass, revolving about a fast-dwindling cluster of desperate, white-skinned figures.

Not until his last man fell did Wentyard break away, blood smeared on his arms, dripping from his sword. He was hemmed in by a surging ring of ferocious figures, but he had one loaded pistol left. He fired it full in a painted face surmounted by a feathered chest and saw it vanish in red ruin. He clubbed a shaven head with the empty barrel, and rushed through the gap made by the falling bodies. A wild figure leaped at him, swinging a war-club, but the sword was quicker. Wentyard tore the blade free as the savage fell. Dusk was ebbing swiftly into darkness, and the figures swirling about him were becoming indistinct, vague of outline. Twilight waned quickly in the ravine and darkness had settled there before it veiled the jungle outside. It was the darkness that saved Wentyard, confusing his attackers. As the sworded Indian fell he found himself free, though men were rushing on him from behind, with clubs lifted.

Blindly he fled down the ravine. It lay empty before him. Fear lent wings to his feet. He raced through the stone abutted Gateway. Beyond it he saw the ravine widen out; stone walls rose ahead of him, almost hidden by vines and creepers, pierced with blank windows and doorways. His flesh crawled with the momentary expectation of a thrust in the back. His heart was pounding so loudly, the blood hammering so agonizingly in his temples, that he could not tell whether or not bare feet were thudding close behind him.

His hat and coat were gone, his shirt torn and bloodstained, though somehow he had come through that desperate melee unwounded. Before him he saw a vine-tangled wall, and an empty doorway. He ran reelingly into the door and turned, falling to his knee from sheer exhaustion. He shook the sweat from his eyes, panting gaspingly as he fumbled to reload his pistols. The ravine was a dim alleyway before him, running to the rock-buttressed bend. Moment by moment he expected to see it thronged with fierce faces, with swarming figures. But it lay empty and fierce cries of the

victorious warriors drew no nearer. For some reason they had not followed him through the Gateway.

Terror that they were creeping on him from behind brought him to his feet, pistols cocked, staring this way and that.

He was in a room whose stone walls seemed ready to crumble. It was roofless, and grass grew between the broken stones of the floor. Through the gaping roof he could see the stars just blinking out, and the frond-fringed rim of the cliff. Through a door opposite the one by which he crouched he had a vague glimpse of other vegetation-choked, roofless chambers beyond.

Silence brooded over the ruins, and now silence had fallen beyond the bend of the ravine. He fixed his eyes on the blur that was the Gateway and waited. It stood empty. Yet he knew that the Indians were aware of his flight. Why did they not rush in and cut his throat? Were they afraid of his pistols? They had shown no fear of his soldiers' muskets. Had they gone away, for some inexplicable reason? Were those shadowy chambers behind him filled with lurking warriors? If so, why in God's name were they waiting?

He rose and went to the opposite door, craned his neck warily through it, and after some hesitation, entered the adjoining chamber. It had no outlet into the open. All its doors led into other chambers, equally ruinous, with broken roofs, cracked floors and crumbling walls. Three or four he traversed, his tread, as he crushed down the vegetation growing among the broken stones, seeming intolerably loud in the stillness. Abandoning his explorations — for the labyrinth seemed endless — he returned to the room that opened toward the ravine. No sound came up the gulch, but it was so dark under the cliff that men could have entered the Gateway and been crouching near him, without his being able to see them.

At last he could endure the suspense no longer. Walking as quietly as he was able, he left the ruins and approached the Gateway, now a well of blackness. A few moments later he was hugging the left-hand abutment and straining his eyes to see into the ravine beyond. It was too dark to see anything more than the stars blinking over the rims of the walls. He took a cautious step beyond the Gateway — it was the swift swish of feet through the vegetation on the floor that saved his life. He sensed rather than saw a black shape loom out of the darkness, and he fired blindly and point-blank. The flash lighted a ferocious face, falling backward, and beyond it the

Englishman dimly glimpsed other figures, solid ranks of them, surging inexorably toward him.

With a choked cry he hurled himself back around the gate pillar, stumbled and fell and lay dumb and quaking, clenching his teeth against the sharp agony he expected in the shape of a spear-thrust. None came. No figure came lunging after him. Incredulously he gathered himself to his feet, his pistols shaking in his hands. They were waiting, beyond that bend, but they would not come through the Gateway, not even to glut their blood-lust. This fact forced itself upon him, with its implication of inexplicable mystery.

Stumblingly he made his way back to the ruins and groped into the black doorway, overcoming an instinctive aversion against entering the roofless chamber. Starlight shone through the broken roof, lightening the gloom a little, but black shadows clustered along the walls and the inner door was an ebon wall of mystery. Like most Englishmen of his generation, John Wentyard more than believed in ghosts, and he felt that if ever there was a place fit to be haunted by the phantoms of a lost and forgotten race, it was these sullen ruins.

He glanced fearfully through the broken roof at the dark fringe of overhanging fronds on the cliffs above, hanging motionless in the breathless air, and wondered if moonrise, illuminating his refuge, would bring arrows questing down through the roof. Except for the far lone cry of a night-bird, the jungle was silent. There was not so much as the rustle of a leaf. If there were men on the cliffs there was no sign to show it. He was aware of hunger and an increasing thirst; rage gnawed at him, and a fear that was already tinged with panic.

He crouched at the doorway, pistols in his hands, naked sword at his knee, and after awhile the moon rose, touching the overhanging fronds with silver long before it untangled itself from the trees and rose high enough to pour its light over the cliffs. Its light invaded the ruins, but no arrows came from the cliff, nor was there any sound from beyond the Gateway. Wentyard thrust his head through the door and surveyed his retreat.

The ravine, after it passed between the ancient gate pillars, opened into a broad bowl, walled by cliffs, and unbroken except for the mouth of the gulch. Wentyard saw the rim as a continuous, roughly circular line, now edged with the fire of moonlight. The ruins in which he had taken refuge almost filled this bowl, being built against the cliffs on one side. Decayed

and smothering vines had almost obliterated the original architectural plan. He saw the structure as a maze of roofless chambers, the outer doors opening upon the broad space left between it and the opposite wall of the cliff. This space was covered with low, dense vegetation, which also choked some of the chambers. Wentyard saw no way of escape. The cliffs were not like the walls of the ravine. They were of solid rock and sheer, even jutting outward a little at the rim. No vines trailed down them. They did not rise many yards above the broken roofs of the ruins, but they were as far out of his reach as if they had towered a thousand feet. He was caught like a rat in a trap. The only way out was up the ravine, where the blood-lusting warriors waited with grim patience. He remembered Vulmea's mocking warning: " — Like the road to Hell: easy to go down; not so easy to go up again!" Passionately he hoped that the Indians had caught the Irishman and slain him slowly and painfully. He could have watched Vulmea flayed alive with intense satisfaction.

Presently, despite hunger and thirst and fear, he fell asleep, to dream of ancient temples where drums muttered and strange figures in parrot-feather mantles moved through the smoke of sacrificial fires; and he dreamed at last of a silent, hideous shape which came to the inner door of his roofless chamber and regarded him with cold, inhuman eyes.

It was from this dream that he awakened, bathed in cold sweat, to start up with an incoherent cry, clutching his pistols. Then, fully awake, he stood in the middle of the chamber, trying to gather his scattered wits. Memory of the dream was vague but terrifying. Had he actually seen a shadow sway in the doorway and vanish as he awoke, or had it been only part of his nightmare? The red, lopsided moon was poised on the western rim of the cliffs, and that side of the bowl was in thick shadow, but still an illusive light found its way into the ruins. Wentyard peered through the inner doorway, pistols cocked. Light floated rather than streamed down from above, and showed him an empty chamber beyond. The vegetation on the floor was crushed down, but he remembered having walked back and forth across it several times.

Cursing his nervous imagination he returned to the outer doorway. He told himself that he chose that place the better to guard against an attack from the ravine, but the real reason was that he could not bring himself to select a spot deeper in the gloomy interior of the ancient ruins.

He sat down cross-legged just inside the doorway, his back against the wall, his pistols beside him and his sword across his knees. His eyes burned and his lips felt baked with the thirst that tortured him. The sight of the heavy globules of dew that hung on the grass almost maddened him, but he did not seek to quench his thirst by that means, believing as he did that it was rank poison. He drew his belt closer, against his hunger, and told himself that he would not sleep. But he did sleep, in spite of everything.

CHAPTER III

It was a frightful scream close at hand that awakened Wentyard. He was on his feet before he was fully awake, glaring wildly about him. The moon had set and the interior of the chamber was dark as Egypt, in which the outer doorway was but a somewhat lighter blur. But outside it there sounded a blood-chilling gurgling, the heaving and flopping of a heavy body. Then silence.

It was a human being that had screamed. Wentyard groped for his pistols, found his sword instead, and hurried forth, his taut nerves thrumming. The starlight in the bowl, dim as it was, was less Stygian than the absolute blackness of the ruins. But he did not see the figure stretched in the grass until he stumbled over it. That was all he saw, then — just that dim form stretched on the ground before the doorway. The foliage hanging over the cliff rustled a little in the faint breeze. Shadows hung thick under the wall and about the ruins. A score of men might have been lurking near him, unseen. But there was no sound.

After a while, Wentyard knelt beside the figure, straining his eyes in the starlight. He grunted softly. The dead man was not an Indian, but a black man, a brawny ebon giant, clad, like the red men, in a bark loin clout, with a crest of parrot feathers on his kinky head. A murderous copper-headed axe lay near his hand, and a great gash showed in his muscular breast, a lesser wound under his shoulder blade. He had been stabbed so savagely that the blade had transfixed him and come out through his back.

Wentyard swore at the accumulated mystery of it. The presence of the black man was not inexplicable. Negro slaves, fleeing from Spanish masters, frequently took to the jungle and lived with the natives. This black evidently did not share in whatever superstition or caution kept the Indians outside the bowl; he had come in alone to butcher the victim they had at bay. But the mystery of his death remained. The blow that had impaled him had been driven with more than ordinary strength. There was a sinister

suggestion about the episode, though the mysterious killer had saved Wentyard from being brained in his sleep — it was as if some inscrutable being, having claimed the Englishman for its own, refused to be robbed of its prey. Wentyard shivered, shaking off the thought.

Then he realized that he was armed only with his sword. He had rushed out of the ruins half-asleep, leaving his pistols behind him, after a brief fumbling that failed to find them in the darkness. He turned and hurried back into the chamber and began to grope on the floor, first irritably, then with growing horror. *The pistols were gone.*

At this realization panic overwhelmed Wentyard. He found himself out in the starlight again without knowing just how he had got there. He was sweating, trembling in every limb, biting his tongue to keep from screaming in hysterical terror.

Frantically he fought for control. It was not imagination, then, which peopled those ghastly ruins with furtive, sinister shapes that glided from room to shadowy room on noiseless feet, and spied upon him while he slept. *Something* besides himself had been in that room — something that had stolen his pistols either while he was fumbling over the dead negro outside, or — grisly thought! — while he slept. He believed the latter had been the case. He had heard no sound in the ruins while he was outside. But why had it not taken his sword as well? Was it the Indians, after all, playing a horrible game with him? Was it their eyes he seemed to feel burning upon him from the shadows? But he did not believe it was the Indians. They would have no reason to kill their black ally.

Wentyard felt that he was near the end of his rope. He was nearly frantic with thirst and hunger, and he shrank from the contemplation of another day of heat in that waterless bowl. He went toward the ravine mouth, grasping his sword in desperation, telling himself that it was better to be speared quickly than haunted to an unknown doom by unseen phantoms, or perish of thirst. But the blind instinct to live drove him back from the rock-buttressed Gateway. He could not bring himself to exchange an uncertain fate for certain death. Faint noises beyond the bend told him that men, many men, were waiting there, and retreated, cursing weakly.

In a futile gust of passion he dragged the black man's body to the Gateway and thrust it through. At least he would not have it for a companion to poison the air when it rotted in the heat.

He sat down about halfway between the ruins and the ravine mouth, hugging his sword and straining his eyes into the shadowy starlight, and felt that he was being watched from the ruins; he sensed a Presence there, inscrutable, inhuman, waiting — waiting —

He was still sitting there when dawn flooded jungle and cliffs with grey light, and a brown warrior, appearing in the Gateway, bent his bow and sent an arrow at the figure hunkered in the open space. The shaft cut into the grass near Wentyard's foot, and the white man sprang up stiffly and ran into the doorway of the ruins. The warrior did not shoot again. As if frightened by his own temerity, he turned and hurried back through the Gateway and vanished from sight.

Wentyard spat dryly and swore. Daylight dispelled some of the phantom terrors of the night, and he was suffering so much from thirst that his fear was temporarily submerged. He was determined to explore the ruins by each crevice and cranny and bring to bay whatever was lurking among them. At least he would have daylight by which to face it.

To this end he turned toward the inner door, and then he stopped in his tracks, his heart in his throat. In the inner doorway stood a great gourd, newly cut and hollowed, and filled with water; beside it was a stack of fruit, and in another calabash there was meat, still smoking faintly. With a stride he reached the door and glared through. Only an empty chamber met his eyes.

Sight of water and scent of food drove from his mind all thoughts of anything except his physical needs. He seized the water gourd and drank gulpingly, the precious liquid splashing on his breast. The water was fresh and sweet, and no wine had ever given him such delirious satisfaction. The meat he found was still warm. What it was he neither knew nor cared. He ate ravenously, grasping the joints in his fingers and tearing away the flesh with his teeth. It had evidently been roasted over an open fire, and without salt or seasoning, but it tasted like food of the gods to the ravenous man. He did not seek to explain the miracle, nor to wonder if the food were poisoned. The inscrutable haunter of the ruins which had saved his life that night, and which had stolen his pistols, apparently meant to preserve him for the time being, at least, and Wentyard accepted the gifts without question.

And having eaten he lay down and slept. He did not believe the Indians would invade the ruins; he did not care much if they did, and speared him in

his sleep. He believed that the unknown being which haunted the rooms could slay him any time it wished. It had been close to him again and again and had not struck. It had showed no signs of hostility so far, except to steal his pistols. To go searching for it might drive it into hostility.

Wentyard, despite his slaked thirst and full belly, was at the point where he had a desperate indifference to consequences. His world seemed to have crumbled about him. He had led his men into a trap to see them butchered; he had seen his prisoner escape; he was caught like a caged rat himself; the wealth he had lusted after and dreamed about had proved a lie. Worn out with vain ragings against his fate, he slept.

The sun was high when he awoke and sat up with a startled oath. Black Vulmea stood looking down at him.

"Damn!" Wentyard sprang up, snatching at his sword. His mind was a riot of maddening emotions, but physically he was a new man, and nerved to a rage that was tinged with near-insanity.

"You dog!" he raved. "So the Indians didn't catch you on the cliffs!"

"Those red dogs?" Vulmea laughed. "They didn't follow me past the Gateway. They don't come on the cliffs overlooking these ruins. They've got a cordon of men strung through the jungle, surrounding this place, but I can get through any time I want to. I cooked your breakfast — and mine — right under their noses, and they never saw me."

"My breakfast!" Wentyard glared wildly. "You mean it was you brought water and food for me?"

"Who else?"

"But — but why?" Wentyard was floundering in a maze of bewilderment.

Vulmea laughed, but he laughed only with his lips. His eyes were burning. "Well, at first I thought it would satisfy me if I saw you get an arrow through your guts. Then when you broke away and got in here, I said, 'Better still! They'll keep the swine there until he starves, and I'll lurk about and watch him die slowly.' I knew they wouldn't come in after you. When they ambushed me and my crew in the ravine, I cut my way through them and got in here, just as you did, and they didn't follow me in. But I got out of here the first night. I made sure you wouldn't get out the way I did that time, and then settled myself to watch you die. I could come or go as I pleased after nightfall, and you'd never see or hear me."

"But in that case, I don't see why —"

“You probably wouldn’t understand!” snarled Vulmea. “But just watching you starve wasn’t enough. I wanted to kill you myself — I wanted to see your blood gush, and watch your eyes glaze!” The Irishman’s voice thickened with his passion, and his great hands clenched until the knuckles showed white. “And I didn’t want to kill a man half-dead with want. So I went back up into the jungle on the cliffs and got water and fruit and knocked a monkey off a limb with a stone, and roasted him. I brought you a good meal and set it there in the door while you were sitting outside the ruins. You couldn’t see me from where you were sitting, and of course you didn’t hear anything. You English are all dull-eared.”

“And it was you who stole my pistols last night!” muttered Wentyard, staring at the butts jutting from Vulmea’s Spanish girdle.

“Aye! I took them from the floor beside you while you slept. I learned stealth from the Indians of North America. I didn’t want you to shoot me when I came to pay my debt. While I was getting them I heard somebody sneaking up outside, and saw a black man coming toward the doorway. I didn’t want him to be robbing me of my revenge, so I stuck my cutlass through him. You awakened when he howled, and ran out, as you’ll remember, but I stepped back around the corner and in at another door. I didn’t want to meet you except in broad open daylight and you in fighting trim.”

“Then it was you who spied on me from the inner door,” muttered Wentyard. “You whose shadow I saw just before the moon sank behind the cliffs.”

“Not I!” Vulmea’s denial was genuine. “I didn’t come down into the ruins until after moonset, when I came to steal your pistols. Then I went back up on the cliffs, and came again just before dawn to leave your food.”

“But enough of this talk!” he roared gustily, whipping out his cutlass. “I’m mad with thinking of the Galway coast and dead men kicking in a row, and a rope that strangled me! I’ve tricked you, trapped you, and now I’m going to kill you!”

Wentyard’s face was a ghastly mask of hate, livid, with bared teeth and glaring eyes.

“Dog!” with a screech he lunged, trying to catch Vulmea off guard.

But the cutlass met and deflected the straight blade, and Wentyard bounded back just in time to avoid the decapitating sweep of the pirate’s

steel. Vulmea laughed fiercely and came on like a storm, and Wentyard met him with a drowning man's desperation.

Like most officers of the British navy, Wentyard was proficient in the use of the long straight sword he carried. He was almost as tall as Vulmea, and though he looked slender beside the powerful figure of the pirate, he believed that his skill would offset the sheer strength of the Irishman.

He was disillusioned within the first few moments of the fight. Vulmea was neither slow nor clumsy. He was as quick as a wounded panther, and his swordplay was no less crafty than Wentyard's. It only seemed so, because of the pirate's furious style of attack, showering blow on blow with what looked like sheer recklessness. But the very ferocity of his attack was his best defense, for it gave his opponent no time to launch a counterattack.

The power of his blows, beating down on Wentyard's blade, rocked and shook the Englishman to his heels, numbing his wrist and arm with their impact. Blind fury, humiliation, naked fright combined to rob the captain of his poise and cunning. A stamp of feet, a louder clash of steel, and Wentyard's blade whirled into a corner. The Englishman reeled back, his face livid, his eyes like those of a madman.

"Pick up your sword!" Vulmea was panting, not so much from exertion as from rage. Wentyard did not seem to hear him.

"Bah!" Vulmea threw aside his cutlass in a spasm of disgust. "Can't you even fight? I'll kill you with my bare hands!"

He slapped Wentyard viciously first on one side of the face and then on the other. The Englishman screamed wordlessly and launched himself at the pirate's throat, and Vulmea checked him with a buffet in the face and knocked him sprawling with a savage smash under the heart. Wentyard got to his knees and shook the blood from his face, while Vulmea stood over him, his brows black and his great fists knotted.

"Get up!" muttered the Irishman thickly. "Get up, you hangman of peasants and children!"

Wentyard did not heed him. He was groping inside his shirt, from which he drew out something he stared at with painful intensity.

"Get up, damn you, before I set my boot-heels on your face —"

Vulmea broke off, glaring incredulously. Wentyard, crouching over the object he had drawn from his shirt, was weeping in great, racking sobs.

"What the hell!" Vulmea jerked it away from him, consumed by wonder to learn what could bring tears from John Wentyard. It was a skillfully

painted miniature. The blow he had struck Wentyard had cracked it, but not enough to obliterate the soft gentle faces of a pretty young woman and child which smiled up at the scowling Irishman.

“Well, I’m damned!” Vulmea stared from the broken portrait in his hand to the man crouching miserably on the floor. “Your wife and daughter?”

Wentyard, his bloody face sunk in his hands, nodded mutely. He had endured much within the last night and day. The breaking of the portrait he always carried over his heart was the last straw; it seemed like an attack on the one soft spot in his hard soul, and it left him dazed and demoralized.

Vulmea scowled ferociously, but it somehow seemed forced.

“I didn’t know you had a wife and child,” he said almost defensively.

“The lass is but five years old,” gulped Wentyard. “I haven’t seen them in nearly a year. My God, what’s to become of them now? A navy captain’s pay is none so great. I’ve never been able to save anything. It was for them I sailed in search of Van Raven and his treasure. I hoped to get a prize that would take care of them if aught happened to me. Kill me!” he cried shrilly, his voice cracking at the highest pitch. “Kill me and be done with it, before I lose my manhood with thinking of them, and beg for my life like a craven dog!”

But Vulmea stood looking down at him with a frown. Varying expressions crossed his dark face, and suddenly he thrust the portrait back in the Englishman’s hand.

“You’re too poor a creature for me to soil my hands with!” he sneered, and turning on his heel, strode through the inner door.

Wentyard stared dully after him, then, still on his knees, began to caress the broken picture, whimpering softly like an animal in pain as if the breaks in the ivory were wounds in his own flesh. Men break suddenly and unexpectedly in the tropics, and Wentyard’s collapse was appalling.

He did not look up when the swift stamp of boots announced Vulmea’s sudden return, without the pirate’s usual stealth. A savage clutch on his shoulder raised him to stare stupidly into the Irishman’s convulsed face.

“You’re an infernal dog!” snarled Vulmea, in a fury that differed strangely from his former murderous hate. He broke into lurid imprecations, cursing Wentyard with all the proficiency he had acquired during his years at sea. “I ought to split your skull,” he wound up. “For years I’ve dreamed of it, especially when I was drunk. I’m a cursed fool not to stretch you dead on the floor. I don’t owe you any consideration, blast you! Your wife and

daughter don't mean anything to me. But I'm a fool, like all the Irish, a blasted, chicken-hearted, sentimental fool, and I can't be the cause of a helpless woman and her colleen starving. Get up and quit sniveling!"

Wentyard looked up at him stupidly.

"You — you came back to help me?"

"I might as well stab you as leave you here to starve!" roared the pirate, sheathing his sword. "Get up and stick your skewer back in its scabbard. Who'd have ever thought that a scraun like you would have women-folk like those innocents? Hell's fire! You ought to be shot! Pick up your sword. You may need it before we get away. But remember, I don't trust you any further than I can throw a whale by the tail, and I'm keeping your pistols. If you try to stab me when I'm not looking I'll break your head with my cutlass hilt."

Wentyard, like a man in a daze, replaced the painting carefully in his bosom and mechanically picked up his sword and sheathed it. His numbed wits began to thaw out, and he tried to pull himself together.

"What are we to do now?" he asked.

"Shut up!" growled the pirate. "I'm going to save you for the sake of the lady and the lass, but I don't have to talk to you!" With rare consistency he then continued: "We'll leave this trap the same way I came and went.

"Listen: four years ago I came here with a hundred men. I'd heard rumors of a ruined city up here, and I thought there might be loot hidden in it. I followed the old road from the beach, and those brown dogs let me and my men get in the ravine before they started butchering us. There must have been five or six hundred of them. They raked us from the walls, and then charged us — some came down the ravine and others jumped down the walls behind us and cut us off. I was the only one who got away, and I managed to cut my way through them, and ran into this bowl. They didn't follow me in, but stayed outside the Gateway to see that I didn't get out.

"But I found another way — a slab had fallen away from the wall of a room that was built against the cliff, and a stairway was cut in the rock. I followed it and came out of a sort of trap door up on the cliffs. A slab of rock was over it, but I don't think the Indians knew anything about it anyway, because they never go up on the cliffs that overhang the basin. They never come in here from the ravine, either. There's something here they're afraid of — ghosts, most likely.

“The cliffs slope down into the jungle on the outer sides, and the slopes and the crest are covered with trees and thickets. They had a cordon of men strung around the foot of the slopes, but I got through at night easily enough, made my way to the coast and sailed away with the handful of men I’d left aboard my ship.

“When you captured me the other day, I was going to kill you with my manacles, but you started talking about treasure, and a thought sprang in my mind to steer you into a trap that I might possibly get out of. I remembered this place, and I mixed a lot of truth in with some lies. The Fangs of Satan are no myth; they are a hoard of jewels hidden somewhere on this coast, but this isn’t the place. There’s no plunder about here.

“The Indians have a ring of men strung around this place, as they did before. I can get through, but it isn’t going to be so easy getting you through. You English are like buffaloes when you start through the brush. We’ll start just after dark and try to get through before the moon rises.

“Come on; I’ll show you the stair.”

Wentyard followed him through a series of crumbling, vine-tangled chambers, until he halted before a doorway that gaped in the wall that was built against the cliff. A thick slab leaned against the wall which obviously served as a door. The Englishman saw a flight of narrow steps, carved in the solid rock, leading upward through a shaft tunneled in the cliff.

“I meant to block the upper mouth by heaping big rocks on the slab that covers it,” said Vulmea. “That was when I was going to let you starve. I knew you might find the stair. I doubt if the Indians know anything about it, as they never come in here or go up on the cliffs. But they know a man might be able to get out over the cliffs some way, so they’ve thrown that cordon around the slopes.

“That nigger I killed was a different proposition. A slave ship was wrecked off this coast a year ago, and the blacks escaped and took to the jungle. There’s a regular mob of them living somewhere near here. This particular black man wasn’t afraid to come into the ruins. If there are more of his kind out there with the Indians, they may try again tonight. But I believe he was the only one, or he wouldn’t have come alone.”

“Why don’t we go up the cliff now and hide among the trees?” asked Wentyard.

“Because we might be seen by the men watching below the slopes, and they’d guess that we were going to make a break tonight, and redouble their

vigilance. After awhile I'll go and get some more food. They won't see me."

The men returned to the chamber where Wentyard had slept. Vulmea grew taciturn, and Wentyard made no attempt at conversation. They sat in silence while the afternoon dragged by. An hour or so before sundown Vulmea rose with a curt word, went up the stair and emerged on the cliffs. Among the trees he brought down a monkey with a dextrously-thrown stone, skinned it, and brought it back into the ruins along with a calabash of water from a spring on the hillside. For all his woodcraft he was not aware that he was being watched; he did not see the fierce black face that glared at him from a thicket that stood where the cliffs began to slope down into the jungle below.

Later, when he and Wentyard were roasting the meat over a fire built in the ruins, he raised his head and listened intently.

"What do you hear?" asked Wentyard.

"A drum," grunted the Irishman.

"I hear it," said Wentyard after a moment. "Nothing unusual about that."

"It doesn't sound like an Indian drum," answered Vulmea. "Sounds more like an African drum."

Wentyard nodded agreement; his ship had lain off the mangrove swamps of the Slave Coast, and he had heard such drums rumbling to one another through the steaming night. There was a subtle difference in the rhythm and timbre that distinguished it from an Indian drum.

Evening came on and ripened slowly to dusk. The drum ceased to throb. Back in the low hills, beyond the ring of cliffs, a fire glinted under the dusky trees, casting brown and black faces into sharp relief.

An Indian whose ornaments and bearing marked him as a chief squatted on his hams, his immobile face turned toward the ebony giant who stood facing him. This man was nearly a head taller than any other man there, his proportions overshadowing both the Indians squatting about the fire and the black warriors who stood in a close group behind him. A jaguar-skin mantle was cast carelessly over his brawny shoulders, and copper bracelets ornamented his thickly-muscled arms. There was an ivory ring on his head, and parrot feathers stood up from his kinky hair. A shield of hard wood and toughened bullhide was on his left arm, and in his right hand he gripped a great spear whose hammered iron head was as broad as a man's hand.

"I came swiftly when I heard the drum," he said gutturally, in the bastard-Spanish that served as a common speech for the savages of both colors. "I knew it was N'Onga who called me. N'Onga had gone from my camp to fetch Ajumba, who was lingering with your tribe. N'Onga told me by the drum-talk that a white man was at bay, and Ajumba was dead. I came in haste. Now you tell me that you dare not enter the Old City."

"I have told you a devil dwells there," answered the Indian doggedly. "He has chosen the white man for his own. He will be angry if you try to take him away from him. It is death to enter his kingdom."

The black chief lifted his great spear and shook it defiantly.

"I was a slave to the Spaniards long enough to know that the only devil is a white man! I do not fear your devil. In my land his brothers are big as he, and I have slain one with a spear like this. A day and a night have passed since the white man fled into the Old City. Why has not the devil devoured him, or this other who lingers on the cliffs?"

"The devil is not hungry," muttered the Indian. "He waits until he is hungry. He has eaten recently. When he is hungry again he will take them. I will not go into his lair with my men. You are a stranger in this country. You do not understand these things."

"I understand that Bigomba who was a king in his own country fears nothing, neither man nor demon," retorted the black giant. "You tell me that Ajumba went into the Old City by night, and died. I have seen his body. The devil did not slay him. One of the white men stabbed him. If Ajumba could go into the Old City and not be seized by the devil, then I and my thirty men can go. I know how the big white man comes and goes between the cliffs and the ruins. There is a hole in the rock with a slab for a door over it. N'Onga watched from the bushes high up on the slopes and saw him come forth and later return through it. I have placed men there to watch it. If the white men come again through that hole, my warriors will spear them. If they do not come, we will go in as soon as the moon rises. Your men hold the ravine, and they can not flee that way. We will hunt them like rats through the crumbling houses."

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<code> CHAPTER IV

"Easy now," muttered Vulmea. "It's as dark as Hell in this shaft." Dusk had deepened into early darkness. The white men were groping their way up the steps cut in the rock. Looking back and down Wentyard made out the

lower mouth of the shaft only as a slightly lighter blur in the blackness. They climbed on, feeling their way, and presently Vulmea halted with a muttered warning. Wentyard, groping, touched his thigh and felt the muscles tensing upon it. He knew that Vulmea had placed his shoulders under the slab that closed the upper entrance, and was heaving it up. He saw a crack appear suddenly in the blackness above him, limning the Irishman's bent head and foreshortened figure.

The stone came clear and starlight gleamed through the aperture, laced by the overhanging branches of the trees. Vulmea let the slab fall on the stone rim, and started to climb out of the shaft. He had emerged head, shoulders and hips when without warning a black form loomed against the stars and a gleam of steel hissed downward at his breast.

Vulmea threw up his cutlass and the spear rang against it, staggering him on the steps with the impact. Snatching a pistol from his belt with his left hand he fired point-blank and the black man groaned and fell, head and arms dangling in the opening. He struck the pirate as he fell, destroying Vulmea's already precarious balance. He toppled backward down the steps, carrying Wentyard with him. A dozen steps down they brought up in a sprawling heap, and staring upward, saw the square well above them fringed with indistinct black blobs they knew were heads outlined against the stars.

"I thought you said the Indians never — " panted Wentyard.

"They're not Indians," growled Vulmea, rising. "They're negroes. Cimarroons! The same dogs who escaped from the slave ship. That drum we heard was one of them calling the others. Look out!"

Spears came whirring down the shaft, splintering on the steps, glancing from the walls. The white men hurled themselves recklessly down the steps at the risk of broken limbs. They tumbled through the lower doorway and Vulmea slammed the heavy slab in place.

"They'll be coming down it next," he snarled. "We've got to heap enough rocks against it to hold it — no, wait a minute! If they've got the guts to come at all, they'll come by the ravine if they can't get in this way, or on ropes hung from the cliffs. This place is easy enough to get into — not so damned easy to get out of. We'll leave the shaft open. If they come this way we can get them in a bunch as they try to come out."

He pulled the slab aside, standing carefully away from the door.

"Suppose they come from the ravine and this way, too?"

"They probably will," growled Vulmea, "but maybe they'll come this way first, and maybe if they come down in a bunch we can kill them all. There may not be more than a dozen of them. They'll never persuade the Indians to follow them in."

He set about reloading the pistol he had fired, with quick, sure hands in the dark. It consumed the last grain of powder in the flask. The white men lurked like phantoms of murder about the doorway of the stair, waiting to strike suddenly and deadly. Time dragged. No sound came from above. Wentyard's imagination was at work again, picturing an invasion from the ravine, and dusky figures gliding about them, surrounding the chamber. He spoke of this and Vulmea shook his head.

"When they come I'll hear them; nothing on two legs can get in here without my knowing it."

Suddenly Wentyard was aware of a dim glow pervading the ruins. The moon was rising above the cliffs. Vulmea swore.

"No chance of our getting away tonight. Maybe those black dogs were waiting for the moon to come up. Go into the chamber where you slept and watch the ravine. If you see them sneaking in that way, let me know. I can take care of any that come down the stair."

Wentyard felt his flesh crawl as he made his way through those dim chambers. The moonlight glinted down through vines tangled across the broken roofs, and shadows lay thick across his path. He reached the chamber where he had slept, and where the coals of the fire still glowed dully. He started across toward the outer door when a soft sound brought him whirling around. A cry was wrenched from his throat.

Out of the darkness of a corner rose a swaying shape; a great wedge-shaped head and an arched neck were outlined against the moonlight. In one brain-staggering instant the mystery of the ruins became clear to him; he knew what had watched him with lidless eyes as he lay sleeping, and what had glided away from his door as he awoke — he knew why the Indians would not come into the ruins or mount the cliffs above them. He was face to face with the devil of the deserted city, hungry at last — and that devil was a giant anaconda!

In that moment John Wentyard experienced such fear and loathing horror as ordinarily come to men only in foul nightmares. He could not run, and after that first scream his tongue seemed frozen to his palate. Only

when the hideous head darted toward him did he break free from the paralysis that engulfed him and then it was too late.

He struck at it wildly and futilely, and in an instant it had him — lapped and wrapped about with coils which were like huge cables of cold, pliant steel. He shrieked again, fighting madly against the crushing constriction — he heard the rush of Vulmea's boots — then the pirate's pistols crashed together and he heard plainly the thud of the bullets into the great snake's body. It jerked convulsively and whipped from about him, hurling him sprawling to the floor, and then it came at Vulmea like the rush of a hurricane through the grass, its forked tongue licking in and out in the moonlight, and the noise of its hissing filling the chamber.

Vulmea avoided the battering-ram stroke of the blunt nose with a sidewise spring that would have shamed a starving jaguar, and his cutlass was a sheen in the moonlight as it hewed deep into the mighty neck. Blood spurted and the great reptile rolled and knotted, sweeping the floor and dislodging stones from the wall with its thrashing tail. Vulmea leaped high, clearing it as it lashed but Wentyard, just climbing to his feet, was struck and knocked sprawling into a corner. Vulmea was springing in again, cutlass lifted, when the monster rolled aside and fled through the inner door, with a loud rushing sound through the thick vegetation.

Vulmea was after it, his berserk fury fully roused. He did not wish the wounded reptile to crawl away and hide, perhaps to return later and take them by surprise. Through chamber after chamber the chase led, in a direction neither of the men had followed in his former explorations, and at last into a room almost choked by tangled vines. Tearing these aside Vulmea stared into a black aperture in the wall, just in time to see the monster vanishing into its depths. Wentyard, trembling in every limb, had followed, and now looked over the pirate's shoulder. A reptilian reek came from the aperture, which they now saw as an arched doorway, partly masked by thick vines. Enough moonlight found its way through the roof to reveal a glimpse of stone steps leading up into darkness.

"I missed this," muttered Vulmea. "When I found the stair I didn't look any further for an exit. Look how the doorsill glistens with scales that have been rubbed off that brute's belly. He uses it often. I believe those steps lead to a tunnel that goes clear through the cliffs. There's nothing in this bowl that even a snake could eat or drink. He has to go out into the jungle to get water and food. If he was in the habit of going out by the way of the ravine,

there'd be a path worn away through the vegetation, like there is in this room. Besides, the Indians wouldn't stay in the ravine. Unless there's some other exit we haven't found, I believe that he comes and goes this way, and that means it lets into the outer world. It's worth trying, anyway."

"You mean to follow that fiend into that black tunnel?" ejaculated Wentyard aghast.

"Why not? We've got to follow and kill him anyway. If we run into a nest of them — well, we've got to die some time, and if we wait here much longer the Cimarroons will be cutting our throats. This is a chance to get away, I believe. But we won't go in the dark."

Hurrying back to the room where they had cooked the monkey, Vulmea caught up a fagot, wrapped a torn strip of his shirt about one end and set it smouldering in the coals which he blew into a tiny flame. The improvised torch flickered and smoked, but it cast light of a sort. Vulmea strode back to the chamber where the snake had vanished, followed by Wentyard who stayed close within the dancing ring of light, and saw writhing serpents in every vine that swayed overhead.

The torch revealed blood thickly spattered on the stone steps. Squeezing their way between the tangled vines which did not admit a man's body as easily as a serpent's, they mounted the steps warily. Vulmea went first, holding the torch high and ahead of him, his cutlass in his right hand. He had thrown away the useless, empty pistols. They climbed half a dozen steps and came into a tunnel some fifteen feet wide and perhaps ten feet high from the stone floor to the vaulted roof. The serpent-reek and the glisten of the floor told of long occupancy by the brute, and the blood drops ran on before them.

The walls, floor and roof of the tunnel were in a much better state of preservation than were the ruins outside, and Wentyard found time to marvel at the ingenuity of the ancient race which had built it.

Meanwhile, in the moonlit chamber they had just quitted, a giant black man appeared as silently as a shadow. His great spear glinted in the moonlight, and the plumes on his head rustled as he turned to look about him. Four warriors followed him.

"They went into that door," said one of these, pointing to the vine-tangled entrance. "I saw their torch vanish into it. But I feared to follow them, alone as I was, and I ran to tell you, Bigomba."

“But what of the screams and the shot we heard just before we descended the shaft?” asked another uneasily.

“I think they met the demon and slew it,” answered Bigomba. “Then they went into this door. Perhaps it is a tunnel which leads through the cliffs. One of you go gather the rest of the warriors who are scattered through the rooms searching for the white dogs. Bring them after me. Bring torches with you. As for me, I will follow with the other three, at once. Bigomba sees like a lion in the dark.”

As Vulmea and Wentyard advanced through the tunnel Wentyard watched the torch fearfully. It was not very satisfactory, but it gave some light, and he shuddered to think of its going out or burning to a stump and leaving them in darkness. He strained his eyes into the gloom ahead, momentarily expecting to see a vague, hideous figure rear up amidst it. But when Vulmea halted suddenly it was not because of an appearance of the reptile. They had reached a point where a smaller corridor branched off the main tunnel, leading away to the left.

“Which shall we take?”

Vulmea bent over the floor, lowering his torch.

“The blood drops go to the left,” he grunted. “That’s the way he went.”

“Wait!” Wentyard gripped his arm and pointed along the main tunnel. “Look! There ahead of us! Light!”

Vulmea thrust his torch behind him, for its flickering glare made the shadows seem blacker beyond its feeble radius. Ahead of them, then, he saw something like a floating gray mist, and knew it was moonlight finding its way somehow into the tunnel. Abandoning the hunt for the wounded reptile, the men rushed forward and emerged into a broad square chamber, hewn out of solid rock. But Wentyard swore in bitter disappointment. The moonlight was coming, not from a door opening into the jungle, but from a square shaft in the roof, high above their heads.

An archway opened in each wall, and the one opposite the arch by which they had entered was fitted with a heavy door, corroded and eaten by decay. Against the wall to their right stood a stone image, taller than a man, a carved grotesque, at once manlike and bestial. A stone altar stood before it, its surface channeled and darkly stained. Something on the idol’s breast caught the moonlight in a frosty sparkle.

“The devil!” Vulmea sprang forward and wrenched it away. He held it up — a thing like a giant’s necklace, made of jointed plates of hammered

gold, each as broad as a man's palm and set with curiously-cut jewels.

"I thought I lied when I told you there were gems here," grunted the pirate. "It seems I spoke the truth unwittingly! These are not the Fangs of Satan, but they'll fetch a tidy fortune anywhere in Europe."

"What are you doing?" demanded Wentyard, as the Irishman laid the huge necklace on the altar and lifted his cutlass. Vulmea's reply was a stroke that severed the ornament into equal halves. One half he thrust into Wentyard's astounded hands.

"If we get out of here alive that will provide for the wife and child," he grunted.

"But you — " stammered Wentyard. "You hate me — yet you save my life and then give me this — "

"Shut up!" snarled the pirate. "I'm not giving it to you; I'm giving it to the girl and her baby. Don't you venture to thank me, curse you! I hate you as much as I — "

He stiffened suddenly, wheeling to glare down the tunnel up which they had come. He stamped out the torch and crouched down behind the altar, drawing Wentyard with him.

"Men!" he snarled. "Coming down the tunnel, I heard steel clink on stone. I hope they didn't see the torch. Maybe they didn't. It wasn't much more than a coal in the moonlight."

They strained their eyes down the tunnel. The moon hovered at an angle above the open shaft which allowed some of its light to stream a short way down the tunnel. Vision ceased at the spot where the smaller corridor branched off. Presently four shadows bulked out of the blackness beyond, taking shape gradually like figures emerging from a thick fog. They halted, and the white men saw the largest one — a giant who towered above the others — point silently with his spear, up the tunnel, then down the corridor. Two of the shadowy shapes detached themselves from the group and moved off down the corridor out of sight. The giant and the other man came on up the tunnel.

"The Cimarroons, hunting us," muttered Vulmea. "They're splitting their party to make sure they find us. Lie low; there may be a whole crew right behind them."

They crouched lower behind the altar while the two blacks came up the tunnel, growing more distinct as they advanced. Wentyard's skin crawled at the sight of the broad-bladed spears held ready in their hands. The biggest

one moved with the supple tread of a great panther, head thrust forward, spear poised, shield lifted. He was a formidable image of rampant barbarism, and Wentyard wondered if even such a man as Vulmea could stand before him with naked steel and live.

They halted in the doorway, and the white men caught the white flash of their eyes as they glared suspiciously about the chamber. The smaller black seized the giant's arm convulsively and pointed, and Wentyard's heart jumped into his throat. He thought they had been discovered, but the negro was pointing at the idol. The big man grunted contemptuously. However slavishly in awe he might be of the fetishes of his native coast, the gods and demons of other races held no terrors for him.

But he moved forward majestically to investigate, and Wentyard realized that discovery was inevitable.

Vulmea whispered fiercely in his ear: "We've got to get them, quick! Take the brave. I'll take the chief. Now!"

They sprang up together, and the blacks cried out involuntarily, recoiling from the unexpected apparitions. In that instant the white men were upon them.

The shock of their sudden appearance had stunned the smaller black. He was small only in comparison with his gigantic companion. He was as tall as Wentyard and the great muscles knotted under his sleek skin. But he was staggering back, gaping stupidly, spear and shield lowered on limply hanging arms. Only the bite of steel brought him to his senses, and then it was too late. He screamed and lunged madly, but Wentyard's sword had girded deep into his vitals and his lunge was wild. The Englishman sidestepped and thrust again and yet again, under and over the shield, fleshing his blade in groin and throat. The black man swayed in his rush, his arms fell, shield and spear clattered to the floor and he toppled down upon them.

Wentyard turned to stare at the battle waging behind him, where the two giants fought under the square beam of moonlight, black and white, spear and shield against cutlass.

Bigomba, quicker-witted than his follower, had not gone down under the unexpected rush of the white man. He had reacted instantly to his fighting instinct. Instead of retreating he had thrown up his shield to catch the down-swinging cutlass, and had countered with a ferocious lunge that scraped blood from the Irishman's neck as he ducked aside.

Now they fought in grim silence, while Wentyard circled about them, unable to get in a thrust that might not imperil Vulmea. Both moved with the sure-footed quickness of tigers. The black man towered above the white, but even his magnificent proportions could not overshadow the sinewy physique of the pirate. In the moonlight the great muscles of both men knotted, rippled and coiled in response to their herculean exertions. The play was bewildering, almost blinding the eye that tried to follow it.

Again and again the pirate barely avoided the dart of the great spear, and again and again Bigomba caught on his shield a stroke that otherwise would have shorn him asunder. Speed of foot and strength of wrist alone saved Vulmea, for he had no defensive armor. But repeatedly he either dodged or sidestepped the savage thrusts, or beat aside the spear with his blade. And he rained blow on blow with his cutlass, slashing the bullhide to ribbons, until the shield was little more than a wooden framework through which, slipping in a lightning-like thrust, the cutlass drew first blood as it raked through the flesh across the black chief's ribs.

At that Bigomba roared like a wounded lion, and like a wounded lion he leaped. Hurling the shield at Vulmea's head he threw all his giant body behind the arm that drove the spear at the Irishman's breast. The muscles leaped up in quivering bunches on his arm as he smote, and Wentyard cried out, unable to believe that Vulmea could avoid the lunge. But chain lightning was slow compared to the pirate's shift. He ducked, sidestepped, and as the spear whipped past under his armpit, he dealt a cut that found no shield in the way. The cutlass was a blinding flicker of steel in the moonlight, ending its arc in a butcher-shop *crunch*. Bigomba fell as a tree falls and lay still. His head had been all but severed from his body.

Vulmea stepped back, panting. His great chest heaved under the tattered shirt, and sweat dripped from his face. At last he had met a man almost his match, and the strain of that terrible encounter left the tendons of his thighs quivering.

"We've got to get out of here before the rest of them come," he gasped, catching up his half of the idol's necklace. "That smaller corridor must lead to the outside, but those niggers are in it, and we haven't any torch. Let's try this door. Maybe we can get out that way."

The ancient door was a rotten mass of crumbling panels and corroded copper bands. It cracked and splintered under the impact of Vulmea's heavy shoulder, and through the apertures the pirate felt the stir of fresh air, and

caught the scent of a damp river-reek. He drew back to smash again at the door, when a chorus of fierce yells brought him about snarling like a trapped wolf. Swift feet pattered up the tunnel, torches waved, and barbaric shouts re-echoed under the vaulted roof. The white men saw a mass of fierce faces and flashing spears, thrown into relief by the flaring torches, surging up the tunnel. The light of their coming streamed before them. They had heard and interpreted the sounds of combat as they hurried up the tunnel, and now they had sighted their enemies, and they burst into a run, howling like wolves.

“Break the door, quick!” cried Wentyard.

“No time now,” grunted Vulmea. “They’d be on us before we could get through. We’ll make our stand here.”

He ran across the chamber to meet them before they could emerge from the comparatively narrow archway, and Wentyard followed him. Despair gripped the Englishman and in a spasm of futile rage he hurled the half-necklace from him. The glint of its jewels was mockery. He fought down the sick memory of those who waited for him in England as he took his place at the door beside the giant pirate.

As they saw their prey at bay the howls of the oncoming blacks grew wilder. Spears were brandished among the torches — then a shriek of different timbre cut the din. The foremost blacks had almost reached the point where the corridor branched off the tunnel — and out of the corridor raced a frantic figure. It was one of the black men who had gone down it exploring. And behind him came a blood-smeared nightmare. The great serpent had turned at bay at last.

It was among the blacks before they knew what was happening. Yells of hate changed to screams of terror, and in an instant all was madness, a clustering tangle of struggling black bodies and limbs, and that great sinuous cable-like trunk writhing and whipping among them, the wedge-shaped head darting and battering. Torches were knocked against the walls, scattering sparks. One man, caught in the squirming coils, was crushed and killed almost instantly, and others were dashed to the floor or hurled with bone-splintering force against the walls by the battering-ram head, or the lashing, beam-like tail. Shot and slashed as it was, wounded mortally, the great snake clung to life with the horrible vitality of its kind, and in the blind fury of its death throes it became an appalling engine of destruction.

Within a matter of moments the blacks who survived had broken away and were fleeing down the tunnel, screaming their fear. Half a dozen limp and broken bodies lay sprawled behind them, and the serpent, unlooping himself from these victims, swept down the tunnel after the living who fled from him. Fugitives and pursuer vanished into the darkness, from which frantic yells came back faintly.

“God!” Wentyard wiped his brow with a trembling hand. “That might have happened to us!”

“Those niggers who went groping down the corridor must have stumbled onto him lying in the dark,” muttered Vulmea. “I guess he got tired of running. Or maybe he knew he had his death-wound and turned back to kill somebody before he died. He’ll chase those niggers until either he’s killed them all, or died himself. They may turn on him and spear him to death when they get into the open. Pick up your part of the necklace. I’m going to try that door again.”

Three powerful drives of his shoulder were required before the ancient door finally gave way. Fresh, damp air poured through, though the interior was dark. But Vulmea entered without hesitation, and Wentyard followed him. After a few yards of groping in the dark, the narrow corridor turned sharply to the left, and they emerged into a somewhat wider passage, where a familiar, nauseating reek made Wentyard shudder.

“The snake used this tunnel,” said Vulmea. “This must be the corridor that branches off the tunnel on the other side of the idol room. There must be a regular network of subterranean rooms and tunnels under these cliffs. I wonder what we’d find if we explored all of them.”

Wentyard fervently disavowed any curiosity in that direction, and an instant later jumped convulsively when Vulmea snapped suddenly: “Look there!”

“Where? How can a man look anywhere in this darkness?”

“Ahead of us, damn it! It’s light at the other end of this tunnel!”

“Your eyes are better than mine,” muttered Wentyard, but he followed the pirate with new eagerness, and soon he too could see the tiny disk of grey that seemed set in a solid black wall. After that it seemed to the Englishman that they walked for miles. It was not that far in reality, but the disk grew slowly in size and clarity, and Wentyard knew that they had come a long way from the idol room when at last they thrust their heads through a

round, vine-crossed opening and saw the stars reflected in the black water of a sullen river flowing beneath them.

“This is the way he came and went, all right,” grunted Vulmea.

The tunnel opened in the steep bank and there was a narrow strip of beach below it, probably existent only in dry seasons. They dropped down to it and looked about at the dense jungle walls which hung over the river.

“Where are we?” asked Wentyard helplessly, his sense of direction entirely muddled.

“Beyond the foot of the slopes,” answered Vulmea, “and that means we’re outside the cordon the Indians have strung around the cliffs. The coast lies in that direction; come on!”

The sun hung high above the western horizon when two men emerged from the jungle that fringed the beach, and saw the tiny bay stretching before them.

Vulmea stopped in the shadow of the trees.

“There’s your ship, lying at anchor where we left her. All you’ve got to do now is hail her for a boat to be sent ashore, and your part of the adventure is over.”

Wentyard looked at his companion. The Englishman was bruised, scratched by briars, his clothing hanging in tatters. He could hardly have been recognized as the trim captain of the *Redoubtable*. But the change was not limited to his appearance. It went deeper. He was a different man than the one who marched his prisoner ashore in quest of a mythical hoard of gems.

“What of you? I owe you a debt that I can never — “

“You owe me nothing,” Vulmea broke in. “I don’t trust you, Wentyard.”

The other winced. Vulmea did not know that it was the cruelest thing he could have said. He did not mean it as cruelty. He was simply speaking his mind, and it did not occur to him that it would hurt the Englishman.

“Do you think I could ever harm you now, after this?” exclaimed Wentyard. “Pirate or not, I could never — “

“You’re grateful and full of the milk of human kindness now,” answered Vulmea, and laughed hardly. “But you might change your mind after you got back on your decks. John Wentyard lost in the jungle is one man; Captain Wentyard aboard his king’s warship is another.”

“I swear — ” began Wentyard desperately, and then stopped, realizing the futility of his protestations. He realized, with an almost physical pain,

that a man can never escape the consequences of a wrong, even though the victim may forgive him. His punishment now was an inability to convince Vulmea of his sincerity, and it hurt him far more bitterly than the Irishman could ever realize. But he could not expect Vulmea to trust him, he realized miserably. In that moment he loathed himself for what he had been, and for the smug, self-sufficient arrogance which had caused him to ruthlessly trample on all who fell outside the charmed circle of his approval. At that moment there was nothing in the world he desired more than the firm hand-clasp of the man who had fought and wrought so tremendously for him; but he knew he did not deserve it.

“You can’t stay here!” he protested weakly.

“The Indians never come to this coast,” answered Vulmea. “I’m not afraid of the Cimarroons. Don’t worry about me.” He laughed again, at what he considered the jest of anyone worrying about his safety. “I’ve lived in the wilds before now. I’m not the only pirate in these seas. There’s a rendezvous you know nothing about. I can reach it easily. I’ll be back on the Main with a ship and a crew the next time you hear about me.”

And turning supply, he strode into the foliage and vanished, while Wentyard, dangling in his hand a jeweled strip of gold, stared helplessly after him.

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<code> BOOT-HILL PAYOFF

The Laramies Ride

Five men were riding down the winding road that led to San Leon, and one was singing, in a toneless monotone:

“Early in the mornin’ in the month of May,

Brady came down on the mornin’ train,

Brady came down on the Shinin’ Star,

And he shot Mr. Duncan in behind the bar!”

“Shut up! *Shut up!*” It was the youngest of the riders who ripped out like that. A lanky, tow-headed kid, with a touch of pallor under his tan, and a rebellious smolder in his hot eyes.

The biggest man of the five grinned.

“Bucky’s nervous,” he jeered genially. “You don’t want to be no derved bandit, do you, Bucky?”

The youngest glowered at him.

“That welt on yore jaw ought to answer that, Jim,” he growled.

“You fit like a catamount,” agreed Big Jim placidly. “I thought we’d never git you on yore cayuse and started for San Leon, without knockin’ you in the head. ‘Bout the only way you show yo’re a Laramie, Bucky, is in the handlin’ of yore fists.”

“T’ain’t no honor to be a Laramie,” flared Bucky. “You and Luke and Tom and Hank has dragged the name through slime. For the last three years you been worse’n a pack of starvin’ lobos — stealin’ cattle and horses; robbin’ folks — why, the country’s near ruint. And now yo’re headin’ to San Leon to put on the final touch — robbin’ the Cattlemen’s Bank, when you know dern well the help the ranchmen got from that bank’s been all that kept ‘em on their feet. Old man Brown’s stretched hisself nigh to the bustin’ p’int to help folks.”

He gulped and fought back tears that betrayed his extreme youth. His brothers grinned tolerantly. “It’s the last time,” he informed them bitterly. “You won’t git me into no raid again!”

“It’s the last time for all of us,” said Big Jim, biting off a cud of tobacco. “We’re through after this job. We’ll live like honest men in Mexico.”

“Serve you right if a posse caught us and hanged us all,” said Bucky viciously.

“Not a chance.” Big Jim’s placidity was unruffled. “Nobody but us knows the trail that follows the secret waterholes across the desert. No posse’d dare to follow us. Once out of town and headed south for the border, the devil himself couldn’t catch us.”

“I wonder if anybody’ll ever stumble onto our secret hideout up in the Los Diablos Mountains,” mused Hank.

“I doubt it. Too well hid. Like the desert trail, nobody but us knows them mountain trails. It sure served us well. Think of all the steers and horses we’ve hid there, and drove through the mountains to Mexico! And the times we’ve laid up there laughin’ in our sleeves as the posse chased around a circle.”

Bucky muttered something under his breath; he retained no fond memories of that hidden lair high up in the barren Diablos. Three years before, he had reluctantly followed his brothers into it from the little ranch in the foothills where Old Man Laramie and his wife had worn away their lives in futile work. The old life, when their parents lived and had held their wild sons in check, had been drab and hard, but had lacked the bitterness he had known when cooking and tending house for his brothers in that hidden den from which they had ravaged the countryside. Four good men gone bad — mighty bad.

San Leon lay as if slumbering in the desert heat as the five brothers rode up to the doors of the Cattlemen’s Bank. None noted their coming; the Red Lode saloon, favorite rendezvous for the masculine element of San Leon, stood at the other end of the town, and out of sight around a slight bend in the street.

No words were passed; each man knew his part beforehand. The three elder Laramies slid lithely out of their saddles, throwing their reins to Bucky and Luke, the second youngest. They strode into the bank with a soft jingle of spurs and creak of leather, closing the door behind them.

Luke’s face was impassive as an image’s, as he dragged leisurely on a cigarette, though his eyes gleamed between slitted lids. But Bucky sweated and shivered, twisting nervously in his saddle. By some twist of destiny, one son had inherited all the honesty that was his parents’ to transmit. He had kept his hands clean. Now, in spite of himself, he was scarred with their brand.

He started convulsively as a gun crashed inside the bank; like an echo came another reverberation.

Luke's Colt was in his hand, and he snatched one foot clear of the stirrup, then feet pounded toward the street and the door burst open to emit the three outlaws. They carried bulging canvas sacks, and Hank's sleeve was crimson.

"Ride like hell!" grunted Big Jim, forking his roan. "Old Brown throwed down on Hank. Old fool! I had to salivate him permanent."

And like hell it was they rode, straight down the street toward the desert, yelling and firing as they went. They thundered past houses from which startled individuals peered bewilderedly, past stores where leathery faced storekeepers were dragging forth blue-barreled scatter-guns. They swept through the futile rain of lead that poured from the excited and befuddled crowd in front of the Red Lode, and whirled on toward the desert that stretched south of San Leon.

But not quite to the desert. For as they rounded the last bend in the twisting street and came abreast of the last house in the village, they were confronted by the gray-bearded figure of old "Pop" Anders, sheriff of San Leon County. The old man's gnarled right hand rested on the ancient single-action Colt on his thigh, his left was lifted in a seemingly futile command to halt.

Big Jim cursed and sawed back on the reins, and the big roan slid to a halt.

"Git outa the way, Pop!" roared Big Jim. "We don't want to hurt you."

The old warrior's eyes blazed with righteous wrath.

"Robbed the bank this time, eh?" he said in cold fury, his eyes on the canvas sacks. "Likely spilt blood, too. Good thing Frank Laramie died before he could know what skunks his boys turned out to be. You ain't content to steal our stock till we're nigh bankrupt; you got to rob our bank and take what little money we got left for a new start. Why, you damned human sidewinders!" the old man shrieked, his control snapping suddenly. "Ain't there *nothin'* that's too low-down for you to do?"

Behind them sounded the pound of running feet and a scattering banging of guns. The crowd from the Red Lode was closing in.

"You've wasted our time long enough, old man!" roared Luke, jabbing in the spurs and sending his horse rearing and plunging toward the indomitable figure. "Git outa the way, or —"

The old single-action jumped free in the gnarled hand. Two shots roared together, and Luke's sombrero went skyrocketing from his head. But the old

sheriff fell face forward in the dust with a bullet through his heart, and the Laramie gang swept on into the desert, feeding their dust to their hurriedly mounted and disheartened pursuers.

Only young Buck Laramie looked back, to see the door of the last house fly open, and a pig-tailed girl run out to the still figure in the street. It was the sheriff's daughter, Judy. She and Buck had gone to the same school in the old days before the Laramies hit the wolf-trail. Buck had always been her champion. Now she went down on her knees in the dust beside her father's body, seeking frantically for a spark of life where there was none.

A red film blazed before Buck Laramie's eyes as he turned his livid face toward his brothers.

"Hell," Luke was fretting, "I didn't aim to salivate him permanent. The old lobo woulda hung everyone of us if he could of — but just the same I didn't aim to kill him."

Something snapped in Bucky's brain.

"You didn't aim to kill him!" he shrieked. "No, but you did! Yo're all a pack of low-down sidewinders just like he said! They ain't nothin' too dirty for you!" He brandished his clenched fists in the extremity of his passion. "You filthy scum!" he sobbed. "When I'm growed up I'm comin' back here and make up for ever' dollar you've stole, ever' life you've took. I'll do it if they hang me for tryin', s'help me!"

His brothers did not reply. They did not look at him. Big Jim hummed flatly and absently:

*"Some say he shot him with a thirty-eight,
Some say he shot him with a forty-one;
But I say he shot him with a forty-four,
For I saw him as he lay on the barroom floor."*

Bucky subsided, slumped in his saddle and rode dismally on. San Leon and the old life lay behind them all. Somewhere south of the hazy horizon the desert stretched into Mexico where lay their future destiny. And his destiny was inextricably interwoven with that of his brothers. He was an outlaw, too, now, and he must stay with the clan to the end of their last ride.

Some guiding angel must have caused Buck Laramie to lean forward to pat the head of his tired sorrel, for at that instant a bullet ripped through his hat-brim, instead of his head.

It came as a startling surprise, but his reaction was instant. He leaped from his horse and dove for the protection of a sand bank, a second bullet

spurting dust at his heels. Then he was under cover, peering warily out, Colt in hand.

The tip of a white sombrero showed above a rim of sand, two hundred yards in front of him. Laramie blazed away at it, though knowing as he pulled the trigger that the range was too long and the target too small for six-gun accuracy. Nevertheless, the hat-top vanished.

"Takin' no chances," muttered Laramie. "Now who in hell is *he*? Here I am a good hour's ride from San Leon, and folks pottin' at me already. Looks bad for what I'm aimin' to do. Reckon it's somebody that knows me, after all these years?"

He could not believe it possible that anyone would recognize the lanky, half-grown boy of six years ago in the bronzed, range-hardened man who was returning to San Leon to keep the vow he had made as his clan rode southward with two dead men and a looted bank behind them.

The sun was burning hot, and the sand felt like an oven beneath Laramie. His canteen was slung to his saddle, and his horse was out of his reach, drooping under a scrubby mesquite. The other fellow would eventually work around to a point where his rifle would out-range Laramie's six-gun — or he might shoot the horse and leave Buck afoot in the desert.

The instant his attacker's next shot sang past his refuge, he was up and away in a stooping, weaving run to the next sand hill, to the right and slightly forward of his original position. He wanted to get in close quarters with his unknown enemy.

He wriggled from cover to cover, and sprinted in short dashes over narrow strips of open ground, taking advantage of every rock, cactus-bed and sand-bank, with lead hissing and spitting at him all the way. The hidden gunman had guessed his purpose, and obviously had no desire for a close-range fight. He was slinging lead every time Laramie showed an inch of flesh, cloth or leather, and Buck counted the shots. He was within striking distance of the sand rim when he believed the fellow's rifle was empty.

Springing recklessly to his feet he charged straight at his hidden enemy, his six-gun blazing. He had miscalculated about the rifle, for a bullet tore through the slack of his shirt. But then the Winchester was silent, and Laramie was raking the rim with such a barrage of lead that the gunman evidently dared not lift himself high enough to line the sights of a six-gun.

But a pistol was something that must be reckoned with, and as he spent his last bullet, Laramie dove behind a rise of sand and began desperately to jam cartridges into his empty gun. He had failed to cross the sand rim in that rush, but another try would gain it — unless hot lead cut him down on the way. Drum of hoofs reached his ears suddenly and glaring over his shelter he saw a pinto pony beyond the sand rim heading in the direction of San Leon. Its rider wore a white sombrero.

“Damn!” Laramie slammed the cylinder in place and sent a slug winging after the rapidly receding horseman. But he did not repeat the shot. The fellow was already out of range.

“Reckon the work was gettin’ too close for him,” he ruminated as he trudged back to his horse. “Hell, maybe he didn’t want me to get a good look at him. But why? Nobody in these parts would be shy about shootin’ at a Laramie, if they knew him as such. But who’d know I *was* a Laramie?”

He swung up into the saddle, then absently slapped his saddle bags and the faint clinking that resulted soothed him. Those bags were loaded with fifty thousand dollars in gold eagles, and every penny was meant for the people of San Leon.

“It’ll help pay the debt the Laramies owe for the money the boys stole,” he confided to the uninterested sorrel. “How I’m goin’ to pay back for the men they killed is more’n I can figure out. But I’ll try.”

The money represented all he had accumulated from the sale of the Laramie stock and holdings in Mexico — holdings bought with money stolen from San Leon. It was his by right of inheritance, for he was the last of the Laramies. Big Jim, Tom, Hank, Luke, all had found trail’s end in that lawless country south of the Border. As they had lived, so had they died, facing their killers, with smoking guns in their hands. They had tried to live straight in Mexico, but the wild blood was still there. Fate had dealt their hands, and Buck looked upon it all as a slate wiped clean, a record closed — with the exception of Luke’s fate.

That memory vaguely troubled him now, as he rode toward San Leon to pay the debts his brothers contracted.

“Folks said Luke drew first,” he muttered. “But it wasn’t like him to pick a barroom fight. Funny the fellow that killed him cleared out so quick, if it was a fair fight.”

He dismissed the old problem and reviewed the recent attack upon himself.

"If he knowed I was a Laramie, it might have been anybody. But how could he know? Joel Waters wouldn't talk."

No, Joel Waters wouldn't talk; and, Joel Waters, old time friend of Laramie's father, long ago, and owner of the Boxed W ranch, was the only man who knew Buck Laramie was returning to San Leon.

"San Leon at last, cayuse," he murmured as he topped the last desert sand hill that sloped down to the town. "Last time I seen it was under circumstances most — what the devil!"

He started and stiffened as a rattle of gunfire burst on his ears. Battle in San Leon? He urged his weary steed down the hill. Two minutes later history was repeating itself.

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<code> CHAPTER II

Owl-Hoot Ghosts

As Buck Laramie galloped into San Leon, a sight met his eyes which jerked him back to a day six years gone. For tearing down the street came six wild riders, yelling and shooting. In the lead rode one, who, with his huge frame and careless ease, might have been Big Jim Laramie come back to life again. Behind them the crowd at the Red Lode, roused to befuddled life, was shooting just as wildly and ineffectively as on that other day when hot lead raked San Leon. There was but one man to bar the bandits' path — one man who stood, legs braced wide, guns drawn, in the roadway before the last house in San Leon. So old Pop Anders had stood, that other day, and there was something about this man to remind Laramie of the old sheriff, though he was much younger. In a flash of recognition Laramie knew him — Bob Anders, son of Luke's victim. He, too, wore a silver star.

This time Laramie did not stand helplessly by to see a sheriff slaughtered. With the swiftness born of six hard years below the border, he made his decision and acted. Gravel spurted as the sorrel threw back his head against the sawing bit and came to a sliding stop, and all in one motion Laramie was out of the saddle and on his feet beside the sheriff — half crouching and his six-gun cocked and pointed. This time two would meet the charge, not one.

Laramie saw that masks hid the faces of the riders as they swept down, and contempt stabbed through him. No Laramie ever wore a mask. His Colt vibrated as he thumbed the hammer. Beside him the young sheriff's guns were spitting smoke and lead.

The clumped group split apart at that blast. One man, who wore a Mexican sash instead of a belt, slumped in his saddle clawing for the horn. Another with his right arm flopping broken at his side was fighting his pain-maddened beast which had stopped a slug intended for its rider.

The big man who had led the charge grabbed the fellow with the sash as he started to slide limply from his saddle, and dragged him across his own bow. He bolted across the roadside and plunged into a dry wash. The others followed him. The man with the broken arm abandoned his own crazed mount and grabbed the reins of the riderless horse. Beasts and men, they slid over the rim and out of sight in a cloud of dust.

Anders yelled and started across the road on the run, but Laramie jerked him back.

"They're covered," he grunted, sending his sorrel galloping to a safe place with a slap on the rump. "We got to get out of sight, *pronto!*"

The sheriff's good judgment overcame his excitement then, and he wheeled and darted for the house, yelping: "Follow me, stranger!"

Bullets whined after them from the gulch as the outlaws began their stand. The door opened inward before Anders' outstretched hand touched it, and he plunged through without checking his stride. Lead smacked the jambs and splinters flew as Laramie ducked after Anders. He collided with something soft and yielding that gasped and tumbled to the floor under the impact. Glaring wildly down Laramie found himself face to face with a vision of feminine loveliness that took his breath away, even in that instant. With a horrified gasp he plunged to his feet and lifted the girl after him. His all-embracing gaze took her in from tousled blond hair to whipcord breeches and high-heeled riding boots. She seemed too bewildered to speak.

"Sorry, miss," he stuttered. "I hope y'ain't hurt. I was — I was — " The smash of a window pane and the whine of a bullet cut short his floundering apologies. He snatched the girl out of line of the window and in an instant was crouching beside it himself, throwing lead across the road toward the smoke wisps.

Anders had barred the door and grabbed a Winchester from a rack on the wall.

"Duck into a back room, Judy," he ordered, kneeling at the window on the other side of the door. "Partner, I don't know you — " he punctuated his remarks with rapid shots, " — but I'm plenty grateful."

“Hilton’s the name,” mumbled Laramie, squinting along, his six-gun barrel. “Friends call me Buck — damn!”

His bullet had harmlessly knocked dust on the gulch rim, and his pistol was empty. As he groped for cartridges he felt a Winchester pushed into his hand, and, startled, turned his head to stare full into the disturbingly beautiful face of Judy Anders. She had not obeyed her brother’s order, but had taken a loaded rifle from the rack and brought it to Laramie, crossing the room on hands and knees to keep below the line of fire. Laramie almost forgot the men across the road as he stared into her deep clear eyes, now glowing with excitement. In dizzy fascination he admired the peach-bloom of her cheeks, her red, parted lips.

“Th-thank you, miss!” he stammered. “I needed that smoke-wagon right smart. And excuse my language. I didn’t know you was still in the room —

“He ducked convulsively as a bullet ripped across the sill, throwing splinters like a buzz-saw. Shoving the Winchester out of the window he set to work. But his mind was still addled. And he was remembering a pitifully still figure sprawled in the dust of that very road, and a pig-tailed child on her knees beside it. The child was no longer a child, but a beautiful woman; and he — he was still a Laramie, and the brother of the man who killed her father.

“*Judy!*” There was passion in Bob Anders’ voice. “Will you get out of here? There! Somebody’s callin’ at the back door. Go let ‘em in. And stay back there, will you?”

This time she obeyed, and a few seconds later half a dozen pairs of boots clomped into the room, as some men from the Red Lode who had slipped around through a back route to the besieged cabin, entered.

“They was after the bank, of course,” announced one of them. “They didn’t git nothin’ though, dern ‘em. Ely Harrison started slingin’ lead the minute he seen them masks comin’ in the door. He didn’t hit nobody, and by good luck the lead they throwed at him didn’t connect, but they pulled out in a hurry. Harrison shore s’prised me. I never thought much of him before now, but he showed he was ready to fight for his money, and our’n.”

“Same outfit, of course,” grunted the sheriff, peering warily through the jagged shards of the splintered window-pane.

“Sure. The damn’ Laramies again. Big Jim leadin’, as usual.”

Buck Laramie jumped convulsively, doubting the evidence of his ears. He twisted his head to stare at the men.

“You think it’s the Laramies out there?” Buck’s brain felt a bit numb. These mental jolts were coming too fast for him.

“Sure,” grunted Anders. “Couldn’t be nobody else. They was gone for six year — where, nobody knowed. But a few weeks back they showed up again and started their old deviltry, worse than ever.”

“Killed his old man right out there in front of his house,” grunted one of the men, selecting a rifle from the rack. The others were firing carefully through the windows, and the men in the gulch were replying in kind. The room was full of drifting smoke.

“But I’ve heard of ‘em,” Laramie protested. “They was all killed down in Old Mexico.”

“Couldn’t be,” declared the sheriff, lining his sights. “These are the old gang all right. They’ve put up warnin’s signed with the Laramie name. Even been heard singin’ that old song they used to always sing about King Brady. Got a hideout up in the Los Diablos, too, just like they did before. Same one, of course. I ain’t managed to find it yet, but — ” His voice was drowned in the roar of his .45-70.

“Well, I’ll be a hammer-headed jackass,” muttered Laramie under his breath. “Of all the — “

His profane meditations were broken into suddenly as one of the men bawled: “Shootin’s slowed down over there! What you reckon it means?”

“Means they’re aimin’ to sneak out of that wash at the other end and high-tail it into the desert,” snapped Anders. “I ought to have thought about that before, but things has been happenin’ so fast. You *hombres* stay here and keep smokin’ the wash so they can’t bolt out on this side. I’m goin’ to circle around and block ‘em from the desert.”

“I’m with you,” growled Laramie. “I want to see what’s behind them masks.”

They ducked out the back way and began to cut a wide circle which should bring them to the outer edge of the wash. It was difficult going and frequently they had to crawl on their hands and knees to take advantage of every clump of cactus and greasewood.

“Gettin’ purty close,” muttered Laramie, lifting his head. “What I’m wonderin’ is, why ain’t they already bolted for the desert? Nothin’ to stop ‘em.”

"I figger they wanted to get me if they could, before they lit out," answered Anders. "I believe I been snoopin' around in the Diablos too close to suit 'em. Look out! They've seen us!"

Both men ducked as a steady line of flame spurts rimmed the edge of the wash. They flattened down behind their scanty cover and bullets cut up puffs of sand within inches of them.

"This is a pickle!" gritted Anders, vainly trying to locate a human head to shoot at. "If we back up, we back into sight, and if we go forward we'll get perforated."

"And if we stay here the result's the same," returned Laramie. "Greasewood don't stop lead. We got to summon reinforcements." And lifting his voice in a stentorian yell that carried far, he whooped: "Come on, boys! Rush 'em from that side! They can't shoot two ways at once!"

They could not see the cabin from where they lay, but a burst of shouts and shots told them his yell had been heard. Guns began to bang up the wash and Laramie and Anders recklessly leaped to their feet and rushed down the slight slope that led to the edge of the gulch, shooting as they went.

They might have been riddled before they had gone a dozen steps, but the outlaws had recognized the truth of Laramie's statement. They couldn't shoot two ways at once, and they feared to be trapped in the gulch with attackers on each side. A few hurried shots buzzed about the ears of the charging men, and then outlaws burst into view at the end of the wash farthest from town, mounted and spurring hard, the big leader still carrying a limp figure across his saddle.

Cursing fervently, the sheriff ran after them, blazing away with both six-shooters, and Laramie followed him. The fleeing men were shooting backward as they rode, and the roar of six-guns and Winchesters was deafening. One of the men reeled in his saddle and caught at his shoulder, dyed suddenly red.

Laramie's longer legs carried him past the sheriff, but he did not run far. As the outlaws pulled out of range, toward the desert and the Diablos, he slowed to a walk and began reloading his gun.

"Let's round up the men, Bob," he called. "We'll follow 'em. I know the waterholes —"

He stopped short with a gasp. Ten yards behind him Bob Anders, a crimson stream dyeing the side of his head, was sinking to the desert floor.

Laramie started back on a run just as the men from the cabin burst into view. In their lead rode a man on a pinto — and Buck Laramie knew that pinto.

“*Git him!*” howled the white-hatted rider. “He shot Bob Anders in the back! I seen him! *He’s a Laramie!*”

Laramie stopped dead in his tracks. The accusation was like a bomb-shell exploding in his face. That was the man who had tried to drygulch him an hour or so before — same pinto, same white sombrero — but he was a total stranger to Laramie. How in the devil did *he* know of Buck’s identity, and what was the reason for his enmity?

Laramie had no time to try to figure it out now. For the excited townsmen, too crazy with excitement to stop and think, seeing only their young sheriff stretched in his blood, and hearing the frantic accusation of one of their fellows, set up a roar and started blazing away at the man they believed was a murderer.

Out of the frying pan into the fire — the naked desert was behind him, and his horse was still standing behind the Anders’ cabin — with that mob between him and that cabin.

But any attempt at explanation would be fatal. Nobody would listen. Laramie saw a break for him in the fact that only his accuser was mounted, and probably didn’t know he had a horse behind the cabin, and would try to reach it. The others were too excited to think anything. They were simply slinging lead, so befuddled with the mob impulse they were not even aiming — which is all that saved Laramie in the few seconds in which he stood bewildered and uncertain.

He ducked for the dry wash, running almost at a right angle with his attackers. The only man capable of intercepting him was White-Hat, who was bearing down on him, shooting from the saddle with a Winchester.

Laramie wheeled, and as he wheeled a bullet ripped through his Stetson and stirred his hair in passing. White-Hat was determined to have his life, he thought, as his own six-gun spat flame. White-Hat flinched sidewise and dropped his rifle. Laramie took the last few yards in his stride and dived out of sight in the wash.

He saw White-Hat spurring out of range too energetically to be badly wounded, and he believed his bullet had merely knocked the gun out of the fellow’s hands. The others had spread out and were coming down the slope at a run, burning powder as they came.

Laramie did not want to kill any of those men. They were law-abiding citizens acting under a misapprehension. So he emptied his gun over their heads and was gratified to see them precipitately take to cover. Then without pausing to reload, he ducked low and ran for the opposite end of the wash, which ran on an angle that would bring him near the cabin.

The men who had halted their charge broke cover and came on again, unaware of his flight, and hoping to get him while his gun was empty. They supposed he intended making a stand at their end of the wash.

By the time they had discovered their mistake and were pumping lead down the gully, Laramie was out at the other end and racing across the road toward the cabin. He ducked around the corner with lead nipping at his ears and vaulted into the saddle of the sorrel — and cursed his luck as Judy Anders ran out the rear door, her eyes wide with fright.

“What’s happened?” she cried. “Where’s Bob?”

“No time to pow-wow,” panted Laramie. “Bob’s been hurt. Don’t know how bad. I got to ride, because — “

He was interrupted by shouts from the other side of the cabin.

“Look out, Judy!” one man yelled. “Stay under cover! He shot Bob in the back!”

Reacting to the shout without conscious thought, Judy sprang to seize his reins.

Laramie jerked the sorrel aside and evaded her grasp. “It’s a lie!” he yelled with heat. “I ain’t got time to explain. Hope Bob ain’t hurt bad.”

Then he was away, crouching low in his saddle with bullets pinging past him; it seemed he’d been hearing lead whistle all day; he was getting sick of that particular noise. He looked back once. Behind the cabin Judy Anders was bending over a limp form that the men had carried in from the desert. Now she was down on her knees in the dust beside that limp body, searching for a spark of life.

Laramie cursed sickly. History was indeed repeating itself that day in San Leon.

For a time Laramie rode eastward, skirting the desert, and glad of a breathing spell. The sorrel had profited by its rest behind the Anders’ cabin, and was fairly fresh. Laramie had a good lead on the pursuers he knew would be hot on his trail as soon as they could get to their horses, but he headed east instead of north, the direction in which lay his real goal — the

Boxed W ranch. He did not expect to be able to throw them off his scent entirely, but he did hope to confuse them and gain a little time.

It was imperative that he see his one friend in San Leon County — Joel Waters. Maybe Joel Waters could unriddle some of the tangle. Who were the men masquerading as Laramies?

He had been forging eastward for perhaps an hour when, looking backward from a steep rise, he saw a column of riders approaching some two miles away through a cloud of dust that meant haste. That would be the posse following his trail — and that meant that the sheriff was dead or still senseless.

Laramie wheeled down the slope on the other side and headed north, hunting hard ground that would not betray a pony's hoof-print.

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<code> CHAPTER III

Trigger Debt

Dusk was fast settling when he rode into the yard of the Boxed W. He was glad of the darkness, for he had feared that some of Waters' punchers might have been in San Leon that day, and seen him. But he rode up to the porch without having encountered anyone, and saw the man he was hunting sitting there, pulling at a corn-cob pipe.

Waters rose and came forward with his hand outstretched as Laramie swung from the saddle.

"You've growed," said the old man. "I'd never knowed you if I hadn't been expectin' you. You don't favor yore brothers none. Look a lot like yore dad did at yore age, though. You've pushed yore cayuse hard," he added, with a piercing glance at the sweat-plastered flanks of the sorrel.

"Yeah." There was bitter humor in Laramie's reply. "I just got through shootin' me a sheriff."

Waters jerked the pipe from his mouth. He looked stunned.

"What?"

"All you got to do is ask the upright citizens of San Leon that's trailin' me like a lobo wolf," returned Laramie with a mirthless grin. And tersely and concisely he told the old rancher what had happened in San Leon and on the desert.

Waters listened in silence, puffing smoke slowly.

"It's bad," he muttered, when Laramie had finished. "Damned bad — well, about all I can do right now is to feed you. Put yore cayuse in the

corral.”

“Rather hide him near the house, if I could,” said Laramie. “That posse is liable to hit my sign and trail me here any time. I want to be ready to ride.”

“Blacksmith shop behind the house,” grunted Waters. “Come on.”

Laramie followed the old man to the shop, leading the sorrel. While he was removing the bridle and loosening the cinch, Waters brought hay and filled an old log-trough. When Laramie followed him back to the house, the younger man carried the saddle bags over his arm. Their gentle clink no longer soothed him; too many obstacles to distributing them were rising in his path.

“I just finished eatin’ before you come,” grunted Waters. “Plenty left.”

“Hop Sing still cookin’ for you?”

“Yeah.”

“Ain’t you ever goin’ to get married?” chaffed Laramie.

“Shore,” grunted the old man, chewing his pipe stem. “I just got to have time to decide what type of woman’d make me the best wife.”

Laramie grinned. Waters was well past sixty, and had been giving that reply to chaffing about his matrimonial prospects as far back as Buck could remember.

Hop Sing remembered Laramie and greeted him warmly. The old Chinaman had cooked for Waters for many years. Laramie could trust him as far as he could trust Waters himself.

The old man sat gripping his cold pipe between his teeth as Laramie disposed of a steak, eggs, beans and potatoes and tamped it down with a man-sized chunk of apple pie.

“Yo’re follerin’ blind trails,” he said slowly. “Mebbe I can help you.”

“Maybe. Do you have any idea who the gent on the showy pinto might be?”

“Not many such paints in these parts. What’d the man look like?”

“Well, I didn’t get a close range look at him, of course. From what I saw he looked to be short, thick-set, and he wore a short beard and a mustache so big it plumb ambushed his pan.”

“Why, hell!” snorted Waters. “That’s bound to be Mart Rawley! He rides a flashy pinto, and he’s got the biggest set of whiskers in San Leon.”

“Who’s he?”

“Owns the Red Lode. Come here about six months ago and bought it off of old Charlie Ross.”

“Well, that don’t help none,” growled Laramie, finishing his coffee and reaching for the makings. He paused suddenly, lighted match lifted. “Say, did this hombre ride up from Mexico?”

“He come in from the east. Of course, he could have come from Mexico, at that; he’d have circled the desert. Nobody but you Laramies ever hit straight across it. He ain’t said he come from Mexico original; and he ain’t said he ain’t.”

Laramie meditated in silence, and then asked: “What about this new gang that calls theirselves Laramies?”

“Plain coyotes,” snarled the old man. “Us San Leon folks was just gittin’ on our feet again after the wreck yore brothers made out of us, when this outfit hit the country. They’ve robbed and stole and looted till most of us are right back where we was six years ago. They’ve done more damage in a few weeks than yore brothers did in three years.

“I ain’t been so bad hit as some, because I’ve got the toughest, straightest-shootin’ crew of punchers in the county; but most of the cowmen around San Leon are mortgaged to the hilt, and stand to lose their outfits if they git looted any more. Ely Harrison — he’s president of the bank now, since yore brothers killed old man Brown — Ely’s been good about takin’ mortgages and handin’ out money, but he cain’t go on doin’ it forever.”

“Does everybody figure they’re the Laramies?”

“Why not? They send letters to the cowmen sayin’ they’ll wipe out their whole outfit if they don’t deliver ‘em so many hundred head of beef stock, and they sign them letters with the Laramie name. They’re hidin’ out in the Diablos like you all did; they’s always the same number in the gang; and they can make a getaway through the desert, which nobody but the Laramies ever did.

“Of course, they wear masks, which the Laramies never did, but that’s a minor item; customs change, so to speak. I’d have believed they was the genuine Laramies myself, only for a couple of reasons — one bein’ you’d wrote me in your letter that you was the only Laramie left. You didn’t give no details.” The old man’s voice was questioning.

“Man’s reputation always follows him,” grunted Buck. “A barroom gladiator got Jim. Hank got that gunfighter the next week, but was shot up so hisself he died. Tom joined the revolutionaries and the *rurales* cornered

him in a dry wash. Took 'em ten hours and three dead men to get him. Luke — ” He hesitated and scowled slightly.

“Luke was killed in a barroom brawl in Sante Maria, by a two-gunfighter called Killer Rawlins. They said Luke reached first, but Rawlins beat him to it. I don't know. Rawlins skipped that night. I've always believed that Luke got a dirty deal, some way. He was the best one of the boys. If I ever meet Rawlins — ” Involuntarily his hand moved toward the worn butt of his Colt. Then he shrugged his shoulders, and said: “You said there was two reasons why you knowed these coyotes wasn't Laramies; what's t'other'n?”

“They work different,” growled the old man. “Yore brothers was bad, but white men, just the same. They killed prompt, but they killed clean. These rats ain't content with just stealin' our stock. They burn down ranch houses and pizen water holes like a tribe of cussed Apaches. Jim Bannerman of the Lazy B didn't leave 'em two hundred of steers in a draw like they demanded in one of them letters. A couple of days later we found nothin' but smokin' ruins at the Lazy B, with Jim's body burned up inside and all his punchers dead or shot up.”

Buck's face was gray beneath its tan. His fist knotted on the gunbutt.

“The devil!” he choked, in a voice little above a whisper. “And the Laramies are gettin' the blame! I thought my brothers dragged the name low — but these devils are haulin' it right down into hell. Joel Waters, listen to me! I come back here to pay back money my brothers stole from San Leon; I'm stayin' to pay a bigger debt. The desert's big, but it ain't big enough for a Laramie and the rats that wears his name. If I don't wipe that gang of rattlers off the earth they can have my name, because I won't need it no more.”

“The Laramies owe a debt to San Leon,” agreed old Joel, filling his pipe. “Cleanin' out that snake-den is the best way I know of payin' it.”

Some time later Laramie rose at last and ground his cigarette butt under his heel.

“We've about talked out our wampum. From all I can see, everything points to this Mart Rawley bein' connected with the gang, somehow. He must have been the one that shot Bob Anders. He was ahead of the other fellows; they couldn't see him for a rise in the ground. They wouldn't have seen him shoot Anders. He might have been aimin' at me; or he might have just wanted Anders out of the way.

“Anyway, I’m headin’ for the Diablos tonight. I know yo’re willin’ to hide me here, but you can help me more if nobody suspects yo’re helpin’ me, yet.

“I’m leavin’ these saddle-bags with you. If I don’t come back out of the Diablos, you’ll know what to do with the money. So long.”

They shook hands, and old Joel said: “So long, Buck. I’ll take care of the money. If they git crowdin’ you too close, duck back here. And if you need help in the hills, try to git word back to me. I can still draw a bead with a Winchester, and I’ve got a gang of hard-ridin’ waddies to back my play.”

“I ain’t forgettin’, Joel.”

Laramie turned toward the door. Absorbed in his thoughts, he forgot for an instant that he was a hunted man, and relaxed his vigilance. As he stepped out onto the veranda he did not stop to think that he was thrown into bold relief by the light behind him.

As his boot-heel hit the porch yellow flame lanced the darkness and he heard the whine of a bullet that fanned him as it passed. He leapt back, slamming the door, wheeled, and halted in dismay to see Joel Waters sinking to the door. The old man, standing directly behind Laramie, had stopped the slug meant for his guest.

With his heart in his mouth Laramie dropped beside his friend. “Where’d it get you, Joel?” he choked.

“Low down, through the leg,” grunted Waters, already sitting up and whipping his bandanna around his leg for a tourniquet. “Nothin’ to worry about. You better git goin’.”

Laramie took the bandanna and began knotting it tightly, ignoring a hail from without.

“Come out with yore hands up, Laramie!” a rough voice shouted. “You can’t fight a whole posse. We got you cornered!”

“Beat it, Buck!” snapped Waters, pulling away his friend’s hands. “They must have left their horses and sneaked up on foot. Sneak out the back way before they surround the house, fork yore cayuse and burn the breeze. That’s Mart Rawley talkin’, and I reckon it was him that shot. He aims to git you before you have time to ask questions or answer any. Even if you went out there with yore hands up, he’d kill you. Git goin’, dern you!”

“All right!” Laramie jumped up as Hop Sing came out of the kitchen, almond eyes wide and a cleaver in his hand. “Tell ‘em I held a gun on you

and made you feed me. T'ain't time for 'em to know we're friends, not yet."

The next instant he was gliding into the back part of the house and slipping through a window into the outer darkness. He heard somebody swearing at Rawley for firing before the rest had taken up their positions, and he heard other voices and noises that indicated the posse was scattering out to surround the house.

He ran for the blacksmith shop, and, groping in the dark, tightened the cinch on the sorrel and slipped on the bridle. He worked fast, but before Laramie could lead the horse outside he heard a jingle of spurs and the sound of footsteps.

Laramie swung into the saddle, ducked his head low to avoid the lintel of the door, and struck in the spurs. The sorrel hurtled through the door like a thunderbolt. A startled yell rang out, a man jumped frantically out of the way, tripped over his spurs and fell flat on his back, discharging his Winchester in the general direction of the Big Dipper. The sorrel and its rider went past him like a thundering shadow to be swallowed in the darkness. Wild yells answered the passionate blasphemy of the fallen man, and guns spurted red as their owners fired blindly after the receding hoofbeats. But before the possemen could untangle themselves from their bewilderment and find their mounts, the echoes of flying hoofs had died away and night hid the fugitive's trail. Buck Laramie was far away, riding to the Diablos.

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<code> CHAPTER IV

Sidewinder Ramrod

Midnight found Laramie deep in the Diablos. He halted, tethered the sorrel, and spread his blankets at the foot of a low cliff. Night was not the time to venture further along the rock-strewn paths and treacherous precipices of the Diablos. He slept fitfully, his slumber disturbed by dreams of a girl kneeling beside a wounded man.

With the first gray of dawn he was riding familiar trails that would lead him to the cabin in the hidden canyon that he knew so well, the old hideout of his gang, where he believed he would find the new band which was terrorizing the country. The hideout had but one entrance — a rock-walled tunnel. How the fake gang could have learned of the place Laramie could not know.

The hideout was in a great bowl, on all sides of which rose walls of jumbled rock, impassable to a horseman. It was possible to climb the cliffs near the entrance of the tunnel, which, if the fake gang were following the customs of the real Laramies, would be guarded.

Half an hour after sunrise found him making his way on foot toward the canyon entrance. His horse he had left concealed among the rocks at a safe distance, and lariat in hand he crept along behind rocks and scrub growth toward the old river bed that formed the canyon. Presently, gazing through the underbrush that masked his approach, he saw, half hidden by a rock, a man in a tattered brown shirt who sat at the mouth of the canyon entrance, his hat pulled low over his eyes, and a Winchester across his knees.

Evidently a belief in the security of the hideout made the sentry careless. Laramie had the drop on him; but to use his advantage incurred the possibility of a shot that would warn those inside the canyon and spoil his plans. So he retreated to a point where he would not be directly in the line of the guard's vision, if the man roused, and began working his way to a spot a few hundred yards to the left, where, as he knew of old, he could climb to the rim of the canyon.

In a few moments he had clambered up to a point from which he could glimpse the booted feet of the guard sticking from behind the rock. Laramie's flesh crawled at the thought of being picked off with a rifle bullet like a fly off a wall, if the guard looked his way.

But the boots did not move, he dislodged no stones large enough to make an alarming noise, and presently, panting and sweating, he heaved himself over the crest of the rim and lay on his belly gazing down into the canyon below him.

As he looked down into the bowl which had once been like a prison to him, bitterness of memory was mingled with a brief, sick longing for his dead brothers; after all, they were his brothers, and had been kind to him in their rough way.

The cabin below him had in no wise changed in the passing of the years. Smoke was pouring out of the chimney, and in the corral at the back, horses were milling about in an attempt to escape the ropes of two men who were seeking saddle mounts for the day.

Shaking out his lariat, Laramie crept along the canyon rim until he reached a spot where a stunted tree clung to the very edge. To this tree he made fast the rope, knotted it at intervals for handholds, and threw the other

end over the cliff. It hung fifteen feet short of the bottom, but that was near enough.

As he went down it, with a knee hooked about the thin strand to take some of the strain off his hands, he grinned thinly as he remembered how he had used this descent long ago when he wanted to dodge Big Jim who was waiting at the entrance to give him a licking. His face hardened.

“Wish he was here with me now. We’d mop up these rats by ourselves.”

Dangling at the end of the rope at arm’s length he dropped, narrowly missing a heap of jagged rocks, and lit in the sand on his feet, going to his all-fours from the impact.

Bending low, sometimes on hands and knees, he headed circuitously for the cabin, keeping it between himself and the men in the corral. To his own wonderment he reached the cabin without hearing any alarm sounded. Maybe the occupants, if there were any in the canyon beside the men he had seen, had gone out the back way to the corral. He hoped so.

Cautiously he raised his head over a window sill and peered inside. He could see no one in the big room that constituted the front part of the cabin. Behind this room, he knew, were a bunk room and kitchen, and the back door was in the kitchen. There might be men in those backrooms; but he was willing to take the chance. He wanted to get in there and find a place where he could hide and spy.

The door was not locked; he pushed it open gently and stepped inside with a catlike tread, Colt poked ahead of him.

“*Stick ‘em up!*” Before he could complete the convulsive movement prompted by these unexpected words, he felt the barrel of a six-gun jammed hard against his backbone. He froze — opened his fingers and let his gun crash to the floor. There was nothing else for it.

The door to the bunkroom swung open and two men came out with drawn guns and triumphant leers on their unshaven faces. A third emerged from the kitchen. All were strangers to Laramie. He ventured to twist his head to look at his captor, and saw a big-boned, powerful man with a scarred face, grinning exultantly.

“That was easy,” rumbled one of the others, a tall, heavily built ruffian whose figure looked somehow familiar. Laramie eyed him closely.

“So yo’re ‘Big Jim’,” he said.

The big man scowled, but Scarface laughed.

“Yeah! With a mask on nobody can tell the difference. You ain’t so slick, for a Laramie. I seen you sneakin’ through the bresh ten minutes ago, and we been watchin’ you ever since. I seen you aimed to come and make yoreself to home, so I app’inted myself a welcome committee of one — behind the door. You couldn’t see me from the winder. Hey, you Joe!” he raised his voice pompously. “Gimme a piece of rope. Mister Laramie’s goin’ to stay with us for a spell.”

Scarface shoved the bound Laramie into an old Morris chair that stood near the kitchen door. Laramie remembered that chair well; the brothers had brought it with them when they left their ranch home in the foothills.

He was trying to catch a nebulous memory that had something to do with that chair, when steps sounded in the bunkroom and “Jim” entered, accompanied by two others. One was an ordinary sort of criminal, slouchy, brutal faced and unshaven. The other was of an entirely different type. He was elderly and pale-faced, but that face was bleak and flinty. He did not seem range-bred like the others. Save for his high-heeled riding boots, he was dressed in town clothes, though the well-worn butt of a .45 jutted from a holster at his thigh.

Scarface hooked thumbs in belt and rocked back on his heels with an air of huge satisfaction. His big voice boomed in the cabin.

“Mister Harrison, I takes pleasure in makin’ you acquainted with Mister Buck Laramie, the last of a family of honest horse-thieves, what’s rode all the way from Mexico just to horn in on our play. And Mister Laramie, since you ain’t long for this weary world, I’m likewise honored to interjuice you to Mister Ely Harrison, high man of our outfit and president of the Cattlemen’s Bank of San Leon!”

Scarface had an eye for dramatics in his crude way. He bowed grotesquely, sweeping the floor with his Stetson and grinning gleefully at the astounded glare with which his prisoner greeted his introduction.

Harrison was less pleased.

“That tongue of yours wags too loose, Braxton,” he snarled.

Scarface lapsed into injured silence, and Laramie found his tongue.

“Ely Harrison!” he said slowly. “Head of the gang — the pieces of this puzzle’s beginnin’ to fit. So you generously helps out the ranchers yore coyotes ruins — not forgettin’ to grab a healthy mortgage while doin’ it. And you was a hero and shot it out with the terrible bandits when they come for yore bank; only nobody gets hurt on either side.”

Unconsciously he leaned further back in the Morris chair — and a lightning jolt of memory hit him just behind the ear. He stifled an involuntary grunt, and his fingers, hidden by his body from the eyes of his captors, began fumbling between the cushions of the chair.

He had remembered his jackknife, a beautiful implement, and the pride of his boyhood, stolen from him and hidden by his brother Tom, for a joke, a few days before they started for Mexico. Tom had forgotten all about it, and Buck had been too proud to beg him for it. But Tom had remembered, months later, in Mexico; had bought Buck a duplicate of the first knife, and told him that he had hidden the original between the cushions of the old Morris chair.

Laramie's heart almost choked him. It seemed too good to be true, this ace in the hole. Yet there was no reason to suppose anybody had found and removed the knife. His doubts were set at rest as his fingers encountered a smooth, hard object. It was not until that moment that he realized that Ely Harrison was speaking to him. He gathered his wits and concentrated on the man's rasping voice, while his hidden fingers fumbled with the knife, trying to open it.

" — damned unhealthy for a man to try to block *my* game," Harrison was saying harshly. "Why didn't you mind your own business?"

"How do you know I come here just to spoil yore game?" murmured Laramie absently.

"Then why *did* you come here?" Harrison's gaze was clouded with a sort of ferocious uncertainty. "Just how much did you know about our outfit before today? Did you know I was the leader of the gang?"

"Guess," suggested Laramie. The knife was open at last. He jammed the handle deep between the cushions and the chair-back, wedging it securely. The tendons along his wrists ached. It had been hard work, manipulating the knife with his cramped fingers, able to move just so far. His steady voice did not change in tone as he worked. "I was kind of ashamed of my name till I seen how much lower a man could go than my brothers ever went. They was hard men, but they was white, at least. Usin' my name to torture and murder behind my back plumb upsets me. Maybe I didn't come to San Leon just to spoil yore game; but maybe I decided to spoil it after I seen some of the hands you dealt."

"You'll spoil our game!" Harrison sneered. "Fat chance you've got of spoiling anybody's game. But you've got only yourself to blame. In another

month I'd have owned every ranch within thirty miles of San Leon."

"So that's the idea, huh?" murmured Laramie, leaning forward to expectorate, and dragging his wrists hard across the knife-edge. He felt one strand part, and as he leaned back and repeated the movement, another gave way and the edge bit into his flesh. If he could sever one more strand, he would make his break.

"Just how much did you know about our outfit before you came here?" demanded Harrison again, his persistence betraying his apprehension on that point. "How much did you tell Joel Waters?"

"None of yore derned business," Laramie snapped. His nerves getting on edge with the approach of the crisis.

"You'd better talk," snarled Harrison. "I've got men here who'd think nothing of shoving your feet in the fire to roast. Not that it matters. We're all set anyway. Got ready when we heard you'd ridden in. It just means we move tonight instead of a month later. But if you can prove to me that you haven't told anybody that I'm the real leader of the gang — well, we can carry out our original plans, and you'll save your life. We might even let you join the outfit."

"Join the — do you see any snake-scales on me?" flared Laramie, fiercely expanding his arm muscles. Another strand parted and the cords fell away from his wrists.

"Why you — " Murderous passion burst all bounds as Harrison lurched forward, his fist lifted. And Laramie shot from the chair like a steel spring released, catching them all flat-footed, paralyzed by the unexpectedness of the move.

One hand ripped Harrison's Colt from its scabbard. The other knotted into a fist that smashed hard in the banker's face and knocked him headlong into the midst of the men who stood behind him.

"Reach for the ceilin', you yellow-bellied polecats!" snarled Laramie, livid with fury and savage purpose; his cocked .45 menaced them all. "Reach! I'm dealin' this hand!"

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<code> CHAPTER V

First Blood

For an instant the scene held — then Scarface made a convulsive movement to duck behind the chair.

“Back up!” yelled Laramie, swinging his gun directly on him, and backing toward the door. But the tall outlaw who had impersonated Big Jim had recovered from the daze of his surprise. Even as Laramie’s pistol muzzle moved in its short arc toward Braxton, the tall one’s hand flashed like the stroke of a snake’s head to his gun. It cleared leather just as Laramie’s .45 banged.

Laramie felt hot wind fan his cheek, but the tall outlaw was sagging back and down, dying on his feet and grimly pulling trigger as he went. A hot welt burned across Laramie’s left thigh, another slug ripped up splinters near his feet. Harrison had dived behind the Morris chair and Laramie’s vengeful bullet smashed into the wall behind him.

It all happened so quickly that the others had barely unleathered their irons as he reached the threshold. He fired at Braxton, saw the scar-faced one drop his gun with a howl, saw “Big Jim” sprawl on the floor, done with impersonation and outlawry forever, and then he was slamming the door from the outside, wincing involuntarily as bullets smashed through the panels and whined about him.

His long legs flung him across the kitchen and he catapulted through the outer door. He collided head-on with the two men he had seen in the corral. All three went into the dust in a heap. One, even in falling, jammed his six-gun into Buck’s belly and pulled trigger without stopping to see who it was. The hammer clicked on an empty chamber. Laramie, flesh crawling with the narrowness of his escape, crashed his gun barrel down on the other’s head and sprang up, kicking free of the second man whom he recognized as Mart Rawley, he of the white sombrero and flashy pinto.

Rawley’s gun had been knocked out of his hand in the collision. With a yelp the drygulcher scuttled around the corner of the cabin on hands and knees. Laramie did not stop for him. He had seen the one thing that might save him — a horse, saddled and bridled, tied to the corral fence.

He heard the furious stamp of boots behind him. Harrison’s voice screamed commands as his enemies streamed out of the house and started pouring lead after him. Then a dozen long leaps carried him spraddle-legged to the startled mustang. With one movement he had ripped loose the tether and swung aboard. Over his shoulder he saw the men spreading out to head him off in the dash they expected him to make toward the head of the canyon. Then he wrenched the cayuse around and spurred through the corral gate which the outlaws had left half open.

In an instant Laramie was the center of a milling whirlpool of maddened horses as he yelled, fired in the air, and lashed them with the quirt hanging from the horn.

“Close the gate!” shrieked Harrison. One of the men ran to obey the command, but as he did, the snorting beasts came thundering through. Only a frantic leap backward saved him from being trampled to death under the maddened horses.

His companions yelled and ran for the protection of the cabin, firing blindly into the dust cloud that rose as the herd pounded past. Then Laramie was dashing through the scattering horde and drawing out of six-gun range, while his enemies howled like wolves behind him.

“Git along, cayuse!” yelled Laramie, drunk with the exhilaration of the hazard. “We done better’n I hoped. They got to round up their broncs before they hit my trail, and that’s goin’ to take time!”

Thought of the guard waiting at the canyon entrance did not sober him.

“Only way out is through the tunnel. Maybe he thinks the shootin’ was just a family affair, and won’t drill a gent ridin’ from *inside* the canyon. Anyway, cayuse, we takes it on the run.”

A Winchester banged from the mouth of the tunnel and the bullet cut the air past his ear.

“Pull up!” yelled a voice, but there was hesitancy in the tone. Doubtless the first shot had been a warning, and the sentry was puzzled. Laramie gave no heed; he ducked low and jammed in the spurs. He could see the rifle now, the blue muzzle resting on a boulder, and the ragged crown of a hat behind it. Even as he saw it, flame spurted from the blue ring. Laramie’s horse stumbled in its headlong stride as lead ploughed through the fleshy part of its shoulder. That stumble saved Laramie’s life for it lurched him out of the path of the next slug. His own six-gun roared.

The bullet smashed on the rock beside the rifle muzzle. Dazed and half-blinded by splinters of stone, the outlaw reeled back into the open, and fired without aim. The Winchester flamed almost in Laramie’s face. Then his answering slug knocked the guard down as if he had been hit with a hammer. The Winchester flew out of his hands as he rolled on the ground. Laramie jerked the half-frantic mustang back on its haunches and dived out of the saddle to grab for the rifle.

“Damn!” It had struck the sharp edge of a rock as it fell. The lock was bent and the weapon useless. He cast it aside disgustedly, wheeled toward

his horse, and then halted to stare down at the man he had shot. The fellow had hauled himself to a half-sitting position. His face was pallid, and blood oozed from a round hole in his shirt bosom. He was dying. Sudden revulsion shook Laramie as he saw his victim was hardly more than a boy. His berserk excitement faded.

“Laramie!” gasped the youth. “You must be Buck Laramie!”

“Yeah,” admitted Laramie. “Anything — anything I can do?”

The boy grinned in spite of his pain.

“Thought so. Nobody but a Laramie could ride so reckless and shoot so straight. Seems funny — bein’ plugged by a Laramie after worshipping ‘em most of my life.”

“What?” ejaculated Laramie.

“I always wanted to be like ‘em,” gasped the youth. “Nobody could ride and shoot and fight like them. That’s why I j’ined up with these polecats. They said they was startin’ up a gang that was to be just like the Laramies. But they ain’t; they’re a passel of dirty coyotes. Once I started in with ‘em, though, I had to stick.”

Laramie said nothing. It was appalling to think that a young life had been so warped, and at last destroyed, by the evil example of his brothers.

“You better go and raise a posse if yo’re aimin’ to git them rats,” the boy said. “They’s goin’ to be hell to pay tonight.”

“How’s that?” questioned Laramie, remembering Harrison’s remarks about something planned for the night.

“You got ‘em scared,” murmured the boy. “Harrison’s scared you might have told Joel Waters he was boss-man of the gang. That’s why he come here last night. They’d aimed to keep stealin’ for another month. Old Harrison woulda had most all the ranches around here by then, foreclosin’ mortgages.

“When Mart Rawley failed to git you, old Harrison sent out word for the boys to git together here today. They figgered on huntin’ you down, if the posse from San Leon hadn’t already got you. If they found out you didn’t know nothin’ and hadn’t told nobody nothin’, they just aimed to kill you and go on like they’d planned from the first. But if they didn’t git you, or found you’d talked, they aimed to make their big cleanup tonight, and then ride.”

“What’s that?” asked Laramie.

“They’re goin’ down tonight and burn Joel Waters’ ranch buildings, and the sheriff’s, and some of the other big ones. They’ll drive all the cattle off to Mexico over the old Laramie trail. Then old Harrison’ll divide the loot and the gang will scatter. If he finds you ain’t spilled the works about him bein’ the top man, he’ll stay on in San Leon. That was his idee from the start — ruin the ranchers, buy up their outfits cheap and be king of San Leon.”

“How many men’s he got?”

“‘Tween twenty-five and thirty,” panted the youth. He was going fast. He choked, and a trickle of blood began at the corner of his mouth. “I ought not to be squealin’, maybe; t’ain’t the Laramie way. But I wouldn’t to nobody but a Laramie. You didn’t see near all of ‘em. Two died on the way back from San Leon, yesterday. They left ‘em out in the desert. The rest ain’t got back from drivin’ cattle to Mexico, but they’ll be on hand by noon today.”

Laramie was silent, reckoning on the force he could put in the field. Waters’ punchers were all he could be sure of — six or seven men at the most, not counting the wounded Waters. The odds were stacking up.

“Got a smoke?” the youth asked weakly. Laramie rolled a cigarette, placed it between the blue lips and held a match. Looking back down the canyon, Laramie saw men saddling mounts. Precious time was passing, but he was loath to leave the dying lad.

“Get goin’,” muttered the boy uneasily. “You got a tough job ahead of you — honest men and thieves both agen you — but I’m bettin’ on the Laramies — the real ones — ” He seemed wandering in his mind. He began to sing in a ghastly whisper the song that Laramie could never hear without a shudder.

*“When Brady died they planted him deep,
Put a bottle of whisky at his head and feet,
Folded his arms across his breast,
And said: ‘King Brady’s gone to his rest!’”*

The crimson trickle became a sudden spurt; the youth’s voice trailed into silence. The cigarette slipped from his lips. He went limp and lay still, through forever with the wolf-trail.

Laramie rose heavily and groped for his horse, trembling in the shade of the rock. He tore the blanket rolled behind the saddle and covered the still figure. Another debt to be marked up against the Laramies.

He swung aboard and galloped through the tunnel to where his own horse was waiting — a faster mount than the cayuse he was riding. As he shifted mounts he heard shouts behind him, knew that his pursuers had halted at the body, knew the halt would be brief.

Without looking back, he hit the straightest trail he knew that led toward the ranch of Joel Waters.

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<code> CHAPTER VI

“String Him Up!”

It was nearly noon when Laramie pulled up his sweating bronc at the porch of the Boxed W ranch house. There were no punchers in sight. Hop Sing opened the door.

“Where’s Waters?” rapped out Laramie.

“Solly!” Hop Sing beamed on the younger man. “He gone to town to see doctluh and get leg fixed. Slim Jones dlive him in in buckblood. He be back tonight.”

“Damn!” groaned Laramie. He saw his plan being knocked into a cocked hat. That plan had been to lead a band of men straight to the outlaws’ hideout and bottle them up in their stronghold before they could scatter out over the range in their planned raid. The Boxed W punchers would not follow a stranger without their boss’s orders, and only Waters could convince the bellicose citizens of San Leon that Laramie was on the level. Time was flying, and every minute counted.

There was only one risky course left open. He swung on his tiring horse and reined away on the road for San Leon.

He met no one on the road, for which he was thankful. When he drew up on the outskirts of the town his horse was drawing laboring breaths. He knew the animal would be useless in case he had to dust out of town with a posse on his heels.

Laramie knew of a back alley that led to the doctor’s office, and by which he hoped to make it unseen. He dismounted and headed down the alley, leading the gelding by the reins.

He sighted the little adobe shack where the town’s one physician lived and worked, when a jingle of spurs behind him caused him to jerk his head in time to see a man passing the end of the alley. It was Mart Rawley, and Laramie ducked behind his horse, cursing his luck. Rawley must have been

prowling around the town, expecting him, and watching for him. His yell instantly split the lazy silence.

“Laramie!” howled Rawley. “Laramie’s back! Hey, Bill! Lon! Joe! Everybody! Laramie’s in town again! This way!”

Laramie forked his mustang and spurred it into a lumbering run for the main street. Lead was singing down the alley as Laramie burst into Main Street, and saw Joel Waters sitting in a chair on the porch of the doctor’s shack.

“Get all the men you can rustle and head for the Diablos!” he yelled at the astonished ranchman. “I’ll leave a trail for you to follow. I found the gang at the old hideout — and they’re comin’ out tonight for a big cleanup!”

Then he was off again, his clattering hoofs drowning Waters’ voice as he shouted after the rider. Men were yelling and .45s banging. A horse and a foot they came at him, shooting as they ran. The dull, terrifying mob-roar rose, pierced with yells of: “String him up!” “He shot Bob Anders in the back!”

His way to open country was blocked, and his horse was exhausted. With a snarl Laramie wheeled and rode to the right for a narrow alley that did not seem to be blocked. It led between two buildings to a side-street, and was not wide enough for a horse to pass through. Maybe that was the reason it had been left unguarded. Laramie reached it, threw himself from his saddle and dived into the narrow mouth.

For an instant his mount, standing with drooping head in the opening, masked his master from bullets, though Laramie had not intended sacrificing his horse for his own hide. Laramie had run half the length of the alley before someone reached out gingerly, grasped the reins and jerked the horse away. Laramie half turned, without pausing in his run, and fired high and harmlessly back down the alley. The whistle of lead kept the alley clear until he bolted out the other end.

There, blocking his way in the side, street, stood a figure beside a black racing horse. Laramie’s gun came up — then he stopped short, mouth open in amazement. It was Judy Anders who stood beside the black horse.

Before he could speak she sprang forward and thrust the reins in his hand.

“Take him and go! He’s fast!”

“Why — what?” Laramie sputtered, his thinking processes in a muddle. The mere sight of Judy Anders had that effect upon him. Hope flamed in him. Did her helping him mean — then reason returned and he took the gift the gods had given him without stopping for question. As he grabbed the horn and swung up he managed: “I sure thank you kindly, miss — “

“Don’t thank me,” Judy Anders retorted curtly; her color was high, but her red lips were sulky. “You’re a Laramie and ought to be hung, but you fought beside Bob yesterday when he needed help. The Anderses pay their debts. Will you go?”

A nervous stamp of her little foot emphasized the request. The advice was good. Three of the townsmen appeared with lifted guns around a corner of a nearby building. They hesitated as they saw the girl near him, but began maneuvering for a clear shot at him without endangering her.

“See Joel Waters, at the doctor’s office!” he yelled to her, and was off for the open country, riding like an Apache, and not at all sure that she understood him. Men howled and guns crashed behind him, and maddened citizens ran cursing for their mounts, too crazy-mad to notice the girl who shrieked vainly at them, unheeding her waving arms.

“Stop! Stop! Wait! Listen to me!” Deaf to her cries they streamed past her, ahorse and afoot, and burst out into the open. The mounted men spurred their horses savagely after the figure that was swiftly dwindling in the distance.

Judy dashed aside an angry tear and declaimed her opinion of men in general, and the citizens of San Leon in particular, in terms more expressive than lady-like.

“What’s the matter?” It was Joel Waters, limping out of the alley, supported by the doctor. The old man seemed stunned by the rapidity of events. “What in the devil’s all this mean? Where’s Buck?”

She pointed. “There he goes, with all the idiots in San Leon after him.”

“Not all the idiots,” Waters corrected. “*I’m* still here. Dern it, the boy must be crazy, comin’ here. I yelled myself deaf at them fools, but they wouldn’t listen — “

“They wouldn’t listen to me, either!” cried Judy despairingly. “But they won’t catch him — ever, on that black of mine. And maybe when they come limping back, they’ll be cooled down enough to hear the truth. If they won’t listen to me, they will to Bob!”

“To Bob?” exclaimed the doctor. “Has he come out of his daze? I was just getting ready to come over and see him again, when Joel came in for his leg to be dressed.”

“Bob came out of it just a little while ago. He told me it wasn’t Laramie who shot him. He’s still groggy and uncertain as to just what happened. He doesn’t know who it was who shot him, but he knows it wasn’t Buck Laramie. The last thing he remembers was Laramie running some little distance ahead of him. The bullet came from behind. He thinks a stray slug from the men behind them hit him.”

“I don’t believe it was a stray,” grunted Waters, his eyes beginning to glitter. “I got a dern good idee who shot Bob. I’m goin’ to talk — “

“Better not bother Bob too much right now,” interrupted the doctor “I’ll go over there — “

“Better go in a hurry if you want to catch Bob at home,” the girl said grimly. “He was pulling on his boots and yelling for our cook to bring him his gun-belt when I left!”

“What? Why, he musn’t get up yet!” The doctor transferred Waters’ arm from his shoulder to that of the girl, and hurried away toward the house where Bob Anders was supposed to be convalescing.

“Why did Buck come back here?” Judy wailed to Waters.

“From what he hollered at me as he lighted past, I reckon he’s found somethin’ up in the Diablos. He come for help. Probably went to my ranch first, and findin’ me not there, risked his neck comin’ on here. Said send men after him, to foller signs he’d leave. I relayed that there information on to Slim Jones, my foreman. Doc lent Slim a horse, and Slim’s high-tailin’ it for the Boxed W right now to round up my waddies and hit the trail. As soon as these San Leon snake-hunters has ruint their cayuses chasin’ that black streak of light you give Buck, they’ll be pullin’ back into town. This time, I bet they’ll listen.”

I’m glad he didn’t shoot Bob,” she murmured. “But why — why did he come back here in the first place?”

“He come to pay a debt he figgered he owed on behalf of his no-account brothers. His saddle bags is full of gold he aims to give back to the citizens of this here ongrateful town. What’s the matter?”

For his fair companion had uttered a startled exclamation.

“N-nothing, only — only I didn’t know it was that way! Then Buck never robbed or stole, like his brothers?”

“Course he didn’t!” snapped the old man irascibly. “Think I’d kept on bein’ his friend all his life, if he had? Buck ain’t to blame for what his brothers did. He’s straight and he’s always been straight.”

“But he was with them, when — when — “

“I know.” Waters’ voice was gentler. “But he didn’t shoot yore dad. That was Luke. And Buck was with ‘em only because they made him. He wasn’t nothin’ but a kid.”

She did not reply and old Waters, noting the soft, new light glowing in her eyes, the faint, wistful smile that curved her lips, wisely said nothing.

In the meantime the subject of their discussion was proving the worth of the sleek piece of horseflesh under him. He grinned as he saw the distance between him and his pursuers widen, thrilled to the marvel of the horse between his knees as any good horseman would. In half an hour he could no longer see the men who hunted him.

He pulled the black to an easier, swinging gait that would eat up the miles for long hours on end, and headed for the Diablos. But the desperate move he was making was not dominating his thoughts. He was mulling over a new puzzle; the problem of why Judy Anders had come to his aid. Considering her parting words, she didn’t have much use for him. If Bob had survived his wound, and asserted Laramie’s innocence, why were the citizens so hot for his blood? If not — would Judy Anders willingly aid a man she thought shot her brother? He thrilled at the memory of her, standing there with the horse that saved his life. If only he weren’t a Laramie — How beautiful she was.

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<code> CHAPTER VII

Bottled Up

A good three hours before sundown Laramie was in the foothills of the Diablos. In another hour, by dint of reckless riding over trails that were inches in width, which even he ordinarily would have shunned, he came in sight of the entrance to the hideout. He had left signs farther down the trail to indicate, not the way he had come, but the best way for Waters’ punchers to follow him.

Once more he dismounted some distance from the tunnel and stole cautiously forward. There would be a new sentry at the entrance, and Laramie’s first job must be to dispose of him silently.

He was halfway to the tunnel when he glimpsed the guard, sitting several yards from the mouth, near a clump of bushes. It was the scar-faced fellow Harrison had called Braxton, and he seemed wide-awake.

Falling back on Indian tactics, acquired from the Yaquis in Mexico, Laramie began a stealthy, and necessarily slow, advance on the guard, swinging in a circle that would bring him behind the man. He crept up to within a dozen feet.

Braxton was getting restless. He shifted his position, craning his neck as he stared suspiciously about him. Laramie believed he had heard, but not yet located, faint sounds made in Laramie's progress. In another instant he would turn his head and stare full at the bushes which afforded the attacker scanty cover.

Gathering a handful of pebbles, Laramie rose stealthily to his knees and threw them over the guard's head. They hit with a loud clatter some yards beyond the man. Braxton started to his feet with an oath. He glared in the direction of the sound with his Winchester half lifted, neck craned. At the same instant Laramie leaped for him with his six-gun raised like a club.

Scarface wheeled, and his eyes flared in amazement. He jerked the rifle around, but Laramie struck it aside with his left hand, and brought down his pistol barrel crushingly on the man's head. Braxton went to his knees like a felled ox; slumped full-length and lay still.

Laramie ripped off belts and neckerchief from the senseless figure; bound and gagged his captive securely. He appropriated his pistol, rifle and spare cartridges, then dragged him away from the tunnel mouth and shoved him in among a cluster of rocks and bushes, effectually concealing him from the casual glance.

"Won the first trick, by thunder!" grunted Laramie. "And now for the next deal."

The success of that deal depended on whether or not all the outlaws of Harrison's band were in the hideout. Mart Rawley was probably outside, yet; maybe still back in San Leon. But Laramie knew he must take the chance that all the other outlaws *were* inside.

He glanced up to a ledge overhanging the tunnel mouth, where stood precariously balanced the huge boulder which had given him his idea for bottling up the canyon.

"Cork for my bottle!" muttered Laramie. "All I need now's a lever."

A broken tree limb sufficed for that, and a few moments later he had climbed to the ledge and was at work on the boulder. A moment's panic assailed him as he feared its base was too deeply imbedded for him to move it. But under his fierce efforts he felt the great mass give at last. A few minutes more of back-breaking effort, another heave that made the veins bulge on his temples — and the boulder started toppling, crashed over the ledge and thundered down into the tunnel entrance. It jammed there, almost filling the space.

He swarmed down the wall and began wedging smaller rocks and brush in the apertures between the boulder and the tunnel sides. The only way his enemies could get out now was by climbing the canyon walls, a feat he considered practically impossible, or by laboriously picking out the stones he had jammed in place, and squeezing a way through a hole between the boulder and the tunnel wall. And neither method would be a cinch, with a resolute cowpuncher slinging lead at everything that moved.

Laramie estimated that his whole task had taken about half an hour. Slinging Braxton's rifle over his shoulder he clambered up the cliffs. At the spot on the canyon rim where he had spied upon the hideout that morning, he fortified himself by the simple procedure of crouching behind a fair-sized rock, with the Winchester and pistols handy at his elbows. He had scarcely taken his position when he saw a mob of riders breaking away from the corral behind the cabin. As he had figured, the gang was getting away to an early start for its activities of the night.

He counted twenty-five of them; and the very sun that glinted on polished gun hammers and silver conchas seemed to reflect violence and evil deeds.

"Four hundred yards," muttered Laramie, squinting along the blue rifle barrel. "Three fifty — three hundred — now I opens the ball!"

At the ping of the shot dust spurted in front of the horses' hoofs, and the riders scattered like quail, with startled yells.

"Drop them shootin' irons and hi'st yore hands!" roared Laramie. "Tunnel's corked up and you can't get out!"

His answer came in a vengeful hail of bullets, spattering along the canyon rim for yards in either direction. He had not expected any other reply. His shout had been more for rhetorical effect than anything else. But there was nothing theatrical about his second shot, which knocked a man out of his saddle. The fellow never moved after he hit the ground.

The outlaws converged toward the tunnel entrance, firing as they rode, aiming at Laramie's aerie, which they had finally located. Laramie replied in kind. A mustang smitten by a slug meant for his rider rolled to the ground and broke his rider's leg under him. A squat raider howled profanely as a slug ploughed through his breast muscles.

Then half a dozen men in the lead jammed into the tunnel and found that Laramie had informed them truthfully. Their yells reached a crescendo of fury. The others slid from their horses and took cover behind the rocks that littered the edges of the canyon, dragging the wounded men with them.

From a rush and a dash the fight settled to a slow, deadly grind, with nobody taking any rash chances. Having located his tiny fort, they concentrated their fire on the spot of the rim he occupied. A storm of bullets drove him to cover behind the breastworks, and became exceedingly irksome.

He had not seen either Rawley or Harrison. Rawley, he hoped, was still in San Leon, but the absence of Harrison worried him. Had he, too, gone to San Leon? If so, there was every chance that he might get clean away, even if his band was wiped out. There was another chance, that he or Rawley, or both of them, might return to the hideout and attack him from the rear. He cursed himself for not having divulged the true identity of the gang's leader to Judy Anders; but he always seemed addled when talking to her.

The ammunition supply of the outlaws seemed inexhaustible. He knew at least six men were in the tunnel, and he heard them cursing and shouting, their voices muffled. He found himself confronted by a quandary that seemed to admit of no solution. If he did not discourage them, they would be breaking through the blocked tunnel and potting him from the rear. But to affect this discouragement meant leaving his point of vantage, and giving the men below a chance to climb the canyon wall. He did not believe this could be done, but he did not know what additions to the fortress had been made by the new occupants. They might have chiseled out handholds at some point on the wall. Well, he'd have to look at the tunnel.

"Six-guns against rifles, if this keeps up much longer," he muttered, working his way over the ledges. "Cartridges most gone. Why the devil don't Joel's men show up? I can't keep these hombres hemmed up forever — *damn!*"

His arm thrust his six-gun out as he yelped. Stones and brush had been worked out at one place in the tunnel-mouth, and the head and shoulders of

a man appeared. At the crash of Laramie's Colt the fellow howled and vanished. Laramie crouched, glaring; they would try it again, soon. If he was not there to give them lead-argument, the whole gang would be squeezing out of the tunnel in no time.

He could not get back to the rim, and leave the tunnel unguarded; yet there was always the possibility of somebody climbing the canyon wall.

Had he but known it, his fears were justified. For while he crouched on the ledge, glaring down at the tunnel-mouth, down in the canyon a man was wriggling toward a certain point of the cliff, where his keen eyes had discerned something dangling. He had discovered Laramie's rope, hanging from the stunted tree on the rim. Cautiously he lifted himself out of the tall grass, ready to duck back in an instant, then as no shot came from the canyon rim, he scuttled like a rabbit toward the wall.

Kicking off his boots and slinging his rifle on his back, he began swarming, ape-like, up the almost sheer wall. His outstretched arm grasped the lower end of the rope, just as the others in the canyon saw what he was doing, and opened a furious fire on the rim to cover his activities. The outlaw on the rope swore luridly, and went up with amazing agility, his flesh crawling with the momentary expectation of a bullet in his back.

The renewed firing had just the effect on Laramie that the climber had feared it would have — it drew him back to his breastwork. It was not until he was crouching behind his breastwork that it occurred to him that the volleys might have been intended to draw him away from the tunnel. So he spared only a limited glance over the rocks, for the bullets were winging so close that he dared not lift his head high. He did not see the man on the rope cover the last few feet in a scrambling rush, and haul himself over the rim, unslinging his rifle as he did so.

Laramie turned and headed back for the ledge whence he could see the opening. And as he did so, he brought himself into full view of the outlaw who was standing upright on the rim, by the stunted tree.

The whip-like crack of his Winchester reached Laramie an instant after he felt a numbing impact in his left shoulder. The shock of the blow knocked him off his feet, and his head hit hard against a rock. Even as he fell he heard the crashing of brush down the trail, and his last, hopeless thought was that Rawley and Harrison were returning. Then the impact of his head against the rock knocked all thought into a stunned blank.

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<code> CHAPTER VIII

Boot-Hill Talk

An outlaw came scrambling out of the tunnel with desperate haste, followed by another and another. One crouched, rifle in hand, glaring up at the wall, while the others tore away the smaller stones, and aided by those inside, rolled the boulder out of the entrance. Three men ran out of the tunnel and joined them.

Their firing roused Buck Laramie. He blinked and glared, then oriented himself. He saw five riders sweeping toward the tunnel, and six outlaws who had rushed out while he was unconscious, falling back into it for shelter; and he recognized the leader of the newcomers as Slim Jones, Joel Waters' foreman. The old man had not failed him.

"Take cover, you fools!" Laramie yelled wildly, unheard in the din.

But the reckless punchers came straight on and ran into a blast of lead poured from the tunnel mouth into which the outlaws had disappeared. One of the waddies saved his life by a leap from the saddle as his horse fell with a bullet through its brain, and another man threw wide his arms and pitched on his head, dead before he hit the pebbles.

Then only did Slim and his wild crew swerve their horses out of line and fall back to cover. Laramie remembered the slug that had felled him, and turned to scan the canyon rim. He saw the man by the stunted tree then;^ the fellow was helping one of his companions up the same route he had taken, and evidently thought that his shot had settled Laramie, as he was making no effort at concealment. Laramie lifted his rifle and pulled the trigger — and the hammer fell with an empty click. He had no more rifle cartridges. Below him the punchers were futilely firing at the tunnel entrance, and the outlaws within were wisely holding their fire until they could see something to shoot at.

Laramie crawled along a few feet to put himself out of range of the rifleman on the rim, then shouted: "Slim! Swing wide of that trail and come up here with yore men!"

He was understood, for presently Slim and the three surviving punchers came crawling over the tangle of rocks, having necessarily abandoned their horses.

"'Bout time you was gettin' here," grunted Laramie. "Gimme some .30-30s."

A handful of cartridges were shoved into his eager fingers.

“We come as soon as we could,” said Slim. “Had to ride to the ranch to round up these snake-hunters.”

“Where’s Waters?”

“I left him in San Leon, cussin’ a blue streak because he couldn’t get nobody to listen to him. Folks got no more sense’n cattle; just as easy to stampede and as hard to git millin’ once they bust loose.”

“What about Bob Anders?”

“Doctor said he was just creased; was just fixin’ to go over there when me and Joel come into town and he had to wait and dress Joel’s leg. Hadn’t come to hisself, last time the doc was there.”

Laramie breathed a sigh of relief. At least Bob Anders was going to live, even if he hadn’t been able to name the man who shot him. Soon Judy would know the truth. Laramie snapped into action.

“Unless Waters sends us more men, we’re licked. Tunnel’s cleared and men climbin’ the cliff.”

“You’re shot!” Jones pointed to Laramie’s shirt shoulder, soaked with blood.

“Forget it!” snapped Laramie. “Well, gimme that bandanna — ” and while he knotted it into a crude bandage, he talked rapidly. “Three of you *hombres* stay here and watch that tunnel. Don’t let nobody out, d’you hear? Me and Slim are goin’ to circle around and argy with the gents climbin’ the cliffs. Come on, Slim.”

It was rough climbing, and Laramie’s shoulder burned like fire, with a dull throbbing that told him the lead was pressing near a bone. But he set his teeth and crawled over the rough rocks, keeping out of sight of the men in the canyon below, until they had reached a point beyond his tiny fort on the rim, and that much closer to the stunted tree.

They had kept below the crest and had not been sighted by the outlaws on the rim, who had been engrossed in knotting a second rope, brought up by the second man, to the end of the lariat tied to the tree. This had been dropped down the wall again, and now another outlaw was hanging to the rope and being drawn straight up the cliff like a water bucket by his two friends above.

Slim and Laramie fired almost simultaneously. Slim’s bullet burned the fingers of the man clinging to the lariat. He howled and let go the rope and fell fifteen feet to the canyon floor. Laramie winged one of the men on the cliff, but it did not affect his speed as he raced after his companion in a

flight for cover. Bullets whizzed up from the canyon as the men below spotted Laramie and his companion. They ducked back, but relentlessly piled lead after the men fleeing along the rim of the cliff.

These worthies made no attempt to make a stand. They knew the lone defender had received reinforcements and they were not stopping to learn in what force. Laramie and Slim caught fleeting glimpses of the fugitives as they headed out through the hills.

"Let 'em go," grunted Laramie. "Be no more trouble from that quarter, and I bet them rannies won't try to climb that rope no more. Come on; I hear guns talkin' back at the tunnel."

Laramie and his companion reached the punchers on the ledge in time to see three horsemen streaking it down the trail, with lead humming after them. Three more figures lay sprawled about the mouth of the tunnel.

"They busted out on horseback," grunted one of the men, kneeling and aiming after the fleeing men. "Come so fast we couldn't stop 'em all — uh."

His shot punctuated his remarks, and one of the fleeing horsemen swayed in his saddle. One of the others seemed to be wounded, as the three ducked into the trees and out of sight.

"Three more hit the trail," grunted Slim.

"Not them," predicted Laramie. "They was bound to see us — know they ain't but five of us. They won't go far; they'll be sneakin' back to pot us in the back when their pards start bustin' out again."

"No racket in the tunnel now."

"They're layin' low for a spell. Too damn risky now. They didn't have but six horses in the tunnel. They got to catch more and bring 'em to the tunnel before they can make the rush.

"They'll wait till dark, and then we can't stop 'em from gettin' their cayuses into the tunnel. We can't stop 'em from tearin' out at this end, neither, unless we got more men. Slim, climb back up on the rim and lay down behind them rocks I stacked up. Watch that rope so nobody climbs it; we got to cut that, soon's it gets dark. And don't let no horses be brought into the tunnel, if you can help it."

Slim crawled away, and a few moments later his rifle began banging, and he yelled wrathfully: "They're already at it!"

"Listen!" ejaculated Laramie suddenly.

Down the trail, out of sight among the trees sounded a thundering of hoofs, yells and shots.

The shots ceased, then after a pause, the hoofs swept on, and a crowd of men burst into view.

“Yippee!” whooped one of the punchers bounding into the air and swinging his hat. “Reinforcements, b’golly! It’s a regular army!”

“Looks like all San Leon was there!” bellowed another. “Hey, boys, don’t git in line with that tunnel mouth! Spread out along the trail — who’s them three fellers they got tied to their saddles?”

“The three snakes that broke loose from the tunnel!” yelled the third cowboy. “They scooped ‘em in as they come! Looks like everybody’s there. There’s Charlie Ross, and Jim Watkins, the mayor, and Lon Evans, Mart Rawley’s bartender — reckon he didn’t know his boss was a crook — and by golly, look who’s leadin’ ‘em!”

“*Bob Anders!*” ejaculated Laramie, staring at the pale-faced, but erect figure who, with bandaged head, rode ahead of the thirty or forty men who came clattering up the trail and swung wide through the brush to avoid the grim tunnel mouth. Anders saw him and waved his hand, and a deep yell of approbation rose from the men behind the sheriff. Laramie sighed deeply. A few hours ago these same men wanted to hang him.

Rifles were spitting from the tunnel, and the riders swung from their horses and began to take up positions on each side of the trail, as Anders took in the situation at a glance and snapped his orders. Rifles began to speak in answer to the shots of the outlaws. Laramie came clambering down the cliff to grasp Anders’ outstretched hand.

“I came to just about the time you hit town today, Laramie,” he said. “Was just tellin’ Judy it couldn’t been you that shot me, when all that hell busted loose and Judy run to help you out if she could. Time I could get my clothes on, and out-argy the doctor, and get on the streets, you was gone with these addle-heads chasin’ you. We had to wait till they give up the chase and come back, and then me and Judy and Joel Waters lit into ‘em. Time we got through talkin’ they was plumb whipped down and achin’ to take a hand in yore game.”

“I owe you all a lot, especially your sister. Where’s Rawley?” Laramie asked.

“We thought he was with us when we lit out after you,” the sheriff answered. “But when we started back we missed him.”

“Look out!” yelled Slim on the rim above them, pumping lead frantically. They’re rushin’ for the tunnel on horses! Blame it, why ain’t somebody up here with me? I can’t stop ‘em all — “

Evidently the gang inside the canyon had been whipped to desperation by the arrival of the reinforcements, for they came thundering through the tunnel laying down a barrage of lead as they came. It was sheer madness. They ran full into a blast of lead that piled screaming horses and writhing men in a red shambles. The survivors staggered back into the tunnel.

Struck by a sudden thought, Laramie groped among the bushes and hauled out the guard, Braxton, still bound and gagged. The fellow was conscious and glared balefully at his captor. Laramie tore the gag off, and demanded: “Where’s Harrison and Rawley?”

“Rawley rode for San Leon after you got away from us this mornin’,” growled Braxton sullenly. “Harrison’s gone, got scared and pulled out. I dunno where he went.”

“Yo’re lyin’,” accused Laramie.

“What’d you ast me for, if you know so much?” sneered Braxton, and lapsed in stubborn, hill-country silence, which Laramie knew nothing would break, so long as the man chose to hold his tongue.

“You mean Harrison’s in on this, Buck?” the sheriff exclaimed. “Joel told me about Rawley.”

“In on it?” Laramie laughed grimly. “Harrison is the kingpin, and Rawley is his chief sidewinder, I ain’t seen neither Harrison nor Rawley since I got here. Be just like them rats to double-cross their own men, and run off with the loot they’ve already got.

“But we still got this nest to clean out, and here’s my idea. Them that’s still alive in the canyon are denned up in or near the tunnel. Nobody nigh the cabin. If four or five of us can hole up in there, we’ll have ‘em from both sides. We’ll tie some lariats together, and some of us will go down the walls and get in the cabin. We’ll scatter men along the rim to see none of ‘em climb out, and we’ll leave plenty men here to hold the tunnel if they try that again — which they will, as soon as it begins to get dark, if we don’t scuttle ‘em first.”

“You ought a been a general, cowboy. Me and Slim and a couple of my Bar X boys’ll go for the cabin. You better stay here; yore shoulder ain’t fit for tight-rope work and such.”

“She’s my hand,” growled Laramie. “I started dealin’ her and I aim to set in till the last pot’s raked in.”

“Yo’re the dealer,” acquiesced Anders. “Let’s go.”

Ten minutes later found the party of five clustered on the canyon rim. The sun had not yet set beyond the peaks, but the canyon below was in shadow. The spot Laramie had chosen for descent was some distance beyond the stunted tree. The rim there was higher, the wall even more precipitous. It had the advantage, however, of an outjut of rock that would partially serve to mask the descent of a man on a lariat from the view of the men lurking about the head of the canyon.

If anyone saw the descent of the five invaders, there was no sign to show they had been discovered. Man after man they slid down the dangling rope and crouched at the foot, Winchesters ready. Laramie came last, clinging with one hand and gritting his teeth against the pain of his wounded shoulder. Then began the advance on the cabin.

That slow, tortuous crawl across the canyon floor seemed endless. Laramie counted the seconds, fearful that they would be seen, fearful that night would shut down before they were forted. The western rim of the canyon seemed crested with golden fire, contrasting with the blue shadows floating beneath it. He sighed gustily as they reached their goal, with still enough light for their purpose.

The cabin doors were shut, the windows closely shuttered.

“Let’s go!” Anders had one hand on the door, drawn Colt in the other.

“Wait,” grunted Laramie. “I stuck my head into a loop here once already today. You all stay here while I take a *pasear* around to the back and look things over from that side. Don’t go in till you hear me holler.”

Then Laramie was sneaking around the cabin, Indian-fashion, gun in hand. He was little more than half the distance to the back when he was paralyzed to hear a voice inside the cabin call out: “All clear!”

Before he could move or shout a warning, he heard Anders answer: “Comin’, Buck!” Then the front door slammed, and there was the sound of a sliding bolt, a yell of dismay from the Bar X men. With sick fury Laramie realized that somebody lurking inside the cabin had heard him giving his instructions and imitated his voice to trick the sheriff into entering. Confirmation came instantly, in a familiar voice — the voice of Ely Harrison!

“Now we can make terms, gentlemen!” shouted the banker, his voice rasping with ferocious exultation. “We’ve got your sheriff in a wolf-trap with hot lead teeth! You can give us road-belts to Mexico, or he’ll be deader than hell in three minutes!”

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<code> CHAPTER IX

Killer Unmasked

Laramie was charging for the rear of the house before the triumphant shout ended. Anders would never agree to buying freedom for that gang to save his own life; and Laramie knew that whatever truce might be agreed upon, Harrison would never let the sheriff live.

The same thought motivated the savage attack of Slim Jones and the Bar X men on the front door; but that door happened to be of unusual strength. Nothing short of a log battering ram could smash it. The rear door was of ordinary thin paneling.

Bracing his good right shoulder to the shock, Laramie rammed his full charging weight against the rear door. It crashed inward and he catapulted into the room gun-first.

He had a fleeting glimpse of a swarthy Mexican wheeling from the doorway that led into the main room, and then he ducked and jerked the trigger as a knife sang past his head. The roar of the .45 shook the narrow room and the knife thrower hit the planks and lay twitching.

With a lunging stride Laramie was through the door, into the main room. He caught a glimpse of men standing momentarily frozen, glaring up from their work of tying Bob Anders to a chair — Ely Harrison, another Mexican, and Mart Rawley.

For an infinitesimal tick of time the scene held — then blurred with gun-smoke as the .45s roared death across the narrow confines. Hot lead was a coal of hell burning its way through the flesh of Laramie’s already wounded shoulder. Bob Anders lurched out of the chair, rolling clumsily toward the wall. The room was a mad welter of sound and smoke in the last light of gathering dusk.

Laramie half rolled behind the partial cover of a cast iron stove, drawing his second gun. The Mexican fled to the bunkroom, howling, his broken left arm flopping. Mart Rawley backed after him at a stumbling run, shooting as he went; crouched inside the door he glared, awaiting his chance. But Harrison, already badly wounded, had gone berserk. Disdaining cover, or

touched with madness, he came storming across the room, shooting as he came, spattering blood at every step. His eyes flamed through the drifting fog of smoke like those of a rabid wolf.

Laramie raised himself to his full height and faced him. Searing lead whined past his ear, jerked at his shirt, stung his thigh; but his own gun was burning red and Harrison was swaying in his stride like a bull which feels the matador's steel. His last shot flamed almost in Laramie's face, and then at close range a bullet split the cold heart of the devil of San Leon, and the greed and ambitions of Ely Harrison were over.

Laramie, with one loaded cartridge left in his last gun, leaned back against the wall, out of range of the bunk room.

"Come on out, Rawley," he called. "Harrison's dead. Yore game's played out."

The hidden gunman spat like an infuriated cat.

"No, my game ain't played out!" he yelled in a voice edged with blood-madness. "Not till I've wiped you out, you mangy stray. But before I kill you, I want you to know that you ain't the first Laramie I've sent to hell! I'd of thought you'd knowed me, in spite of these whiskers. I'm Rawlins, you fool! Killer Rawlins, that plugged yore horse-thief brother Luke in Santa Maria!"

"Rawlins!" snarled Laramie, suddenly white. "No wonder you knowed me!"

"Yes, Rawlins!" howled the gunman. "I'm the one that made friends with Luke Laramie and got him drunk till he told me all about this hideout and the trails across the desert. Then I picked a fight with Luke when he was too drunk to stand, and killed him to keep his mouth shut! And what you goin' to do about it?"

"I'm going to kill you, you hell-buzzard!" gritted Laramie, lurching away from the wall as Rawlins came frothing through the door, with both guns blazing. Laramie fired once from the hip. His last bullet ripped through Killer Rawlins' warped brain. Laramie looked down on him as he died, with his spurred heels drumming a death-march on the floor.

Frantic feet behind him brought him around to see a livid, swarthy face convulsed with fear and hate, a brown arm lifting a razor-edged knife. He had forgotten the Mexican. He threw up his empty pistol to guard the downward sweep of the sharp blade, then once more the blast of a six-gun shook the room. Jose Martinez of Chihuahua lifted one scream of

invocation and blasphemy at some forgotten Aztec god, as his soul went speeding its way to hell.

Laramie turned and stared stupidly through the smoke-blurred dusk at a tall, slim figure holding a smoking gun. Others were pouring in through the kitchen. So brief had been the desperate fight that the men who had raced around the house at the first bellow of the guns, had just reached the scene. Laramie shook his head dazedly.

"Slim!" he muttered. "See if Bob's hurt!"

"Not me!" The sheriff answered for himself, struggling up to a sitting posture by the wall. "I fell outa the chair and rolled outa line when the lead started singin'. Cut me loose, somebody."

"Cut him loose, Slim," mumbled Laramie. "I'm kinda dizzy."

Stark silence followed the roar of the six-guns, silence that hurt Buck Laramie's ear-drums. Like a man in a daze he staggered to a chair and sank down heavily upon it. Scarcely knowing what he did he found himself muttering the words of a song he hated:

"When the folks heard that Brady was dead,

They all turned out, all dressed in red;

Marched down the street a-singin' a song:

'Brady's gone to hell with his Stetson on!'"

He was hardly aware when Bob Anders came and cut his blood-soaked shirt away and washed his wounds, dressing them as best he could with strips torn from his own shirt, and whisky from a jug found on the table. The bite of the alcohol roused Laramie from the daze that enveloped him, and a deep swig of the same medicine cleared his dizzy head.

Laramie rose stiffly; he glanced about at the dead men staring glassily in the lamplight, shuddered, and retched suddenly at the reek of the blood that blackened the planks.

"Let's get out in the open!"

As they emerged into the cool dusk, they were aware that the shooting had ceased. A voice was bawling loudly at the head of the canyon, though the distance made the words unintelligible.

Slim came running back through the dusk.

"They're makin' a parley, Bob!" he reported. "They want to know if they'll be give a fair trial if they surrender."

"I'll talk to 'em. Rest of you keep under cover."

The sheriff worked toward the head of the canyon until he was within earshot of the men in and about the tunnel, and shouted: "Are you *hombres* ready to give in?"

"What's yore terms?" bawled back the spokesman, recognizing the sheriff's voice.

"I ain't makin' terms. You'll all get a fair trial in an honest court. You better make up yore minds. I know they ain't a lot of you left. Harrison's dead and so is Rawley. I got forty men outside this canyon and enough inside, behind you, to wipe you out. Throw yore guns out here where I can see 'em, and come out with yore hands high. I'll give you till I count ten."

And as he began to count, rifles and pistols began clattering on the bare earth, and haggard, bloodstained, powder-blackened men rose from behind rocks with their hands in the air, and came out of the tunnel in the same manner.

"We quits," announced the spokesman. "Four of the boys are laying back amongst the rocks too shot up to move under their own power. One's got a broke laig where his horse fell on him. Some of the rest of us need to have wounds dressed."

Laramie and Slim and the punchers came out of cover, with guns trained on the weary outlaws, and at a shout from Anders, the men outside came streaming through the tunnel, whooping vengefully.

"No mob-stuff," warned Anders, as the men grabbed the prisoners and bound their hands, none too gently. "Get those four wounded men out of the rocks, and we'll see what we can do for them."

Presently, a curious parade came filing through the tunnel into the outer valley where twilight still lingered. And as Laramie emerged from that dark tunnel, he felt as if his dark and sinister past had fallen from him like a worn-out coat.

One of the four wounded men who had been brought through the tunnel on crude stretchers rigged out of rifles and coats was in a talkative mood. Fear and the pain of his wound had broken his nerve entirely and he was overflowing with information.

"I'll tell you anything you want to know! Put in a good word for me at my trial, and I'll spill the works!" he declaimed, ignoring the sullen glares of his hardier companions.

"How did Harrison get mixed up in this deal?" demanded the sheriff.

“Mixed, hell! He planned the whole thing. He was cashier in the bank when the Laramies robbed it; the real ones, I mean. If it hadn’t been for that robbery, old Brown would soon found out that Harrison was stealin’ from him. But the Laramies killed Brown and give Harrison a chance to cover his tracks. They got blamed for the dough he’d stole, as well as the money they’d actually taken.

“That give Harrison an idee how to be king of San Leon. The Laramies had acted as scapegoats for him once, and he aimed to use ‘em again. But he had to wait till he could get to be president of the bank, and had taken time to round up a gang.”

“So he’d ruin the ranchers, give mortgages and finally get their outfits, and then send his coyotes outa the country and be king of San Leon,” broke in Laramie. “We know that part of it. Where’d Rawlins come in?”

“Harrison knowed him years ago, on the Rio Grande. When Harrison aimed to raise his gang, he went to Mexico and found Rawlins. Harrison knowed the real Laramies had a secret hideout, so Rawlins made friends with Luke Laramie, and — “

“We know all about that,” interrupted Anders with a quick glance at Buck.

“Yeah? Well, everything was *bueno* till word come from Mexico that Buck Laramie was ridin’ up from there. Harrison got skittish. He thought Laramie was comin’ to take toll for his brother. So he sent Rawlins to waylay Laramie. Rawlins missed, but later went on to San Leon to try again. He shot you instead, Anders. Word was out to get you, anyway. You’d been prowlin’ too close to our hideout to suit Harrison.

“Harrison seemed to kinda go locoed when first he heard Laramie was headin’ this way. He made us pull that fool stunt of a fake bank hold-up to pull wool over folks’s eyes more’n ever. Hell, nobody suspected him anyway. Then he risked comin’ out here. But he was panicky and wanted us to git ready to make a clean sweep tonight and pull out. When Laramie got away from us this mornin’, Harrison decided he’d ride to Mexico with us.

“Well, when the fightin’ had started, Harrison and Rawley stayed out a sight. Nothin’ they could do, and they hoped we’d be able to break out of the canyon. They didn’t want to be seen and recognized. If it should turn out Laramie hadn’t told anybody he was head of the gang, Harrison would be able to stay on, then.”

Preparations were being made to start back to San Leon with the prisoners, when a sheepish looking delegation headed by Mayor Jim Watkins approached Laramie. Watkins hummed and hawed with embarrassment, and finally blurted out, with typical Western bluntness:

“Look here, Laramie, we owe you somethin’ now, and we’re just as hot too pay our debts as you are to pay yours. Harrison had a small ranch out a ways from town, which he ain’t needin’ no more, and he ain’t got no heirs, so we can get it easy enough. We thought if you was aimin’, maybe, to stay around San Leon, we’d like powerful well to make you a present of that ranch, and kinda help you get a start in the cow business. And we don’t want the fifty thousand Waters said you aimed to give us. You’ve wiped out that debt.”

A curious moroseness had settled over Laramie, a futile feeling of anticlimax, and a bitter yearning he did not understand. He felt old and weary, a desire to be alone, and an urge to ride away over the rim of the world and forget — he did not even realize what it was he wanted to forget.

“Thanks,” he muttered. “I’m paying that fifty thousand back to the men it belonged to. And I’ll be movin’ on tomorrow.”

“Where to?”

He made a helpless, uncertain gesture.

“You think it over,” urged Watkins, turning away. Men were already mounting, moving down the trail. Anders touched Laramie’s sleeve.

“Let’s go. Buck. You need some attention on them wounds.”

“Go ahead. Bob. I’ll be along. I wanta kind set here and rest.”

Anders glanced sharply at him and then made a hidden gesture to Slim Jones, and turned away. The cavalcade moved down the trail in the growing darkness, armed men riding toward a new era of peace and prosperity; gaunt, haggard bound men riding toward the penitentiary and the gallows.

Laramie sat motionless, his empty hands hanging limp on his knees. A vital chapter in his life had closed, leaving him without a goal. He had kept his vow. Now he had no plan or purpose to take its place.

Slim Jones, standing nearby, not understanding Laramie’s mood, but not intruding on it, started to speak. Then both men lifted their heads at the unexpected rumble of wheels.

“A buckboard!” ejaculated Slim.

“No buckboard ever come up that trail,” snorted Laramie.

“One’s comin’ now; and who d’you think? Old Joel, by golly. And look who’s drivin’!”

Laramie’s heart gave a convulsive leap and then started pounding as he saw the slim supple figure beside the old rancher. She pulled up near them and handed the lines to Slim, who sprang to help her down.

“Biggest fight ever fit in San Leon County!” roared Waters, “and I didn’t git to fire a shot. Cuss a busted laig, anyway!”

“You done a man’s part, anyway, Joel,” assured Laramie; and then he forgot Joel Waters entirely, in the miracle of seeing Judy Anders standing before him, smiling gently, her hand outstretched and the rising moon melting her soft hair to golden witch-fire.

“I’m sorry for the way I spoke to you today,” she said softly. “I’ve been bitter about things that were none of your fault.”

“D-don’t apologize, please,” he stuttered, inwardly cursing himself because of his confusion. The touch of her slim, firm hand sent shivers through his frame and he knew all at once what that empty, gnawing yearning was; the more poignant now, because so unattainable.

“You saved my neck. Nobody that does that needs to apologize. You was probably right, anyhow. Er — uh — Bob went down the trail with the others. You must have missed him.”

“I saw him and talked to him,” she said softly. “He said you were behind them. I came on, expecting to meet you.”

He was momentarily startled. “You came on to meet *me*? Oh, of course. Joel would want to see how bad shot up I was.” He achieved a ghastly excuse for a laugh.

“Mr. Waters wanted to see you, of course. But I — Buck, I wanted to see you, too.”

She was leaning close to him, looking up at him, and he was dizzy with the fragrance and beauty of her; and in his dizziness said the most inane and idiotic thing he could possibly have said.

“To see me?” he gurgled wildly. “What — what you want to see *me* for?”

She seemed to draw away from him and her voice was a bit too precise.

“I wanted to apologize for my rudeness this morning,” she said, a little distantly.

“I said don’t apologize to me,” he gasped. “You saved my life — and I — I — Judy, dang it, I love you!”

It was out — the amazing statement, blurted out involuntarily. He was frozen by his own audacity, stunned and paralyzed. But she did not seem to mind. Somehow he found she was in his arms, and numbly he heard her saying: “I love you too, Buck. I’ve loved you ever since I was a little girl, and we went to school together. Only I’ve tried to force myself not to think of you for the past six years. But I’ve loved the memory of you — that’s why it hurt me so to think that you’d gone bad — as I thought you had. That horse I brought you — it wasn’t altogether because you’d helped Bob that I brought it to you. It — it was partly because of my own feeling. Oh, Buck, to learn you’re straight and honorable is like having a black shadow lifted from between us. You’ll never leave me, Buck?”

“Leave you?” Laramie gasped. “Just long enough to find Watkins and tell him I’m takin’ him up on a proposition he made me, and then I’m aimin’ on spendin’ the rest of my life makin’ you happy.” The rest was lost in a perfectly natural sound.

“Kissin’!” beamed Joel Waters, sitting in his buckboard and gently manipulating his wounded leg. “Reckon they’ll be a marryin’ in these parts purty soon, Slim.”

“Don’t tell me yo’re figgerin’ on gittin’ hitched?” inquired Slim, pretending to misunderstand, but grinning behind his hand.

“You go light on that sarcastic tone. I’m liable to git married any day now. It’s just a matter of time till I decide what type of woman would make me the best wife.”

THE VULTURES OF WAHPETON

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<code> CHAPTER I

Guns in the Dark

The bare plank walls of the Golden Eagle Saloon seemed still to vibrate with the crashing echoes of the guns which had split the sudden darkness with spurts of red. But only a nervous shuffling of booted feet sounded in the tense silence that followed the shots. Then somewhere a match rasped on leather and a yellow flicker sprang up, etching a shaky hand and a pallid face. An instant later an oil lamp with a broken chimney illuminated the saloon, throwing tense bearded faces into bold relief. The big lamp that hung from the ceiling was a smashed ruin; kerosene dripped from it to the floor, making an oily puddle beside a grimmer, darker pool.

Two figures held the center of the room, under the broken lamp. One lay facedown, motionless arms outstretching empty hands. The other was crawling to his feet, blinking and gaping stupidly, like a man whose wits are still muddled by drink. His right arm hung limply by his side, a long-barreled pistol sagging from his fingers.

The rigid line of figures along the bar melted into movement. Men came forward, stooping to stare down at the limp shape. A confused babble of conversation rose. Hurried steps sounded outside, and the crowd divided as a man pushed his way abruptly through. Instantly he dominated the scene. His broad-shouldered, trim-hipped figure was above medium height, and his broad-brimmed white hat, neat boots and cravat contrasted with the rough garb of the others, just as his keen, dark face with its narrow black mustache contrasted with the bearded countenances about him. He held an ivory-butted gun in his right hand, muzzle tilted upward.

“What devil’s work is this?” he harshly demanded; and then his gaze fell on the man on the floor. His eyes widened.

“Grimes!” he ejaculated. “Jim Grimes, my deputy! Who did this?” There was something tigerish about him as he wheeled toward the uneasy crowd. “Who did this?” he demanded, half-crouching, his gun still lifted, but seeming to hover like a live thing ready to swoop.

Feet shuffled as men backed away, but one man spoke up: “We don’t know, Middleton. Jackson there was havin’ a little fun, shootin’ at the ceilin’, and the rest of us was at the bar, watchin’ him, when Grimes come in and started to arrest him — “

“So Jackson shot him!” snarled Middleton, his gun covering the befuddled one in a baffling blur of motion. Jackson yelped in fear and threw up his hands, and the man who had first spoken interposed.

“No, Sheriff, it couldn’t have been Jackson. His gun was empty when the lights went out. I know he slung six bullets into the ceilin’ while he was playin’ the fool, and I heard him snap the gun three times afterwards, so I know it was empty. But when Grimes went up to him, somebody shot the light out, and a gun banged in the dark, and when we got a light on again, there Grimes was on the floor, and Jackson was just gettin’ up.”

“I didn’t shoot him,” muttered Jackson. “I was just havin’ a little fun. I was drunk, but I ain’t now. I wouldn’t have resisted arrest. When the light went out I didn’t know what had happened. I heard the gun bang, and

Grimes dragged me down with him as he fell. I didn't shoot him. I dunno who did."

"None of us knows," added a bearded miner. "Somebody shot in the dark —"

"More'n one," muttered another. "I heard at least three or four guns speakin'."

Silence followed, in which each man looked sidewise at his neighbor. The men had drawn back to the bar, leaving the middle of the big room clear, where the sheriff stood. Suspicion and fear galvanized the crowd, leaping like an electric spark from man to man. Each man knew that a murderer stood near him, possibly at his elbow. Men refused to look directly into the eyes of their neighbors, fearing to surprise guilty knowledge there — and die for the discovery. They stared at the sheriff who stood facing them, as if expecting to see him fall suddenly before a blast from the same unknown guns that had mowed down his deputy.

Middleton's steely eyes ranged along the silent line of men. Their eyes avoided or gave back his stare. In some he read fear; some were inscrutable; in others flickered a sinister mockery.

"The men who killed Jim Grimes are in this saloon," he said finally. "Some of you are the murderers." He was careful not to let his eyes single out anyone when he spoke; they swept the whole assemblage.

"I've been expecting this. Things have been getting a little too hot for the robbers and murderers who have been terrorizing this camp, so they've started shooting my deputies in the back. I suppose you'll try to kill me, next. Well, I want to tell you sneaking rats, whoever you are, that I'm ready for you, any time."

He fell silent, his rangy frame tense, his eyes burning with watchful alertness. None moved. The men along the bar might have been figures cut from stone.

He relaxed and shoved his gun into its scabbard; a sneer twisted his lips.

"I know your breed. You won't shoot a man unless his back is toward you. Forty men have been murdered in the vicinity of this camp within the last year, and not one had a chance to defend himself.

"Maybe this killing is an ultimatum to me. All right; I've got an answer ready: I've got a new deputy, and you won't find him so easy as Grimes. I'm fighting fire with fire from here on. I'm riding out of the Gulch early in

the morning, and when I come back, I'll have a man with me. A gunfighter from Texas!"

He paused to let this information sink in, and laughed grimly at the furtive glances that darted from man to man.

"You'll find him no lamb," he predicted vindictively. "He was too wild for the country where gun-throwing was invented. What he did down there is none of my business. What he'll do here is what counts. And all I ask is that the men who murdered Grimes here, try that same trick on this Texan.

"Another thing, on my own account. I'm meeting this man at Ogalala Spring tomorrow morning. I'll be riding out alone, at dawn. If anybody wants to try to waylay me, let him make his plans now! I'll follow the open trail, and anyone who has any business with me will find me ready."

And turning his trimly-tailored back scornfully on the throng at the bar, the sheriff of Wahpeton strode from the saloon.

Ten miles east of Wahpeton a man squatted on his heels, frying strips of deer meat over a tiny fire. The sun was just coming up. A short distance away a rangy mustang nibbled at the wiry grass that grew sparsely between broken rocks. The man had camped there that night, but his saddle and blanket were hidden back in the bushes. That fact showed him to be a man of wary nature. No one following the trail that led past Ogalala Spring could have seen him as he slept among the bushes. Now, in full daylight, he was making no attempt to conceal his presence.

The man was tall, broad-shouldered, deep-chested, lean-hipped, like one who had spent his life in the saddle. His unruly black hair matched a face burned dark by the sun, but his eyes were a burning blue. Low on either hip the black butt of a heavy Colt jutted from a worn black leather scabbard. These guns seemed as much part of the man as his eyes or his hands. He had worn them so constantly and so long that their association was as natural as the use of his limbs.

As he fried his meat and watched his coffee boiling in a battered old pot, his gaze darted continually eastward where the trail crossed a wide open space before it vanished among the thickets of a broken hill country. Westward the trail mounted a gentle slope and quickly disappeared among trees and bushes that crowded up within a few yards of the spring. But it was always eastward that the man looked.

When a rider emerged from the thickets to the east, the man at the spring set aside the skillet with its sizzling meat strips, and picked up his

rifle — a long range Sharps .50. His eyes narrowed with satisfaction. He did not rise, but remained on one knee, the rifle resting negligently in his hands, the muzzle tilted upward, not aimed.

The rider came straight on, and the man at the spring watched him from under the brim of his hat. Only when the stranger pulled up a few yards away did the first man lift his head and give the other a full view of his face.

The horseman was a supple youth of medium height, and his hat did not conceal the fact that his hair was yellow and curly. His wide eyes were ingenuous, and an infectious smile curved his lips. There was no rifle under his knee, but an ivory-butted .45 hung low at his right hip.

His expression as he saw the other man's face gave no hint to his reaction, except for a slight, momentary contraction of the muscles that control the eyes — a movement involuntary and all but uncontrollable. Then he grinned broadly, and hailed:

"That meat smells prime, stranger!"

"Light and help me with it," invited the other instantly. "Coffee, too, if you don't mind drinkin' out of the pot."

He laid aside the rifle as the other swung from his saddle. The blond youngster threw his reins over the horse's head, fumbled in his blanket roll and drew out a battered tin cup. Holding this in his right hand he approached the fire with the rolling gait of a man born to a horse.

"I ain't et my breakfast," he admitted. "Camped down the trail a piece last night, and come on up here early to meet a man. Thought you was the *hombre* till you looked up. Kinda startled me," he added frankly. He sat down opposite the taller man, who shoved the skillet and coffee pot toward him. The tall man moved both these utensils with his left hand. His right rested lightly and apparently casually on his right thigh.

The youth filled his tin cup, drank the black, unsweetened coffee with evident enjoyment, and filled the cup again. He picked out pieces of the cooling meat with his fingers — and he was careful to use only his left hand for that part of the breakfast that would leave grease on his fingers. But he used his right hand for pouring coffee and holding the cup to his lips. He did not seem to notice the position of the other's right hand.

"Name's Glanton," he confided. "Billy Glanton. Texas. Guadalupe country. Went up the trail with a herd of mossy horns, went broke buckin' faro in Hayes City, and headed west lookin' for gold. Hell of a prospector I

turned out to be! Now I'm lookin' for a job, and the man I was goin' to meet here said he had one for me. If I read your marks right you're a Texan, too?"

The last sentence was more a statement than a question.

"That's my brand," grunted the other. "Name's O'Donnell. Pecos River country, originally."

His statement, like that of Glanton's, was indefinite. Both the Pecos and the Guadalupe cover considerable areas of territory. But Glanton grinned boyishly and stuck out his hand.

"Shake!" he cried. "I'm glad to meet an *hombre* from my home state, even if our stampin' grounds down there are a right smart piece apart!"

Their hands met and locked briefly — brown, sinewy hands that had never worn gloves, and that gripped with the abrupt tension of steel springs.

The handshake seemed to relax O'Donnell. When he poured out another cup of coffee he held the cup in one hand and the pot in the other, instead of setting the cup on the ground beside him and pouring with his left hand.

"I've been in California," he volunteered. "Drifted back on this side of the mountains a month ago. Been in Wahpeton for the last few weeks, but gold huntin' ain't my style. I'm a *vaquero*. Never should have tried to be anything else. I'm headin' back for Texas."

"Why don't you try Kansas?" asked Glanton. "It's fillin' up with Texas men, bringin' cattle up the trail to stock the ranges. Within a year they'll be drivin' 'em into Wyoming and Montana."

"Maybe I might." O'Donnell lifted the coffee cup absently. He held it in his left hand, and his right lay in his lap, almost touching the big black pistol butt. But the tension was gone out of his frame. He seemed relaxed, absorbed in what Glanton was saying. The use of his left hand and the position of his right seemed mechanical, merely an unconscious habit.

"It's a great country," declared Glanton, lowering his head to conceal the momentary and uncontrollable flicker of triumph in his eyes. "Fine ranges. Towns springin' up wherever the railroad touches."

"Everybody gettin' rich on Texas beef. Talkin' about 'cattle kings'! Wish I could have knowed this beef boom was comin' when I was a kid! I'd have rounded up about fifty thousand of them maverick steers that was roamin' loose all over lower Texas, and put me a brand on 'em, and saved 'em for the market!" He laughed at his own conceit.

“They wasn’t worth six bits a head then,” he added, as men in making small talk will state a fact well known to everyone. “Now twenty dollars a head ain’t the top price.”

He emptied his cup and set it on the ground near his right hip. His easy flow of speech flowed on — but the natural movement of his hand away from the cup turned into a blur of speed that flicked the heavy gun from its scabbard.

Two shots roared like one long stuttering detonation.

The blond newcomer slumped sidewise, his smoking gun falling from his fingers, a widening spot of crimson suddenly dyeing his shirt, his wide eyes fixed in sardonic self-mockery on the gun in O’Donnell’s right hand.

“Corcoran!” he muttered. “I thought I had you fooled — you — “

Self-mocking laughter bubbled to his lips, cynical to the last; he was laughing as he died.

The man whose real name was Corcoran rose and looked down at his victim unemotionally. There was a hole in the side of his shirt, and a seared spot on the skin of his ribs burned like fire. Even with his aim spoiled by ripping lead, Glanton’s bullet had passed close.

Reloading the empty chamber of his Colt, Corcoran started toward the horse the dead man had ridden up to the spring. He had taken but one step when a sound brought him around, the heavy Colt jumping back into his hand.

He scowled at the man who stood before him: a tall man, trimly built, and clad in frontier elegance.

“Don’t shoot,” this man said imperturbably. “I’m John Middleton, sheriff of Wahpeton Gulch.”

The warning attitude of the other did not relax.

“This was a private matter,” he said.

“I guessed as much. Anyway, it’s none of my business. I saw two men at the spring as I rode over a rise in the trail some distance back. I was only expecting one. I can’t afford to take any chance. I left my horse a short distance back and came on afoot. I was watching from the bushes and saw the whole thing. He reached for his gun first, but you already had your hand almost on your gun. Your shot was first by a flicker. He fooled me. His move came as an absolute surprise to me.”

“He thought it would to me,” said Corcoran. “Billy Glanton always wanted the drop on his man. He always tried to get some advantage before

he pulled his gun.

“He knew me as soon as he saw me; knew that I knew him. But he thought he was making me think that he didn’t know me. I made him think that. He could take chances because he knew I wouldn’t shoot him down without warnin’ — which is just what he figured on doin’ to me. Finally he thought he had me off my guard, and went for his gun. I was foolin’ him all along.”

Middleton looked at Corcoran with much interest. He was familiar with the two opposite breeds of gunmen. One kind was like Glanton; utterly cynical, courageous enough when courage was necessary, but always preferring to gain an advantage by treachery whenever possible. Corcoran typified the opposite breed; men too direct by nature, or too proud of their skill to resort to trickery when it was possible to meet their enemies in the open and rely on sheer speed and nerve and accuracy. But that Corcoran was a strategist was proved by his tricking Glanton into drawing.

Middleton looked down at Glanton; in death the yellow curls and boyish features gave the youthful gunman an appearance of innocence. But Middleton knew that that mask had covered the heart of a merciless grey wolf.

“A bad man!” he muttered, staring at the rows of niches on the ivory stock of Glanton’s Colt.

“Plenty bad,” agreed Corcoran. “My folks and his had a feud between ‘em down in Texas. He came back from Kansas and killed an uncle of mine — shot him down in cold blood. I was in California when it happened. Got a letter a year after the feud was over. I was headin’ for Kansas, where I figured he’d gone back to, when I met a man who told me he was in this part of the country, and was ridin’ towards Wahpeton. I cut his trail and camped here last night waitin’ for him.

“It’d been years since we’d seen each other, but he knew me — didn’t know I knew he knew me, though. That gave me the edge. You’re the man he was goin’ to meet here?”

“Yes. I need a gunfighting deputy bad. I’d heard of him. Sent him word.”

Middleton’s gaze wandered over Corcoran’s hard frame, lingering on the guns at his hips.

“You pack two irons,” remarked the sheriff. “I know what you can do with your right. But what about the left? I’ve seen plenty of men who wore

two guns, but those who could use both I can count on my fingers.”

“Well?”

“Well,” smiled the sheriff, “I thought maybe you’d like to show what you can do with your left.”

“Why do you think it makes any difference to me whether you believe I can handle both guns or not?” retorted Corcoran without heat.

Middleton seemed to like the reply.

“A tinhorn would be anxious to make me believe he could. You don’t have to prove anything to me. I’ve seen enough to show me that you’re the man I need. Corcoran, I came out here to hire Glanton as my deputy. I’ll make the same proposition to you. What you were down in Texas, or out in California, makes no difference to me. I know your breed, and I know that you’ll shoot square with a man who trusts you, regardless of what you may have been in other parts, or will be again, somewhere else.

“I’m up against a situation in Wahpeton that I can’t cope with alone, or with the forces I have.

“For a year the town and the camps up and down the gulch have been terrorized by a gang of outlaws who call themselves the Vultures.

“That describes them perfectly. No man’s life or property is safe. Forty or fifty men have been murdered, hundreds robbed. It’s next to impossible for a man to pack out any dust, or for a big shipment of gold to get through on the stage. So many men have been shot trying to protect shipments that the stage company has trouble hiring guards any more.

“Nobody knows who are the leaders of the gang. There are a number of ruffians who are suspected of being members of the Vultures, but we have no proof that would stand up, even in a miners’ court. Nobody dares give evidence against any of them. When a man recognizes the men who rob him he doesn’t dare reveal his knowledge. I can’t get anyone to identify a criminal, though I know that robbers and murderers are walking the streets, and rubbing elbows with me along the bars. It’s maddening! And yet I can’t blame the poor devils. Any man who dared testify against one of them would be murdered.

“People blame me some, but I can’t give adequate protection to the camp with the resources allowed me. You know how a gold camp is; everybody so greedy-blind they don’t want to do anything but grab for the yellow dust. My deputies are brave men, but they can’t be everywhere, and they’re not gunfighters. If I arrest a man there are a dozen to stand up in a

miners' court and swear enough lies to acquit him. Only last night they murdered one of my deputies, Jim Grimes, in cold blood.

"I sent for Billy Glanton when I heard he was in this country, because I need a man of more than usual skill. I need a man who can handle a gun like a streak of forked lightning, and knows all the tricks of trapping and killing a man. I'm tired of arresting criminals to be turned loose! Wild Bill Hickok has the right idea — kill the badmen and save the jails for the petty offenders!"

The Texan scowled slightly at the mention of Hickok, who was not loved by the riders who came up the cattle trails, but he nodded agreement with the sentiment expressed. The fact that he, himself, would fall into Hickok's category of those to be exterminated did not prejudice his viewpoint.

"You're a better man than Glanton," said Middleton abruptly. "The proof is that Glanton lies there dead, and here you stand very much alive. I'll offer you the same terms I meant to offer him."

He named a monthly salary considerably larger than that drawn by the average Eastern city marshal. Gold was the most plentiful commodity in Wahpeton.

"And a monthly bonus," added Middleton. "When I hire talent I expect to pay for it; so do the merchants and miners who look to me for protection."

Corcoran meditated a moment.

"No use in me goin' on to Kansas now," he said finally. "None of my folks in Texas are havin' any feud that I know of. I'd like to see this Wahpeton. I'll take you up."

"Good!" Middleton extended his hand and as Corcoran took it he noticed that it was much browner than the left. No glove had covered that hand for many years.

"Let's get it started right away! But first we'll have to dispose of Glanton's body."

"I'll take along his gun and horse and send 'em to Texas to his folks," said Corcoran.

"But the body?"

"Hell, the buzzards'll 'tend to it."

"No, no!" protested Middleton. "Let's cover it with bushes and rocks, at least."

Corcoran shrugged his shoulders. It was not vindictiveness which prompted his seeming callousness. His hatred of the blond youth did not extend to the lifeless body of the man. It was simply that he saw no use in going to what seemed to him an unnecessary task. He had hated Glanton with the merciless hate of his race, which is more enduring and more relentless than the hate of an Indian or a Spaniard. But toward the body that was no longer animated by the personality he had hated, he was simply indifferent. He expected some day to leave his own corpse stretched on the ground, and the thought of buzzards tearing at his dead flesh moved him no more than the sight of his dead enemy. His creed was pagan and nakedly elemental.

A man's body, once life had left it, was no more than any other carcass, moldering back into the soil which once produced it.

But he helped Middleton drag the body into an opening among the bushes, and build a rude cairn above it. And he waited patiently while Middleton carved the dead youth's name on a rude cross fashioned from broken branches, and thrust upright among the stones.

Then they rode for Wahpeton, Corcoran leading the riderless roan; over the horn of the empty saddle hung the belt supporting the dead man's gun, the ivory stock of which bore eleven notches, each of which represented a man's life.

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<code> CHAPTER 2

Golden Madness

The mining town of Wahpeton sprawled in a wide gulch that wandered between sheer rock walls and steep hillsides. Cabins, saloons and dance-halls backed against the cliffs on the south side of the gulch. The houses facing them were almost on the bank of Wahpeton Creek, which wandered down the gulch, keeping mostly to the center. On both sides of the creek cabins and tents straggled for a mile and a half each way from the main body of the town. Men were washing gold dust out of the creek, and out of its smaller tributaries which meandered into the canyon along tortuous ravines. Some of these ravines opened into the gulch between the houses built against the wall, and the cabins and tents which straggled up them gave the impression that the town had overflowed the main gulch and spilled into its tributaries.

Buildings were of logs, or of bare planks laboriously freighted over the mountains. Squalor and dragged or gaudy elegance rubbed elbows. An intense virility surged through the scene. What other qualities it might have lacked, it overflowed with a superabundance of vitality. Color, action, movement — growth and power! The atmosphere was alive with these elements, stinging and tingling. Here there were no delicate shadings or subtle contrasts. Life painted here in broad, raw colors, in bold, vivid strokes. Men who came here left behind them the delicate nuances, the cultured tranquilities of life. An empire was being built on muscle and guts and audacity, and men dreamed gigantically and wrought terrifically. No dream was too mad, no enterprise too tremendous to be accomplished.

Passions ran raw and turbulent. Boot heels stamped on bare plank floors, in the eddying dust of the street. Voices boomed, tempers exploded in sudden outbursts of primitive violence. Shrill voices of painted harpies mingled with the clank of gold on gambling tables, gusty mirth and vociferous altercation along the bars where raw liquor hissed in a steady stream down hairy, dust-caked throats. It was one of a thousand similar panoramas of the day, when a giant empire was bellowing in lusty infancy.

But a sinister undercurrent was apparent. Corcoran, riding by the sheriff, was aware of this, his senses and intuitions whetted to razor keenness by the life he led. The instincts of a gunfighter were developed to an abnormal alertness, else he had never lived out his first year of gunmanship. But it took no abnormally developed instinct to tell Corcoran that hidden currents ran here, darkly and strongly.

As they threaded their way among trains of pack-mules, rumbling wagons and swarms of men on foot which thronged the straggling street, Corcoran was aware of many eyes following them. Talk ceased suddenly among gesticulating groups as they recognized the sheriff, then the eyes swung to Corcoran, searching and appraising. He did not seem to be aware of their scrutiny.

Middleton murmured: "They know I'm bringing back a gunfighting deputy. Some of those fellows are Vultures, though I can't prove it. Look out for yourself."

Corcoran considered this advice too unnecessary to merit a reply. They were riding past the King of Diamonds gambling hall at the moment, and a group of men clustered in the doorway turned to stare at them. One lifted a hand in greeting to the sheriff.

"Ace Brent, the biggest gambler in the gulch," murmured Middleton as he returned the salute. Corcoran got a glimpse of a slim figure in elegant broadcloth, a keen, inscrutable countenance, and a pair of piercing black eyes.

Middleton did not enlarge upon his description of the man, but rode on in silence.

They traversed the body of the town — the clusters of stores and saloons — and passed on, halting at a cabin apart from the rest. Between it and the town the creek swung out in a wide loop that carried it some distance from the south wall of the gulch, and the cabins and tents straggled after the creek. That left this particular cabin isolated, for it was built with

its back wall squarely against the sheer cliff. There was a corral on one side, a clump of trees on the other. Beyond the trees a narrow ravine opened into the gulch, dry and unoccupied.

"This is my cabin," said Middleton. "That cabin back there" — he pointed to one which they had passed, a few hundred yards back up the road — "I use for a sheriff's office. I need only one room. You can bunk in the back room. You can keep your horse in my corral, if you want to. I always keep several there for my deputies. It pays to have a fresh supply of horseflesh always on hand."

As Corcoran dismounted he glanced back at the cabin he was to occupy. It stood close to a clump of trees, perhaps a hundred yards from the steep wall of the gulch.

There were four men at the sheriff's cabin, one of which Middleton introduced to Corcoran as Colonel Hopkins, formerly of Tennessee. He was a tall, portly man with an iron grey mustache and goatee, as well dressed as Middleton himself.

"Colonel Hopkins owns the rich Elinor A. claim, in partnership with Dick Bisle," said Middleton; "in addition to being one of the most prominent merchants in the Gulch."

"A great deal of good either occupation does me, when I can't get my money out of town," retorted the colonel. "Three times my partner and I have lost big shipments of gold on the stage. Once we sent out a load concealed in wagons loaded with supplies supposed to be intended for the miners at Teton Gulch. Once clear of Wahpeton the drivers were to swing back east through the mountains. But somehow the Vultures learned of our plan; they caught the wagons fifteen miles south of Wahpeton, looted them and murdered the guards and drivers."

"The town's honeycombed with their spies," muttered Middleton.

"Of course. One doesn't know who to trust. It was being whispered in the streets that my men had been killed and robbed, before their bodies had been found. We know that the Vultures knew all about our plan, that they rode straight out from Wahpeton, committed that crime and rode straight back with the gold dust. But we could do nothing. We can't prove anything, or convict anybody."

Middleton introduced Corcoran to the three deputies, Bill McNab, Richardson, and Stark. McNab was as tall as Corcoran and more heavily built, hairy and muscular, with restless eyes that reflected a violent temper.

Richardson was more slender, with cold, unblinking eyes, and Corcoran instantly classified him as the most dangerous of the three. Stark was a burly, bearded fellow, not differing in type from hundreds of miners. Corcoran found the appearances of these men incongruous with their protestations of helplessness in the face of the odds against them. They looked like hard men, well able to take care of themselves in any situation.

Middleton, as if sensing his thoughts, said: "These men are not afraid of the devil, and they can throw a gun as quick as the average man, or quicker. But it's hard for a stranger to appreciate just what we're up against here in Wahpeton. If it was a matter of an open fight, it would be different. I wouldn't need any more help. But it's blind going, working in the dark, not knowing who to trust. I don't dare to depute a man unless I'm sure of his honesty. And who can be sure of who? We know the town is full of spies. We don't know who they are; we don't know who the leader of the Vultures is."

Hopkins' bearded chin jutted stubbornly as he said: "I still believe that gambler, Ace Brent, is mixed up with the gang. Gamblers have been murdered and robbed, but Brent's never been molested. What becomes of all the dust he wins? Many of the miners, despairing of ever getting out of the gulch with their gold, blow it all in the saloons and gambling halls. Brent's won thousands of dollars in dust and nuggets. So have several others. What becomes of it? It doesn't all go back into circulation. I believe they get it out, over the mountains. And if they do, when no one else can, that proves to my mind that they're members of the Vultures."

"Maybe they cache it, like you and the other merchants are doing," suggested Middleton. "I don't know. Brent's intelligent enough to be the chief of the Vultures. But I've never been able to get anything on him."

"You've never been able to get anything definite on anybody, except petty offenders," said Colonel Hopkins bluntly, as he took up his hat. "No offense intended, John. We know what you're up against, and we can't blame you. But it looks like, for the good of the camp, we're going to have to take direct action."

Middleton stared after the broadcloth-clad back as it receded from the cabin.

"We," he murmured. "That means the vigilantes — or rather the men who have been agitating a vigilante movement. I can understand their feelings, but I consider it an unwise move. In the first place, such an

organization is itself outside the law, and would be playing into the hands of the lawless element. Then, what's to prevent outlaws from joining the vigilantes, and diverting it to suit their own ends?"

"Not a damned thing!" broke in McNab heatedly. "Colonel Hopkins and his friends are hotheaded. They expect too much from us. Hell, we're just ordinary workin' men. We do the best we can, but we ain't gunslingers like this man Corcoran here."

Corcoran found himself mentally questioning the whole truth of this statement; Richardson had all the earmarks of a gunman, if he had ever seen one, and the Texan's experience in such matters ranged from the Pacific to the Gulf.

Middleton picked up his hat. "You boys scatter out through the camp. I'm going to take Corcoran around, when I've sworn him in and given him his badge, and introduce him to the leading men of the camp.

"I don't want any mistake, or any chance of mistake, about his standing. I've put you in a tight spot, Corcoran, I'll admit — boasting about the gunfighting deputy I was going to get. But I'm confident that you can take care of yourself."

The eyes that had followed their ride down the street focused on the sheriff and his companion as they made their way on foot along the straggling street with its teeming saloons and gambling halls. Gamblers and bartenders were swamped with business, and merchants were getting rich with all commodities selling at unheard-of prices. Wages for day-labor matched prices for groceries, for few men could be found to toil for a prosaic, set salary when their eyes were dazzled by visions of creeks fat with yellow dust and gorges crammed with nuggets. Some of those dreams were not disappointed; millions of dollars in virgin gold was being taken out of the claims up and down the gulch. But the finders frequently found it a golden weight hung to their necks to drag them down to a bloody death. Unseen, unknown, on furtive feet the human wolves stole among them, unerringly marking their prey and striking in the dark.

From saloon to saloon, dance hall to dance hall, where weary girls in tawdry finery allowed themselves to be tussled and hauled about by bear-like males who emptied sacks of gold dust down the low necks of their dresses, Middleton piloted Corcoran, talking rapidly and incessantly. He pointed out men in the crowd and gave their names and status in the

community, and introduced the Texan to the more important citizens of the camp.

All eyes followed Corcoran curiously. The day was still in the future when the northern ranges would be flooded by Texas cattle, driven by wiry Texas riders; but Texans were not unknown, even then, in the mining camps of the Northwest. In the first days of the gold rushes they had drifted in from the camps of California, to which, at a still earlier date, the Southwest had sent some of her staunchest and some of her most turbulent sons. And of late others had drifted in from the Kansas cattle towns along whose streets the lean riders were swaggering and fighting out feuds brought up from the far south country. Many in Wahpeton were familiar with the characteristics of the Texas breed, and all had heard tales of the fighting men bred among the live oaks and mesquites of that hot, turbulent country where racial traits met and clashed, and the traditions of the Old South mingled with those of the untamed West.

Here, then, was a lean grey wolf from that southern pack; some of the men looked their scowling animosity; but most merely looked, in the role of spectators, eager to witness the drama all felt imminent.

"You're, primarily, to fight the Vultures, of course," Middleton told Corcoran as they walked together down the street. "But that doesn't mean you're to overlook petty offenders. A lot of small-time crooks and bullies are so emboldened by the success of the big robbers that they think they can get away with things, too. If you see a man shooting up a saloon, take his gun away and throw him into jail to sober up. That's the jail, up yonder at the other end of town. Don't let men fight on the street or in saloons. Innocent bystanders get hurt."

"All right." Corcoran saw no harm in shooting up saloons or fighting in public places. In Texas few innocent bystanders were ever hurt, for there men sent their bullets straight to the mark intended. But he was ready to follow instructions.

"So much for the smaller fry. You know what to do with the really bad men. We're not bringing any more murderers into court to be acquitted through their friends' lies!"

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<code> CHAPTER 3

Gunman's Trap

Night had fallen over the roaring madness that was Wahpeton Gulch. Light streamed from the open doors of saloons and honky-tonks, and the gusts of noise that rushed out into the street smote the passers-by like the impact of a physical blow.

Corcoran traversed the street with the smooth, easy stride of perfectly poised muscles. He seemed to be looking straight ahead, but his eyes missed nothing on either side of him. As he passed each building in turn he analyzed the sounds that issued from the open door, and knew just how much was rough merriment and horseplay, recognized the elements of anger and menace when they edged some of the voices, and accurately appraised the extent and intensity of those emotions. A real gunfighter was not merely a man whose eye was truer, whose muscles were quicker than other men; he was a practical psychologist, a student of human nature, whose life depended on the correctness of his conclusions.

It was the Golden Garter dance hall that gave him his first job as a defender of law and order.

As he passed a startling clamor burst forth inside — strident feminine shrieks piercing a din of coarse masculine hilarity. Instantly he was through the door and elbowing a way through the crowd which was clustered about the center of the room. Men cursed and turned belligerently as they felt his elbows in their ribs, twisted their heads to threaten him, and then gave back as they recognized the new deputy.

Corcoran broke through into the open space the crowd ringed, and saw two women fighting like furies. One, a tall, fine blond girl, had bent a shrieking, biting, clawing Mexican girl back over a billiard table, and the crowd was yelling joyful encouragement to one or the other: "Give it to her, Glory!" "Slug her, gal!" "Hell, Conchita, bite her!"

The brown girl heeded this last bit of advice and followed it so energetically that Glory cried out sharply and jerked away her wrist, which dripped blood. In the grip of the hysterical frenzy which seizes women in such moments, she caught up a billiard ball and lifted it to crash it down on the head of her screaming captive.

Corcoran caught that uplifted wrist, and deftly flicked the ivory sphere from her fingers. Instantly she whirled on him like a tigress, her yellow hair falling in disorder over her shoulders, bared by the violence of the struggle, her eyes blazing. She lifted her hands toward his face, her fingers working

spasmodically, at which some drunk bawled, with a shout of laughter: "Scratch his eyes out, Glory!"

Corcoran made no move to defend his features; he did not seem to see the white fingers twitching so near his face. He was staring into her furious face, and the candid admiration of his gaze seemed to confuse her, even in her anger. She dropped her hands but fell back on woman's traditional weapon — her tongue.

"You're Middleton's new deputy! I might have expected you to butt in! Where are McNab and the rest? Drunk in some gutter? Is this the way you catch murderers? You lawmen are all alike — better at bullying girls than at catching outlaws!"

Corcoran stepped past her and picked up the hysterical Mexican girl. Conchita seeing that she was more frightened than hurt, scurried toward the back rooms, sobbing in rage and humiliation, and clutching about her the shreds of garments her enemy's tigerish attack had left her.

Corcoran looked again at Glory, who stood clenching and unclenching her white fists. She was still fermenting with anger, and furious at his intervention. No one in the crowd about them spoke; no one laughed, but all seemed to hold their breaths as she launched into another tirade. They knew Corcoran was a dangerous man, but they did not know the code by which he had been reared; did not know that Glory, or any other woman, was safe from violence at his hands, whatever her offense.

"Why don't you call McNab?" she sneered. "Judging from the way Middleton's deputies have been working, it will probably take three or four of you to drag one helpless girl to jail!"

"Who said anything about takin' you to jail?" Corcoran's gaze dwelt in fascination on her ruddy cheeks, the crimson of her full lips in startling contrast against the whiteness of her teeth. She shook her yellow hair back impatiently, as a spirited young animal might shake back its flowing mane.

"You're not arresting me?" She seemed startled, thrown into confusion by this unexpected statement.

"No. I just kept you from killin' that girl. If you'd brained her with that billiard ball I'd have had to arrest you."

"She lied about me!" Her wide eyes flashed, and her breast heaved again.

"That wasn't no excuse for makin' a public show of yourself," he answered without heat. "If ladies have got to fight, they ought to do it in

private.”

And so saying he turned away. A gusty exhalation of breath seemed to escape the crowd, and the tension vanished, as they turned to the bar. The incident was forgotten, merely a trifling episode in an existence crowded with violent incidents. Jovial masculine voices mingled with the shriller laughter of women, as glasses began to clink along the bar.

Glory hesitated, drawing her torn dress together over her bosom, then darted after Corcoran, who was moving toward the door. When she touched his arm he whipped about as quick as a cat, a hand flashing to a gun. She glimpsed a momentary gleam in his eyes as menacing and predatory as the threat that leaps in a panther’s eyes. Then it was gone as he saw whose hand had touched him.

“She lied about me,” Glory said, as if defending herself from a charge of misconduct. “She’s a dirty little cat.”

Corcoran looked her over from head to foot, as if he had not heard her; his blue eyes burned her like a physical fire.

She stammered in confusion. Direct and unveiled admiration was commonplace, but there was an elemental candor about the Texan such as she had never before encountered.

He broke in on her stammerings in a way that showed he had paid no attention to what she was saying.

“Let me buy you a drink. There’s a table over there where we can sit down.”

“No. I must go and put on another dress. I just wanted to say that I’m glad you kept me from killing Conchita. She’s a slut, but I don’t want her blood on my hands.”

“All right.”

She found it hard to make conversation with him, and could not have said why she wished to make conversation.

“McNab arrested me once,” she said, irrelevantly, her eyes dilating as if at the memory of an injustice. “I slapped him for something he said. He was going to put me in jail for resisting an officer of the law! Middleton made him turn me loose.”

“McNab must be a fool,” said Corcoran slowly.

“He’s mean; he’s got a nasty temper, and he — what’s that?”

Down the street sounded a fusillade of shots, a blurry voice yelling gleefully.

“Some fool shooting up a saloon,” she murmured, and darted a strange glance at her companion, as if a drunk shooting into the air was an unusual occurrence in that wild mining camp.

“Middleton said that’s against the law,” he grunted, turning away.

“Wait!” she cried sharply, catching at him. But he was already moving through the door, and Glory stopped short as a hand fell lightly on her shoulder from behind. Turning her head she paled to see the keenly-chiseled face of Ace Brent. His hand lay gently on her shoulder, but there was a command and a blood-chilling threat in its touch. She shivered and stood still as a statue, as Corcoran, unaware of the drama being played behind him, disappeared into the street.

The racket was coming from the Blackfoot Chief Saloon, a few doors down, and on the same side of the street as the Golden Garter. With a few long strides Corcoran reached the door. But he did not rush in. He halted and swept his cool gaze deliberately over the interior. In the center of the saloon a roughly dressed man was reeling about, whooping and discharging a pistol into the ceiling, perilously close to the big oil lamp which hung there. The bar was lined with men, all bearded and uncouthly garbed, so it was impossible to tell which were ruffians and which were honest miners. All the men in the room were at the bar, with the exception of the drunken man.

Corcoran paid little heed to him as he came through the door, though he moved straight toward him, and to the tense watchers it seemed the Texan was looking at no one else. In reality, from the corner of his eye he was watching the men at the bar; and as he moved deliberately from the door, across the room, he distinguished the pose of honest curiosity from the tension of intended murder. He saw the three hands that gripped gun butts.

And as he, apparently ignorant of what was going on at the bar, stepped toward the man reeling in the center of the room, a gun jumped from its scabbard and pointed toward the lamp. And even as it moved, Corcoran moved quicker. His turn was a blur of motion too quick for the eye to follow and even as he turned his gun was burning red.

The man who had drawn died on his feet with his gun still pointed toward the ceiling, unfired. Another stood gaping, stunned, a pistol dangling in his fingers, for that fleeting tick of time; then as he woke and whipped the gun up, hot lead ripped through his brain. A third gun spoke once as the

owner fired wildly, and then he went to his knees under the blast of ripping lead, slumped over on the floor and lay twitching.

It was over in a flash, action so blurred with speed that not one of the watchers could ever tell just exactly what had happened. One instant Corcoran had been moving toward the man in the center of the room, the next both guns were blazing and three men were falling from the bar, crashing dead on the floor.

For an instant the scene held, Corcoran half-crouching, guns held at his hips, facing the men who stood stunned along the bar. Wisps of blue smoke drifted from the muzzles of his guns, forming a misty veil through which his grim face looked, implacable and passionless as that of an image carved from granite. But his eyes blazed.

Shakily, moving like puppets on a string, the men at the bar lifted their hands clear of their waistline. Death hung on the crook of a finger for a shuddering tick of time. Then with a choking gasp the man who had played drunk made a stumbling rush toward the door. With a catlike wheel and stroke Corcoran crashed a gun barrel over his head and stretched him stunned and bleeding on the floor.

The Texan was facing the men at the bar again before any of them could have moved. He had not looked at the men on the floor since they had fallen.

"Well, *amigos!*" His voice was soft, but it was thick with killer's lust. "Why don't you-all keep the *baile* goin'?" Ain't these *hombres* got no friends?"

Apparently they had not. No one made a move.

Realizing that the crisis had passed, that there was no more killing to be done just then, Corcoran straightened, shoving his guns back in his scabbards.

"Purty crude," he criticized. "I don't see how anybody could fall for a trick that stale. Man plays drunk and starts shootin' at the roof. Officer comes in to arrest him. When the officer's back's turned, somebody shoots out the light, and the drunk falls on the floor to get out of the line of fire. Three or four men planted along the bar start blazin' away in the dark at the place where they know the law's standin', and out of eighteen or twenty-four shots, some's bound to connect."

With a harsh laugh he stooped, grabbed the "drunk" by the collar and hauled him upright. The man staggered and stared wildly about him, blood

dripping from the gash in his scalp.

“You got to come along to jail,” said Corcoran unemotionally. “Sheriff says it’s against the law to shoot up saloons. I ought to shoot you, but I ain’t in the habit of pluggin’ men with empty guns. Reckon you’ll be more value to the sheriff alive than dead, anyway.”

And propelling his dizzy charge, he strode out into the street. A crowd had gathered about the door, and they gave back suddenly. He saw a supple, feminine figure dart into the circle of light, which illumined the white face and golden hair of the girl Glory.

“Oh!” she exclaimed sharply. “Oh!” Her exclamation was almost drowned in a sudden clamor of voices as the men in the street realized what had happened in the Blackfoot Chief.

Corcoran felt her pluck at his sleeve as he passed her, heard her tense whisper.

“I was afraid — I tried to warn you — I’m glad they didn’t — “

A shadow of a smile touched his hard lips as he glanced down at her. Then he was gone, striding down the street toward the jail, half-pushing, half-dragging his bewildered prisoner.

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<code> CHAPTER 4

The Madness That Blinds Men

Corcoran locked the door on the man who seemed utterly unable to realize just what had happened, and turned away, heading for the sheriff’s office at the other end of town. He kicked on the door of the jailer’s shack, a few yards from the jail, and roused that individual out of a slumber he believed was alcoholic, and informed him he had a prisoner in his care. The jailer seemed as surprised as the victim was.

No one had followed Corcoran to the jail, and the street was almost deserted, as the people jammed morbidly into the Blackfoot Chief to stare at the bodies and listen to conflicting stories as to just what had happened.

Colonel Hopkins came running up, breathlessly, to grab Corcoran’s hand and pump it vigorously.

“By gad, sir, you have the real spirit! Guts! Speed! They tell me the loafers at the bar didn’t even have time to dive for cover before it was over! I’ll admit I’d ceased to expect much of John’s deputies, but you’ve shown your metal! These fellows were undoubtedly Vultures. That Tom Deal, you’ve got in jail, I’ve suspected him for some time. We’ll question him —

make him tell us who the rest are, and who their leader is. Come in and have a drink, sir!”

“Thanks, but not just now. I’m goin’ to find Middleton and report this business. His office ought to be closer to the jail. I don’t think much of his jailer. When I get through reportin’ I’m goin’ back and guard that fellow myself.”

Hopkins emitted more laudations, and then clapped the Texan on the back and darted away to take part in whatever informal inquest was being made, and Corcoran strode on through the emptying street. The fact that so much uproar was being made over the killing of three would-be murderers showed him how rare was a successful resistance to the Vultures. He shrugged his shoulders as he remembered feuds and range wars in his native Southwest: men falling like flies under the unerring drive of bullets on the open range and in the streets of Texas towns. But there all men were frontiersmen, sons and grandsons of frontiersmen; here, in the mining camps, the frontier element was only one of several elements, many drawn from sections where men had forgotten how to defend themselves through generations of law and order.

He saw a light spring up in the sheriff’s cabin just before he reached it, and, with his mind on possible gunmen lurking in ambush — for they must have known he would go directly to the cabin from the jail — he swung about and approached the building by a route that would not take him across the bar of light pouring from the window. So it was that the man who came running noisily down the road passed him without seeing the Texan as he kept in the shadows of the cliff. The man was McNab; Corcoran knew him by his powerful build, his slouching carriage. And as he burst through the door, his face was illuminated and Corcoran was amazed to see it contorted in a grimace of passion.

Voices rose inside the cabin, McNab’s bull-like roar, thick with fury, and the calmer tones of Middleton. Corcoran hurried forward, and as he approached he heard McNab roar: “Damn you, Middleton, you’ve got a lot of explainin’ to do! Why didn’t you warn the boys he was a killer?”

At that moment Corcoran stepped into the cabin and demanded: “What’s the trouble, McNab?”

The big deputy whirled with a feline snarl of rage, his eyes glaring with murderous madness as they recognized Corcoran.

“You damned — ” A string of filthy expletives gushed from his thick lips as he ripped out his gun. Its muzzle had scarcely cleared leather when a Colt banged in Corcoran’s right hand. McNab’s gun clattered to the floor and he staggered back, grasping his right arm with his left hand, and cursing like a madman.

“What’s the matter with you, you fool?” demanded Corcoran harshly. “Shut up! I did you a favor by not killin’ you. If you wasn’t a deputy I’d have drilled you through the head. But I will anyway, if you don’t shut your dirty trap.”

“You killed Breckman, Red Bill and Curly!” raved McNab; he looked like a wounded grizzly as he swayed there, blood trickling down his wrist and dripping off his fingers.

“Was that their names? Well, what about it?”

“Bill’s drunk, Corcoran,” interposed Middleton. “He goes crazy when he’s full of liquor.”

McNab’s roar of fury shook the cabin. His eyes turned red and he swayed on his feet as if about to plunge at Middleton’s throat.

“Drunk?” he bellowed. “You lie, Middleton! Damn you, what’s your game? You sent your own men to death! Without warnin’!”

“His own men?” Corcoran’s eyes were suddenly glittering slits. He stepped back and made a half-turn so that he was facing both men; his hands became claws hovering over his gunbutts.

“Yes, his men!” snarled McNab. “You fool, *he’s* the chief of the Vultures!”

An electric silence gripped the cabin. Middleton stood rigid, his empty hands hanging limp, knowing that his life hung on a thread no more substantial than a filament of morning dew. If he moved, if, when he spoke, his tone jarred on Corcoran’s suspicious ears, guns would be roaring before a man could snap his fingers.

“Is that so?” Corcoran shot at him.

“Yes,” Middleton said calmly, with no inflection in his voice that could be taken as a threat. “I’m chief of the Vultures.”

Corcoran glared at him puzzled. “What’s your game?” he demanded, his tone thick with the deadly instinct of his breed.

“That’s what I want to know!” bawled McNab. “We killed Grimes for you, because he was catchin’ on to things. And we set the same trap for this

devil. He knew! He must have known! You warned him — told him all about it!”

“He told me nothin’,” grated Corcoran. “He didn’t have to. Nobody but a fool would have been caught in a trap like that. Middleton, before I blow you to Hell, I want to know one thing: what good was it goin’ to do you to bring me into Wahpeton, and have me killed the first night I was here?”

“I didn’t bring you here for that,” answered Middleton.

“Then what’d you bring him here for?” yelled McNab. “You told us —

“I told you I was bringing a new deputy here, that was a gunslinging fool,” broke in Middleton. “That was the truth. That should have been warning enough.”

“But we thought that was just talk, to fool the people,” protested McNab bewilderedly. He sensed that he was beginning to be wound in a web he could not break.

“Did I tell you it was just talk?”

“No, but we thought — “

“I gave you no reason to think anything. The night when Grimes was killed I told everyone in the Golden Eagle that I was bringing in a Texas gunfighter as my deputy. I spoke the truth.”

“But you wanted him killed, and — “

“I didn’t. I didn’t say a word about having him killed.”

“But — “

“Did I?” Middleton pursued relentlessly. “Did I give you a definite order to kill Corcoran, to molest him in any way?”

Corcoran’s eyes were molten steel, burning into McNab’s soul. The befuddled giant scowled and floundered, vaguely realizing that he was being put in the wrong, but not understanding how, or why.

“No, you didn’t tell us to kill him in so many words; but you didn’t tell us to let him alone.”

“Do I have to tell you to let people alone to keep you from killing them? There are about three thousand people in this camp I’ve never given any definite orders about. Are you going out and kill them, and say you thought I meant you to do it, because I didn’t tell you not to?”

“Well, I — ” McNab began apologetically, then burst out in righteous though bewildered wrath: “Damn it, it was the understandin’ that we’d get rid of deputies like that, who wasn’t on the inside. We thought you were

bringin' in an honest deputy to fool the folks, just like you hired Jim Grimes to fool 'em. We thought you was just makin' a talk to the fools in the Golden Eagle. We thought you'd want him out of the way as quick as possible — “

“You drew your own conclusions and acted without my orders,” snapped Middleton. “That’s all that it amounts to. Naturally Corcoran defended himself. If I’d had any idea that you fools would try to murder him, I’d have passed the word to let him alone. I thought you understood my motives. I brought Corcoran in here to fool the people; yes. But he’s not a man like Jim Grimes. Corcoran is with us. He’ll clean out the thieves that are working outside our gang, and we’ll accomplish two things with one stroke: get rid of competition and make the miners think we’re on the level.”

McNab stood glaring at Middleton; three times he opened his mouth, and each time he shut it without speaking. He knew that an injustice had been done him; that a responsibility that was not rightfully his had been dumped on his brawny shoulders. But the subtle play of Middleton’s wits was beyond him; he did not know how to defend himself or make a countercharge.

“All right,” he snarled. “We’ll forget it. But the boys ain’t goin’ to forget how Corcoran shot down their pards. I’ll talk to ‘em, though. Tom Deal’s got to be out of that jail before daylight. Hopkins is aimin’ to question him about the gang. I’ll stage a fake jailbreak for him. But first I’ve got to get this arm dressed.” And he slouched out of the cabin and away through the darkness, a baffled giant, burning with murderous rage, but too tangled in a net of subtlety to know where or how or who to smite.

Back in the cabin Middleton faced Corcoran who still stood with his thumbs hooked in his belt, his fingers near his gun butts. A whimsical smile played on Middleton’s thin lips, and Corcoran smiled back; but it was the mirthless grin of a crouching panther.

“You can’t tangle me up with words like you did that big ox,” Corcoran said. “You let me walk into that trap. You knew your men were ribbin’ it up. You let ‘em go ahead, when a word from you would have stopped it. You knew they’d think you wanted me killed, like Grimes, if you didn’t say nothin’. You let ‘em think that, but you played safe by not givin’ any definite orders, so if anything went wrong, you could step out from under and shift the blame onto McNab.”

Middleton smiled appreciatively, and nodded coolly.

“That’s right. All of it. You’re no fool, Corcoran.”

Corcoran ripped out an oath, and this glimpse of the passionate nature that lurked under his inscrutable exterior was like a momentary glimpse of an enraged cougar, eyes blazing, spitting and snarling.

“Why?” he exclaimed. “Why did you plot all this for me? If you had a grudge against Glanton, I can understand why you’d rib up a trap for him, though you wouldn’t have had no more luck with him than you have with me. But you ain’t got no feud against me. I never saw you before this mornin’!”

“I have no feud with you; I had none with Glanton. But if Fate hadn’t thrown you into my path, it would have been Glanton who would have been ambushed in the Blackfoot Chief. Don’t you see, Corcoran? It was a test. I had to be sure you were the man I wanted.”

Corcoran scowled, puzzled himself now.

“What do you mean?”

“Sit down!” Middleton himself sat down on a nearby chair, unbuckled his gun-belt and threw it, with the heavy, holstered gun, onto a table, out of easy reach. Corcoran seated himself, but his vigilance did not relax, and his gaze rested on Middleton’s left arm pit, where a second gun might be hidden.

“In the first place,” said Middleton, his voice flowing tranquilly, but pitched too low to be heard outside the cabin, “I’m chief of the Vultures, as that fool said. I organized them, even before I was made sheriff. Killing a robber and murderer, who was working outside my gang, made the people of Wahpeton think I’d make a good sheriff. When they gave me the office, I saw what an advantage it would be to me and my gang.

“Our organization is airtight. There are about fifty men in the gang. They are scattered throughout these mountains. Some pose as miners; some are gamblers — Ace Brent, for instance. He’s my right-hand man. Some work in saloons, some clerk in stores. One of the regular drivers of the stage-line company is a Vulture, and so is a clerk of the company, and one of the men who works in the company’s stables, tending the horses.

“With spies scattered all over the camp, I know who’s trying to take out gold, and when. It’s a cinch. We can’t lose.”

“I don’t see how the camp stands for it,” grunted Corcoran.

“Men are too crazy after gold to think about anything else. As long as a man isn’t molested himself, he doesn’t care much what happens to his neighbors. We are organized; they are not. We know who to trust; they don’t. It can’t last forever. Sooner or later the more intelligent citizens will organize themselves into a vigilante committee and sweep the gulch clean. But when that happens, I intend to be far away — with one man I can trust.”

Corcoran nodded, comprehension beginning to gleam in his eyes.

“Already some men are talking vigilante. Colonel Hopkins, for instance. I encourage him as subtly as I can.”

“Why, in the name of Satan?”

“To avert suspicion; and for another reason. The vigilantes will serve my purpose at the end.”

“And your purpose is to skip out and leave the gang holdin’ the sack!”

“Exactly! Look here!”

Taking the candle from the table, he led the way through a back room, where heavy shutters covered the one window. Shutting the door, he turned to the back wall and drew aside some skins which were hung over it. Setting the candle on a roughly hewed table, he fumbled at the logs, and a section swung outward, revealing a heavy plank door set in the solid rock against which the back wall of the cabin was built. It was braced with iron and showed a ponderous lock. Middleton produced a key, and turned it in the lock, and pushed the door inward. He lifted the candle and revealed a small cave, lined and heaped with canvas and buckskin sacks. One of these sacks had burst open, and a golden stream caught the glints of the candle.

“Gold! Sacks and sacks of it!”

Corcoran caught his breath, and his eyes glittered like a wolf’s in the candlelight. No man could visualize the contents of those bags unmoved. And the gold-madness had long ago entered Corcoran’s veins, more powerfully than he had dreamed, even though he had followed the lure to California and back over the mountains again. The sight of that glittering heap, of those bulging sacks, sent his pulses pounding in his temples, and his hand unconsciously locked on the butt of a gun.

“There must be a million there!”

“Enough to require a good-sized mule-train to pack it out,” answered Middleton. “You see why I have to have a man to help me the night I pull out. And I need a man like you. You’re an outdoor man, hardened by

wilderness travel. You're a frontiersman, a *vaquero*, a trail-driver. These men I lead are mostly rats that grew up in border towns — gamblers, thieves, barroom gladiators, saloon-bred gunmen; a few miners gone wrong. You can stand things that would kill any of them.

"The flight we'll have to make will be hard traveling. We'll have to leave the beaten trails and strike out through the mountains. They'll be sure to follow us, and we'll probably have to fight them off. Then there are Indians — Blackfeet and Crows; we may run into a war party of them. I knew I had to have a fighting man of the keenest type; not only a fighting man, but a man bred on the frontier. That's why I sent for Glanton. But you're a better man than he was."

Corcoran frowned his suspicion.

"Why didn't you tell me all this at first?"

"Because I wanted to try you out. I wanted to be sure you were the right man. I had to be sure. If you were stupid enough, and slow enough to be caught in such a trap as McNab and the rest would set for you, you weren't the man I wanted."

"You're takin' a lot for granted," snapped Corcoran. "How do you know I'll fall in with you and help you loot the camp and then double-cross your gang? What's to prevent me from blowin' your head off for the trick you played on me? Or spillin' the beans to Hopkins, or to McNab?"

"Half a million in gold!" answered Middleton. "If you do any of those things, you'll miss your chance to share that cache with me."

He shut the door, locked it, pushed the other door to and hung the skins over it. Taking the candle he led the way back into the outer room.

He seated himself at the table and poured whisky from a jug into two glasses.

"Well, what about it?"

Corcoran did not at once reply. His brain was still filled with blinding golden visions. His countenance darkened, became sinister as he meditated, staring into his whisky glass.

The men of the West lived by their own code. The line between the outlaw and the honest cattleman or *vaquero* was sometimes a hair line, too vague to always be traced with accuracy. Men's personal codes were frequently inconsistent, but rigid as iron. Corcoran would not have stolen one cow, or three cows from a squatter, but he had swept across the border to loot Mexican *rancheros* of hundreds of head. He would not hold up a

man and take his money, nor would he murder a man in cold blood; but he felt no compunctions about killing a thief and taking the money the thief had stolen. The gold in that cache was bloodstained, the fruit of crimes to which he would have scorned to stoop. But his code of honesty did not prevent him from looting it from the thieves who had looted it in turn from honest men.

“What’s my part in the game?” Corcoran asked abruptly.

Middleton grinned zestfully.

“Good! I thought you’d see it my way. No man could look at that gold and refuse a share of it! They trust me more than they do any other member of the gang. That’s why I keep it here. They know — or think they know — that I couldn’t slip out with it. But that’s where we’ll fool them.

“Your job will be just what I told McNab: you’ll uphold law and order. I’ll tell the boys not to pull any more holdups inside the town itself, and that’ll give you a reputation. People will think you’ve got the gang too scared to work in close. You’ll enforce laws like those against shooting up saloons, fighting on the street, and the like. And you’ll catch the thieves that are still working alone. When you kill one we’ll make it appear that he was a Vulture. You’ve put yourself solid with the people tonight, by killing those fools in the Blackfoot Chief. We’ll keep up the deception.

“I don’t trust Ace Brent. I believe he’s secretly trying to usurp my place as chief of the gang. He’s too damned smart. But I don’t want you to kill him. He has too many friends in the gang. Even if they didn’t suspect I put you up to it, even if it looked like a private quarrel, they’d want your scalp. I’ll frame him — get somebody outside the gang to kill him, when the time comes.

“When we get ready to skip, I’ll set the vigilantes and the Vultures to battling each other — how, I don’t know, but I’ll find a way — and we’ll sneak while they’re at it. Then for California — South America and the sharing of the gold!”

“The sharin’ of the gold!” echoed Corcoran, his eyes lit with grim laughter.

Their hard hands met across the rough table, and the same enigmatic smile played on the lips of both men.

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<code> CHAPTER 5

The Wheel Begins to Turn

Corcoran stalked through the milling crowd that swarmed in the street, and headed toward the Golden Garter Dance Hall and Saloon. A man lurching through the door with the wide swing of hilarious intoxication stumbled into him and clutched at him to keep from falling to the floor.

Corcoran righted him, smiling faintly into the bearded, rubicund countenance that peered into his.

"Steve Corcoran, by thunder!" whooped the inebriated one gleefully. "Besh damn' deputy in the Territory! 'S' a honor to get picked up by Steve Corcoran! Come in and have a drink."

"You've had too many now," returned Corcoran.

"Right!" agreed the other. "I'm goin' home now, 'f I can get there. Lasht time I was a little full, I didn't make it, by a quarter of a mile! I went to sleep in a ditch across from your shack. I'd 'a' come in and slept on the floor, only I was 'fraid you'd shoot me for one of them derved Vultures!"

Men about them laughed. The intoxicated man was Joe Willoughby, a prominent merchant in Wahpeton, and extremely popular for his free-hearted and open-handed ways.

"Just knock on the door next time and tell me who it is," grinned Corcoran. "You're welcome to a blanket in the sheriff's office, or a bunk in my room, any time you need it."

"Soul of gener — generosity!" proclaimed Willoughby boisterously. "Goin' home now before the lickie gets down in my legs. S'long, old pard!"

He weaved away down the street, amidst the jovial joshings of the miners, to which he retorted with bibulous good nature.

Corcoran turned again into the dance hall and brushed against another man, at whom he glanced sharply, noting the set jaw, the haggard countenance and the bloodshot eyes. This man, a young miner well known to Corcoran, pushed his way through the crowd and hurried up the street with the manner of a man who goes with a definite purpose. Corcoran hesitated, as though to follow him, then decided against it and entered the dance hall. Half the reason for a gunfighter's continued existence lay in his ability to read and analyze the expressions men wore, to correctly interpret the jut of jaw, the glitter of eye. He knew this young miner was determined on some course of action that might result in violence. But the man was not a criminal, and Corcoran never interfered in private quarrels so long as they did not threaten the public safety.

A girl was singing, in a clear, melodious voice, to the accompaniment of a jangling, banging piano. As Corcoran seated himself at a table, with his back to the wall and a clear view of the whole hall before him, she concluded her number amid a boisterous clamor of applause. Her face lit as she saw him. Coming lightly across the hall, she sat down at his table. She rested her elbows on the table, cupped her chin in her hands, and fixed her wide clear gaze on his brown face.

“Shot any Vultures today, Steve?”

He made no answer as he lifted the glass of beer brought him by a waiter.

“They must be scared of you,” she continued, and something of youthful hero-worship glowed in her eyes. “There hasn’t been a murder or holdup in town for the past month, since you’ve been here. Of course you can’t be everywhere. They still kill men and rob them in the camps up the ravines, but they keep out of town.

“And that time you took the stage through to Yankton! It wasn’t your fault that they held it up and got the gold on the other side of Yankton. You weren’t in it, then. I wish I’d been there and seen the fight, when you fought off the men who tried to hold you up, halfway between here and Yankton.”

“There wasn’t any fight to it,” he said impatiently, restless under praise he knew he did not deserve.

“I know; they were afraid of you. You shot at them and they ran.”

Very true; it had been Middleton’s idea for Corcoran to take the stage through to the next town east, and beat off a fake attempt at holdup. Corcoran had never relished the memory; whatever his faults, he had the pride of his profession; a fake gunfight was as repugnant to him as a business hoax to an honest business man.

“Everybody knows that the stage company tried to hire you away from Middleton, as a regular shotgun-guard. But you told them that your business was to protect life and property here in Wahpeton.”

She meditated a moment and then laughed reminiscently.

“You know, when you pulled me off of Conchita that night, I thought you were just another blustering bully like McNab. I was beginning to believe that Middleton was taking pay from the Vultures, and that his deputies were crooked. I know things that some people don’t.” Her eyes became shadowed as if by an unpleasant memory in which, though her companion could not know it, was limned the handsome, sinister face of

Ace Brent. "Or maybe people do. Maybe they guess things, but are afraid to say anything.

"But I was mistaken about you, and since you're square, then Middleton must be, too. I guess it was just too big a job for him and his other deputies. None of them could have wiped out that gang in the Blackfoot Chief that night like you did. It wasn't your fault that Tom Deal got away that night, before he could be questioned. If he hadn't though, maybe you could have made him tell who the other Vultures were."

"I met Jack McBride comin' out of here," said Corcoran abruptly. "He looked like he was about ready to start gunnin' for somebody. Did he drink much in here?"

"Not much. I know what's the matter with him. He's been gambling too much down at the King of Diamonds. Ace Brent has been winning his money for a week. McBride's nearly broke, and I believe he thinks Brent is crooked. He came in here, drank some whisky, and let fall a remark about having a showdown with Brent."

Corcoran rose abruptly. "Reckon I better drift down towards the King of Diamonds. Somethin' may bust loose there. McBride's quick with a gun, and high tempered. Brent's deadly. Their private business is none of my affair. But if they want to fight it out, they'll have to get out where innocent people won't get hit by stray slugs."

Glory Bland watched him as his tall, erect figure swung out of the door, and there was a glow in her eyes that had never been awakened there by any other man.

Corcoran had almost reached the King of Diamonds gambling hall, when the ordinary noises of the street were split by the crash of a heavy gun. Simultaneously men came headlong out of the doors, shouting, shoving, plunging in their haste.

"McBride's killed!" bawled a hairy miner.

"No, it's Brent!" yelled another. The crowd surged and milled, craning their necks to see through the windows, yet crowding back from the door in fear of stray bullets. As Corcoran made for the door he heard a man bawl in answer to an eager question: "McBride accused Brent of usin' marked cards, and offered to prove it to the crowd. Brent said he'd kill him and pulled his gun to do it. But it snapped. I heard the hammer click. Then McBride drilled him before he could try again."

Men gave way as Corcoran pushed through the crowd. Somebody yelled: "Look out, Steve! McBride's on the warpath!"

Corcoran stepped into the gambling hall, which was deserted except for the gambler who lay dead on the floor, with a bullet-hole over his heart, and the killer who half-crouched with his back to the bar, and a smoking gun lifted in his hand.

McBride's lips were twisted hard in a snarl, and he looked like a wolf at bay.

"Get back, Corcoran," he warned. "I ain't got nothin' against you, but I ain't goin' to be murdered like a sheep."

"Who said anything about murderin' you?" demanded Corcoran impatiently.

"Oh, I know you wouldn't. But Brent's got friends. They'll never let me get away with killin' him. I believe he was a Vulture. I believe the Vultures will be after me for this. But if they get me, they've got to get me fightin'."

"Nobody's goin' to hurt you," said Corcoran tranquilly. "You better give me your gun and come along. I'll have to arrest you, but it won't amount to nothin', and you ought to know it. As soon as a miners' court can be got together, you'll be tried and acquitted. It was a plain case of self-defense. I reckon no honest folks will do any grievin' for Ace Brent."

"But if I give up my gun and go to jail," objected McBride, wavering, "I'm afraid the toughs will take me out and lynch me."

"I'm givin' you my word you won't be harmed while you're under arrest," answered Corcoran.

"That's enough for me," said McBride promptly, extending his pistol.

Corcoran took it and thrust it into his waistband. "It's damned foolishness, takin' an honest man's gun," he grunted. "But accordin' to Middleton that's the law. Give me your word that you won't skip, till you've been properly acquitted, and I won't lock you up."

"I'd rather go to jail," said McBride. "I wouldn't skip. But I'll be safer in jail, with you guardin' me, than I would be walkin' around loose for some of Brent's friends to shoot me in the back. After I've been cleared by due process of law, they won't dare to lynch me, and I ain't afraid of 'em when it comes to gunfightin', in the open."

"All right." Corcoran stooped and picked up the dead gambler's gun, and thrust it into his belt. The crowd surging about the door gave way as he led his prisoner out.

“There the skunk is!” bawled a rough voice. “He murdered Ace Brent!”

McBride turned pale with anger and glared into the crowd, but Corcoran urged him along, and the miner grinned as other voices rose: “A damned good thing, too!” “Brent was crooked!” “He was a Vulture!” bawled somebody, and for a space a tense silence held. That charge was too sinister to bring openly against even a dead man. Frightened by his own indiscretion the man who had shouted slunk away, hoping none had identified his voice.

“I’ve been gamblin’ too much,” growled McBride, as he strode along beside Corcoran. “Afraid to try to take my gold out, though, and didn’t know what else to do with it. Brent won thousands of dollars worth of dust from me; poker, mostly.

“This mornin’ I was talkin’ to Middleton, and he showed a card he said a gambler dropped in his cabin last night. He showed me it was marked, in a way I’d never have suspected. I recognized it as one of the same brand Brent always uses, though Middleton wouldn’t tell me who the gambler was. But later I learned that Brent slept off a drunk in Middleton’s cabin. Damned poor business for a gambler to get drunk.

“I went to the King of Diamonds awhile ago, and started playin’ poker with Brent and a couple of miners. As soon as he raked in the first pot, I called him — flashed the card I got from Middleton and started to show the boys where it was marked. Then Brent pulled his gun; it snapped, and I killed him before he could cock it again. He knew I had the goods on him. He didn’t even give me time to tell where I’d gotten the card.”

Corcoran made no reply. He locked McBride in the jail, called the jailer from his nearby shack and told him to furnish the prisoner with food, liquor and anything else he needed, and then hurried to his own cabin. Sitting on his bunk in the room behind the sheriff’s office, he ejected the cartridge on which Brent’s pistol had snapped. The cap was dented, but had not detonated the powder. Looking closely he saw faint abrasions on both the bullet and brass case. They were such as might have been made by the jaws of iron pinchers and a vise.

Securing a wire-cutter with pincher jaws, he began to work at the bullet. It slipped out with unusual ease, and the contents of the case spilled into his hand. He did not need to use a match to prove that it was not powder. He knew what the stuff was at first glance — iron filings, to give the proper weight to the cartridge from which the powder had been removed.

At that moment he heard someone enter the outer room, and recognized the firm, easy tread of Sheriff Middleton. Corcoran went into the office and Middleton turned, hung his white hat on a nail.

“McNab tells me McBride killed Ace Brent!”

“You ought to know!” Corcoran grinned. He tossed the bullet and empty case on the table, dumped the tiny pile of iron dust beside them.

“Brent spent the night with you. You got him drunk, and stole one of his cards to show to McBride. You knew how his cards were marked. You took a cartridge out of Brent’s gun and put that one in place. One would be enough. You knew there’d be gunplay between him and McBride, when you showed McBride that marked card, and you wanted to be sure it was Brent who stopped lead.”

“That’s right,” agreed Middleton. “I haven’t seen you since early yesterday morning. I was going to tell you about the frame I’d ribbed, as soon as I saw you. I didn’t know McBride would go after Brent as quickly as he did.

“Brent got too ambitious. He acted as if he were suspicious of us both, lately. Maybe, though, it was just jealousy as far as you were concerned. He liked Glory Bland, and she could never see him. It gouged him to see her falling for you.

“And he wanted my place as leader of the Vultures. If there was one man in the gang that could have kept us from skipping with the loot, it was Ace Brent.

“But I think I’ve worked it neatly. No one can accuse me of having him murdered, because McBride isn’t in the gang. I have no control over him. But Brent’s friends will want revenge.”

“A miners’ court will acquit McBride on the first ballot.”

“That’s true. Maybe we’d better let him get shot, trying to escape!”

“We will like hell!” rapped Corcoran. “I swore he wouldn’t be harmed while he was under arrest. His part of the deal was on the level. He didn’t know Brent had a blank in his gun, any more than Brent did. If Brent’s friends want his scalp, let ‘em go after McBride, like white men ought to, when he’s in a position to defend himself.”

“But after he’s acquitted,” argued Middleton, “they won’t dare gang up on him in the street, and he’ll be too sharp to give them a chance at him in the hills.”

“What the hell do I care?” snarled Corcoran. “What difference does it make to me whether Brent’s friends get even or not? Far as I’m concerned, he got what was comin’ to him. If they ain’t got the guts to give McBride an even break, I sure ain’t goin’ to fix it so they can murder him without riskin’ their own hides. If I catch ‘em sneakin’ around the jail for a shot at him, I’ll fill ‘em full of hot lead.

“If I’d thought the miners would be crazy enough to do anything to him for killin’ Brent, I’d never arrested him. They won’t. They’ll acquit him. Until they do, I’m responsible for him, and I’ve give my word. And anybody that tries to lynch him while he’s in my charge better be damned sure they’re quicker with a gun than I am.”

“There’s nobody of that nature in Wahpeton,” admitted Middleton with a wry smile. “All right, if you feel your personal honor is involved. But I’ll have to find a way to placate Brent’s friends, or they’ll be accusing me of being indifferent about what happened to him.”

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<code> CHAPTER 6

Vultures’ Court

Next morning Corcoran was awakened by a wild shouting in the street. He had slept in the jail that night, not trusting Brent’s friends, but there had been no attempt at violence. He jerked on his boots, and went out into the street, followed by McBride, to learn what the shouting was about.

Men milled about in the street, even at that early hour — for the sun was not yet up — surging about a man in the garb of a miner. This man was astride a horse whose coat was dark with sweat; the man was wild eyed, bareheaded, and he held his hat in his hands, holding it down for the shouting, cursing throng to see.

“Look at ‘em!” he yelled. “Nuggets as big as hen eggs! I took ‘em out in an hour, with a pick, diggin’ in the wet sand by the creek! And there’s plenty more! It’s the richest strike these hills ever seen!”

“Where?” roared a hundred voices.

“Well, I got my claim staked out, all I need,” said the man, “so I don’t mind tellin’ you. It ain’t twenty miles from here, in a little canyon everybody’s overlooked and passed over — Jackrabbit Gorge! The creek’s buttered with dust, and the banks are crammed with pockets of nuggets!”

An exuberant whoop greeted this information, and the crowd broke up suddenly as men raced for their shacks.

“New strike,” sighed McBride enviously. “The whole town will be surgin’ down Jackrabbit Gorge. Wish I could go.”

“Gimme your word you’ll come back and stand trial, and you can go,” promptly offered Corcoran. McBride stubbornly shook his head.

“No, not till I’ve been cleared legally. Anyway, only a handful of men will get anything. The rest will be pullin’ back into their claims in Wahpeton Gulch tomorrow. Hell, I’ve been in plenty of them rushes. Only a few ever get anything.”

Colonel Hopkins and his partner Dick Bisley hurried past. Hopkins shouted: “We’ll have to postpone your trial until this rush is over, Jack! We were going to hold it today, but in an hour there won’t be enough men in Wahpeton to impanel a jury! Sorry you can’t make the rush. If we can, Dick and I will stake out a claim for you!”

“Thanks, Colonel!”

“No thanks! The camp owes you something for ridding it of that scoundrel Brent. Corcoran, we’ll do the same for you, if you like.”

“No, thanks,” drawled Corcoran. “Minin’s too hard work. I’ve got a gold mine right here in Wahpeton that don’t take so much labor!”

The men burst into laughter at this conceit, and Bisley shouted back as they hurried on: “That’s right! Your salary looks like an assay from the Comstock lode! But you earn it, all right!”

Joe Willoughby came rolling by, leading a seedy-looking burro on which illy-hung pick and shovel banged against skillet and kettle. Willoughby grasped a jug in one hand, and that he had already been sampling it was proved by his wide-legged gait.

“H’ray for the new diggin’s!” he whooped, brandishing the jug at Corcoran and McBride. “Git along, jackass! I’ll be scoopin’ out nuggets bigger’n this jug before night — if the lickin’ don’t git in my legs before I git there!”

“And if it does, he’ll fall into a ravine and wake up in the mornin’ with a fifty pound nugget in each hand,” said McBride. “He’s the luckiest son of a gun in the camp; and the best natured.”

“I’m goin’ and get some ham-and-eggs,” said Corcoran. “You want to come and eat with me, or let Pete Daley fix your breakfast here?”

“I’ll eat in the jail,” decided McBride. “I want to stay in jail till I’m acquitted. Then nobody can accuse me of tryin’ to beat the law in any way.”

“All right.” With a shout to the jailer, Corcoran swung across the road and headed for the camp’s most pretentious restaurant, whose proprietor was growing rich, in spite of the terrific prices he had to pay for vegetables and food of all kinds — prices he passed on to his customers.

While Corcoran was eating, Middleton entered hurriedly, and bending over him, with a hand on his shoulder, spoke softly in his ear.

“I’ve just got wind that that old miner, Joe Brockman, is trying to sneak his gold out on a pack mule, under the pretense of making this rush. I don’t know whether it’s so or not, but some of the boys up in the hills think it is, and are planning to waylay him and kill him. If he intends getting away, he’ll leave the trail to Jackrabbit Gorge a few miles out of town, and swing back toward Yankton, taking the trail over Grizzly Ridge — you know where the thickets are so close. The boys will be laying for him either on the ridge or just beyond.

“He hasn’t enough dust to make it worth our while to take it. If they hold him up they’ll have to kill him, and we want as few murders as possible. Vigilante sentiment is growing, in spite of the people’s trust in you and me. Get on your horse and ride to Grizzly Ridge and see that the old man gets away safe. Tell the boys Middleton said to lay off. If they won’t listen — but they will. They wouldn’t buck you, even without my word to back you. I’ll follow the old man, and try to catch up with him before he leaves the Jackrabbit Gorge road.

“I’ve sent McNab up to watch the jail, just as a formality. I know McBride won’t try to escape, but we mustn’t be accused of carelessness.”

“Let McNab be mighty careful with his shootin’ irons,” warned Corcoran. “No ‘shot while attemptin’ to escape’, Middleton. I don’t trust McNab. If he lays a hand on McBride, I’ll kill him as sure as I’m sittin’ here.”

“Don’t worry. McNab hated Brent. Better get going. Take the short cut through the hills to Grizzly Ridge.”

“Sure.” Corcoran rose and hurried out in the street which was all but deserted. Far down toward the other end of the gulch rose the dust of the rearguard of the army which was surging toward the new strike. Wahpeton looked almost like a deserted town in the early morning light, foreshadowing its ultimate destiny.

Corcoran went to the corral beside the sheriff’s cabin and saddled a fast horse, glancing cryptically at the powerful pack mules whose numbers were

steadily increasing. He smiled grimly as he remembered Middleton telling Colonel Hopkins that pack mules were a good investment. As he led his horse out of the corral his gaze fell on a man sprawling under the trees across the road, lazily whittling. Day and night, in one way or another, the gang kept an eye on the cabin which hid the cache of their gold. Corcoran doubted if they actually suspected Middleton's intentions. But they wanted to be sure that no stranger did any snooping about.

Corcoran rode into a ravine that straggled away from the gulch, and a few minutes later he followed a narrow path to its rim, and headed through the mountains toward the spot, miles away, where a trail crossed Grizzly Ridge, a long, steep backbone, thickly timbered.

He had not left the ravine far behind him when a quick rattle of hoofs brought him around, in time to see a horse slide recklessly down a low bluff amid a shower of shale. He swore at the sight of its rider.

"Glory! What the hell?"

"Steve!" She reined up breathlessly beside him. "Go back! It's a trick! I heard Buck Gorman talking to Conchita; he's sweet on her. He's a friend of Brent's — a Vulture! She twists all his secrets out of him. Her room is next to mine, she thought I was out. I overheard them talking. Gorman said a trick had been played on you to get you out of town. He didn't say how. Said you'd go to Grizzly Ridge on a wild-goose chase. While you're gone they're going to assemble a 'miners' court,' out of the riff-raff left in town. They're going to appoint a 'judge' and 'jury,' take McBride out of jail, try him for killing Ace Brent — and hang him!"

A lurid oath ripped through Steve Corcoran's lips, and for an instant the tiger flashed into view, eyes blazing, fangs bared. Then his dark face was an inscrutable mask again. He wrenched his horse around.

"Much obliged, Glory. I'll be dustin' back into town. You circle around and come in another way. I don't want folks to know you told me."

"Neither do I!" she shuddered. "I knew Ace Brent was a Vulture. He boasted of it to me, once when he was drunk. But I never dared tell anyone. He told me what he'd do to me if I did. I'm glad he's dead. I didn't know Gorman was a Vulture, but I might have guessed it. He was Brent's closest friend. If they ever find out I told you —"

"They won't," Corcoran assured her. It was natural for a girl to fear such black-hearted rogues as the Vultures, but the thought of them actually

harming her never entered his mind. He came from a country where not even the worst of scoundrels would ever dream of hurting a woman.

He drove his horse at a reckless gallop back the way he had come, but not all the way. Before he reached the Gulch he swung wide of the ravine he had followed out, and plunged into another, that would bring him into the Gulch at the end of town where the jail stood. As he rode down it he heard a deep, awesome roar he recognized — the roar of the man-pack, hunting its own kind.

A band of men surged up the dusty street, roaring, cursing. One man waved a rope. Pale faces of bartenders, store clerks and dance hall girls peered timidly out of doorways as the unsavory mob roared past. Corcoran knew them, by sight or reputation: plug-uglies, barroom loafers, skulkers — many were Vultures, as he knew; others were riff-raff, ready for any sort of deviltry that required neither courage nor intelligence — the scum that gathers in any mining camp.

Dismounting, Corcoran glided through the straggling trees that grew behind the jail, and heard McNab challenge the mob.

“What do you want?”

“We aim to try your prisoner!” shouted the leader. “We come in the due process of law. We’ve app’nted a jedge and paneled a jury, and we demands that you hand over the prisoner to be tried in miners’ court, accordin’ to legal precedent!”

“How do I know you’re representative of the camp?” parried McNab.

“‘Cause we’re the only body of men in camp right now!” yelled someone, and this was greeted by a roar of laughter.

“We come empowered with the proper authority — ” began the leader, and broke off suddenly: “Grab him, boys!”

There was the sound of a brief scuffle, McNab swore vigorously, and the leader’s voice rose triumphantly: “Let go of him, boys, but don’t give him his gun. McNab, you ought to know better’n to try to oppose legal procedure, and you a upholder of law and order!”

Again a roar of sardonic laughter, and McNab growled: “All right; go ahead with the trial. But you do it over my protests. I don’t believe this is a representative assembly.”

“Yes, it is,” averred the leader, and then his voice thickened with blood-lust. “Now, Daley, gimme that key and bring out the prisoner.”

The mob surged toward the door of the jail, and at that instant Corcoran stepped around the corner of the cabin and leaped up on the low porch it boasted. There was a hissing intake of breath. Men halted suddenly, digging their heels against the pressure behind them. The surging line wavered backward, leaving two figures isolated — McNab, scowling, disarmed, and a hairy giant whose huge belly was girt with a broad belt bristling with gun butts and knife hilts. He held a noose in one hand, and his bearded lips gaped as he glared at the unexpected apparition.

For a breathless instant Corcoran did not speak. He did not look at McBride's pallid countenance peering through the barred door behind him. He stood facing the mob, his head slightly bent, a somber, immobile figure, sinister with menace.

"Well," he said finally, softly, "what's holdin' up the *baile*?"

The leader blustered feebly.

"We come here to try a murderer!"

Corcoran lifted his head and the man involuntarily recoiled at the lethal glitter of his eyes.

"Who's your judge?" the Texan inquired softly.

"We appointed Jake Bissett, there," spoke up a man, pointing at the uncomfortable giant on the porch.

"So you're goin' to hold a miners' court," murmured Corcoran. "With a judge and jury picked out of the dives and honky-tonks — scum and dirt of the gutter!" And suddenly uncontrollable fury flamed in his eyes. Bissett, sensing his intention, bellowed in ox-like alarm and grabbed frantically at a gun. His fingers had scarcely touched the checkered butt when smoke and flame roared from Corcoran's right hip. Bissett pitched backward off the porch as if he had been struck by a hammer; the rope tangled about his limbs as he fell, and he lay in the dust that slowly turned crimson, his hairy fingers twitching spasmodically.

Corcoran faced the mob, livid under his sun-burnt bronze. His eyes were coals of blue hell's-fire. There was a gun in each hand, and from the right-hand muzzle a wisp of blue smoke drifted lazily upward.

"I declare this court adjourned!" he roared. "The judge is done impeached, and the jury's discharged! I'll give you thirty seconds to clear the courtroom!"

He was one man against nearly a hundred, but he was a grey wolf facing a pack of yapping jackals. Each man knew that if the mob surged on him,

they would drag him down at last; but each man knew what an awful toll would first be paid, and each man feared that he himself would be one of those to pay that toll.

They hesitated, stumbled back — gave way suddenly and scattered in all directions. Some backed away, some shamelessly turned their backs and fled. With a snarl Corcoran thrust his guns back in their scabbards and turned toward the door where McBride stood, grasping the bars.

“I thought I was a goner that time, Corcoran,” he gasped. The Texan pulled the door open, and pushed McBride’s pistol into his hand.

“There’s a horse tied behind the jail,” said Corcoran. “Get on it and dust out of here. I’ll take the full responsibility. If you stay here they’ll burn down the jail, or shoot you through the window. You can make it out of town while they’re scattered. I’ll explain to Middleton and Hopkins. In a month or so, if you want to, come back and stand trial, as a matter of formality. Things will be cleaned up around here by then.”

McBride needed no urging. The grisly fate he had just escaped had shaken his nerve. Shaking Corcoran’s hand passionately, he ran stumblingly through the trees to the horse Corcoran had left there. A few moments later he was fogging it out of the Gulch.

McNab came up, scowling and grumbling.

“You had no authority to let him go. I tried to stop the mob — “

Corcoran wheeled and faced him, making no attempt to conceal his hatred.

“You did like hell! Don’t pull that stuff with me, McNab. You was in on this, and so was Middleton. You put up a bluff of talk, so afterwards you could tell Colonel Hopkins and the others that you tried to stop the lynchin’ and was overpowered. I saw the scrap you put up when they grabbed you! Hell! You’re a rotten actor.”

“You can’t talk to me like that!” roared McNab.

The old tigerish light flickered in the blue eyes. Corcoran did not exactly move, yet he seemed to sink into a half-crouch, as a cougar does for the killing spring.

“If you don’t like my style, McNab,” he said softly, thickly, “you’re more’n welcome to open the *baile* whenever you get ready!”

For an instant they faced each other, McNab black browed and scowling, Corcoran’s thin lips almost smiling, but blue fire lighting his

eyes. Then with a grunt McNab turned and slouched away, his shaggy head swaying from side to side like that of a surly bull.

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<code> CHAPTER 7

A Vulture's Wings Are Clipped

Middleton pulled up his horse suddenly as Corcoran reined out of the bushes. One glance showed the sheriff that Corcoran's mood was far from placid. They were amidst a grove of alders, perhaps a mile from the Gulch.

"Why, hello, Corcoran," began Middleton, concealing his surprise. "I caught up with Brockman. It was just a wild rumor. He didn't have any gold. That —"

"Drop it!" snapped Corcoran. "I know why you sent me off on that wild-goose chase — same reason you pulled out of town. To give Brent's friends a chance to get even with McBride. If I hadn't turned around and dusted back into Wahpeton, McBride would be kickin' his life out at the end of a rope, right now."

"You came back —?"

"Yeah! And now Jake Bissett's in Hell instead of Jack McBride, and McBride's dusted out — on a horse I gave him. I told you I gave him my word he wouldn't be lynched."

"You killed Bissett?"

"Deader'n hell!"

"He was a Vulture," muttered Middleton, but he did not seem displeased. "Brent, Bissett — the more Vultures die, the easier it will be for us to get away when we go. That's one reason I had Brent killed. But you should have let them hang McBride. Of course I framed this affair; I had to do something to satisfy Brent's friends. Otherwise they might have gotten suspicious."

"If they suspicioned I had anything to do with having him killed, or thought I wasn't anxious to punish the man who killed him, they'd make trouble for me. I can't have a split in the gang now. And even I can't protect you from Brent's friends, after this."

"Have I ever asked you, or any man, for protection?" The quick jealous pride of the gunfighter vibrated in his voice.

"Breckman, Red Bill, curly, and now Bissett. You've killed too many Vultures. I made them think the killing of the first three was a mistake, all around. Bissett wasn't very popular. But they won't forgive you for

stopping them from hanging the man who killed Ace Brent. They won't attack you openly, of course. But you'll have to watch every step you make. They'll kill you if they can, and I won't be able to prevent them."

"If I'd tell 'em just how Ace Brent died, you'd be in the same boat," said Corcoran bitingly. "Of course, I won't. Our final getaway depends on you keepin' their confidence — as well as the confidence of the honest folks. This last killin' ought to put me, and therefore you, ace-high with Hopkins and his crowd."

"They're still talking vigilante. I encourage it. It's coming anyway. Murders in the outlying camps are driving men to a frenzy of fear and rage, even though such crimes have ceased in Wahpeton. Better to fall in line with the inevitable and twist it to a man's own ends, than to try to oppose it. If you can keep Brent's friends from killing you for a few more weeks, we'll be ready to jump. Look out for Buck Gorman. He's the most dangerous man in the gang. He was Brent's friend, and he has his own friends — all dangerous men. Don't kill him unless you have to."

"I'll take care of myself," answered Corcoran somberly. "I looked for Gorman in the mob, but he wasn't there. Too smart. But he's the man behind the mob. Bissett was just a stupid ox; Gorman planned it — or rather, I reckon he helped you plan it."

"I'm wondering how you found out about it," said Middleton. "You wouldn't have come back unless somebody told you. Who was it?"

"None of your business," growled Corcoran. It did not occur to him that Glory Bland would be in any danger from Middleton, even if the sheriff knew about her part in the affair, but he did not relish being questioned, and did not feel obliged to answer anybody's queries.

"That new gold strike sure came in mighty handy for you and Gorman," he said. "Did you frame that, too?"

Middleton nodded.

"Of course. That was one of my men who poses as a miner. He had a hatful of nuggets from the cache. He served his purpose and joined the men who hide up there in the hills. The mob of miners will be back tomorrow, tired and mad and disgusted, and when they hear about what happened, they'll recognize the handiwork of the Vultures; at least some of them will. But they won't connect me with it in any way. Now we'll ride back to town. Things are breaking our way, in spite of your foolish interference with the

mob. But let Gorman alone. You can't afford to make any more enemies in the gang."

Buck Gorman leaned on the bar in the Golden Eagle and expressed his opinion of Steve Corcoran in no uncertain terms. The crowd listened sympathetically, for, almost to a man, they were the ruffians and riff-raff of the camp.

"The dog pretends to be a deputy!" roared Gorman, whose bloodshot eyes and damp tangled hair attested to the amount of liquor he had drunk. "But he kills an appointed judge, breaks up a court and drives away the jury — yes, and releases the prisoner, a man charged with murder!"

It was the day after the fake gold strike, and the disillusioned miners were drowning their chagrin in the saloons. But few honest miners were in the Golden Eagle.

"Colonel Hopkins and other prominent citizens held an investigation," said someone. "They declared that evidence showed Corcoran to have been justified — denounced the court as a mob, acquitted Corcoran of killing Bissett, and then went ahead and acquitted McBride for killing Brent, even though he wasn't there."

Gorman snarled like a cat, and reached for his whisky glass. His hand did not twitch or quiver, his movements were more catlike than ever. The whisky had inflamed his mind, illumined his brain with a white-hot certainty that was akin to insanity, but it had not affected his nerves or any part of his muscular system. He was more deadly drunk than sober.

"I was Brent's best friend!" he roared. "I was Bissett's friend."

"They say Bissett was a Vulture," whispered a voice. Gorman lifted his tawny head and glared about the room as a lion might glare.

"Who says he was a Vulture? Why don't these slanderers accuse a living man? It's always a dead man they accuse! Well, what if he was? He was my friend! Maybe that makes *me* a Vulture!"

No one laughed or spoke as his flaming gaze swept the room, but each man, as those blazing eyes rested on him in turn, felt the chill breath of Death blowing upon him.

"Bissett a Vulture!" he said, wild enough with drink and fury to commit any folly, as well as any atrocity. He did not heed the eyes fixed on him, some in fear, a few in intense interest. "Who knows who the Vultures are? Who knows who, or what anybody really is? Who really knows anything about this man Corcoran, for instance? I could tell — "

A light step on the threshold brought him about as Corcoran loomed in the door. Gorman froze, snarling, lips writhed back, a tawny-maned incarnation of hate and menace.

“I heard you was makin’ a talk about me down here, Gorman,” said Corcoran. His face was bleak and emotionless as that of a stone image, but his eyes burned with murderous purpose.

Gorman snarled wordlessly.

“I looked for you in the mob,” said Corcoran, tonelessly, his voice as soft and without emphasis as the even strokes of a feather. It seemed almost as if his voice were a thing apart from him; his lips murmuring while all the rest of his being was tense with concentration on the man before him.

“You wasn’t there. You sent your coyotes, but you didn’t have the guts to come yourself, and — “

The dart of Gorman’s hand to his gun was like the blurring stroke of a snake’s head, but no eye could follow Corcoran’s hand. His gun smashed before anyone knew he had reached for it. Like an echo came the roar of Gorman’s shot. But the bullet ploughed splinteringly into the floor, from a hand that was already death-stricken and falling. Gorman pitched over and lay still, the swinging lamp glinting on his upturned spurs and the blue steel of the smoking gun which lay by his hand.

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<code> CHAPTER 8

The Coming of the Vigilantes

Colonel Hopkins looked absently at the liquor in his glass, stirred restlessly, and said abruptly: “Middleton, I might as well come to the point. My friends and I have organized a vigilante committee, just as we should have done months ago. Now, wait a minute. Don’t take this as a criticism of your methods. You’ve done wonders in the last month, ever since you brought Steve Corcoran in here. Not a holdup in the town, not a killing — that is, not a murder, and only a few shootings among the honest citizens.

“Added to that the ridding of the camp of such scoundrels as Jake Bissett and Buck Gorman. They were both undoubtedly members of the Vultures. I wish Corcoran hadn’t killed Gorman just when he did, though. The man was drunk, and about to make some reckless disclosures about the gang. At least that’s what a friend of mine thinks, who was in the Golden Eagle that night. But anyway it couldn’t be helped.

“No, we’re not criticizing you at all. But obviously you can’t stop the murders and robberies that are going on up and down the Gulch, all the time. And you can’t stop the outlaws from holding up the stage regularly.

“So that’s where we come in. We have sifted the camp, carefully, over a period of months, until we have fifty men we can trust absolutely. It’s taken a long time, because we’ve had to be sure of our men. We didn’t want to take in a man who might be a spy for the Vultures. But at last we know where we stand. We’re not sure just who *is* a Vulture, but we know who *isn’t*, in as far as our organization is concerned.

“We can work together, John. We have no intention of interfering within your jurisdiction, or trying to take the law out of your hands. We demand a free hand outside the camp; inside the limits of Wahpeton we are willing to act under your orders, or at least according to your advice. Of course we will work in absolute secrecy until we have proof enough to strike.”

“You must remember, Colonel,” reminded Middleton, “that all along I’ve admitted the impossibility of my breaking up the Vultures with the limited means at my disposal. I’ve never opposed a vigilante committee. All I’ve demanded was that when it was formed, it should be composed of honest men, and be free of any element which might seek to twist its purpose into the wrong channels.”

“That’s true. I didn’t expect any opposition from you, and I can assure you that we’ll always work hand-in-hand with you and your deputies.” He hesitated, as if over something unpleasant, and then said: “John, are you sure of *all* your deputies?”

Middleton’s head jerked up and he shot a startled glance at the Colonel, as if the latter had surprised him by putting into words a thought that had already occurred to him.

“Why do you ask?” he parried.

“Well,” Hopkins was embarrassed, “I don’t know — maybe I’m prejudiced — but — well, damn it, to put it bluntly, I’ve sometimes wondered about Bill McNab!”

Middleton filled the glasses again before he answered.

“Colonel, I never accuse a man without iron-clad evidence. I’m not always satisfied with McNab’s actions, but it may merely be the man’s nature. He’s a surly brute. But he has his virtues. I’ll tell you frankly, the reason I haven’t discharged him is that I’m not sure of him. That probably sounds ambiguous.”

“Not at all. I appreciate your position. You have as much as said you suspect him of double-dealing, and are keeping him on your force so you can watch him. Your wits are not dull, John. Frankly — and this will probably surprise you — until a month ago some of the men were beginning to whisper some queer things about you — queer suspicions, that is. But your bringing Corcoran in showed us that you were on the level. You’d have never brought him in if you’d been taking pay from the Vultures!”

Middleton halted with his glass at his lips.

“Great heavens!” he ejaculated. “Did they suspect me of *that*?”

“Just a fool idea some of the men had,” Hopkins assured him. “Of course I never gave it a thought. The men who thought it are ashamed now. The killing of Bissett, of Gorman, of the men in the Blackfoot Chief, show that Corcoran’s on the level. And of course, he’s merely taking his orders from you. All those men were Vultures, of course. It’s a pity Tom Deal got away before we could question him.” He rose to go.

“McNab was guarding Deal,” said Middleton, and his tone implied more than his words said.

Hopkins shot him a startled glance.

“By heaven, so he was! But he was really wounded — I saw the bullet hole in his arm, where Deal shot him in making his getaway.”

“That’s true.” Middleton rose and reached for his hat. “I’ll walk along with you. I want to find Corcoran and tell him what you’ve just told me.”

“It’s been a week since he killed Gorman,” mused Hopkins. “I’ve been expecting Gorman’s Vulture friends to try to get him, any time.”

“So have I!” answered Middleton, with a grimness which his companion missed.

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<code> CHAPTER 9

The Vultures Swoop

Down the gulch lights blazed; the windows of cabins were yellow squares in the night, and beyond them the velvet sky reflected the lurid heart of the camp. The intermittent breeze brought faint strains of music and the other noises of hilarity. But up the gulch, where a clump of trees straggled near an unlighted cabin, the darkness of the moonless night was a mask that the faint stars did not illuminate.

Figures moved in the deep shadows of the trees, voices whispered, their furtive tones mingling with the rustling of the wind through the leaves.

"We ain't close enough. We ought to lay alongside his cabin and blast him as he goes in."

A second voice joined the first, muttering like a bodyless voice in a conclave of ghosts.

"We've gone all over that. I tell you this is the best way. Get him off guard. You're sure Middleton was playin' cards at the King of Diamonds?"

Another voice answered: "He'll be there till daylight, likely."

"He'll be awful mad," whispered the first speaker.

"Let him. He can't afford to do anything about it. *Listen!* Somebody's comin' up the road!"

They crouched down in the bushes, merging with the blacker shadows. They were so far from the cabin, and it was so dark, that the approaching figure was only a dim blur in the gloom.

"It's him!" a voice hissed fiercely, as the blur merged with the bulkier shadow that was the cabin.

In the stillness a door rasped across a sill. A yellow light sprang up, streaming through the door, blocking out a small window high up in the wall. The man inside did not cross the lighted doorway, and the window was too high to see through into the cabin.

The light went out after a few minutes.

"Come on!" The three men rose and went stealthily toward the cabin. Their bare feet made no sound, for they had discarded their boots. Coats too had been discarded, any garment that might swing loosely and rustle, or catch on projections. Cocked guns were in their hands, they could have been no more wary had they been approaching the lair of a lion. And each man's heart pounded suffocatingly, for the prey they stalked was far more dangerous than any lion.

When one spoke it was so low that his companions hardly heard him with their ears a matter of inches from his bearded lips.

"We'll take our places like we planned, Joel. You'll go to the door and call him, like we told you. He knows Middleton trusts you. He don't know you'd be helpin' Gorman's friends. He'll recognize your voice, and he won't suspect nothin'. When he comes to the door and opens it, step back into the shadows and fall flat. We'll do the rest from where we'll be layin'."

His voice shook slightly as he spoke, and the other man shuddered; his face was a pallid oval in the darkness.

"I'll do it, but I bet he kills some of us. I bet he kills me, anyway. I must have been crazy when I said I'd help you fellows."

"You can't back out now!" hissed the other. They stole forward, their guns advanced, their hearts in their mouths. Then the foremost man caught at the arms of his companions.

"Wait! Look there! He's left the door open!"

The open doorway was a blacker shadow in the shadow of the wall.

"He knows we're after him!" There was a catch of hysteria in the babbling whisper. "It's a trap!"

"Don't be a fool! How could he know? He's asleep. I hear him snorin'. We won't wake him. We'll step into the cabin and let him have it! We'll have enough light from the window to locate the bunk, and we'll rake it with lead before he can move. He'll wake up in Hell. Come on, and for God's sake, don't make no noise!"

The last advice was unnecessary. Each man, as he set his bare foot down, felt as if he were setting it into the lair of a diamond-backed rattler.

As they glided, one after another, across the threshold, they made less noise than the wind blowing through the black branches. They crouched by the door, straining their eyes across the room, whence came the rhythmic snoring. Enough light sifted through the small window to show them a vague outline that was a bunk, with a shapeless mass upon it.

A man caught his breath in a short, uncontrollable gasp. Then the cabin was shaken by a thunderous volley, three guns roaring together. Lead swept the bunk in a devastating storm, thudding into flesh and bone, smacking into wood. A wild cry broke in a gagging gasp. Limbs thrashed wildly and a heavy body tumbled to the floor. From the darkness on the floor beside the bunk welled up hideous sounds, choking gurgles and a convulsive flopping and thumping. The men crouching near the door poured lead blindly at the sounds. There was fear and panic in the haste and number of their shots. They did not cease jerking their triggers until their guns were empty, and the noises on the floor had ceased.

"Out of here, quick!" gasped one.

"No! Here's the table, and a candle on it. I felt it in the dark. I've got to *know* that he's dead before I leave this cabin. I've got to see him lyin' dead if I'm goin' to sleep easy. We've got plenty of time to get away. Folks down

the gulch must have heard the shots, but it'll take time for them to get here. No danger. I'm goin' to light the candle — “

There was a rasping sound, and a yellow light sprang up, etching three staring, bearded faces. Wisps of blue smoke blurred the light as the candle wick ignited from the fumbling match, but the men saw a huddled shape crumpled near the bunk, from which streams of dark crimson radiated in every direction.

“Ahhh!”

They whirled at the sound of running footsteps.

“Oh, God!” shrieked one of the men, falling to his knees, his hands lifted to shut out a terrible sight. The other ruffians staggered with the shock of what they saw. They stood gaping, livid, helpless, empty guns sagging in their hands.

For in the doorway, glaring in dangerous amazement, with a gun in each hand, stood the man whose lifeless body they thought lay over there by the splintered bunk!

“Drop them guns!” Corcoran rasped. They clattered on the floor as the hands of their owner mechanically reached skyward. The man on the floor staggered up, his hands empty; he retched, shaken by the nausea of fear.

“Joel Miller!” said Corcoran evenly; his surprise was passed, as he realized what had happened. “Didn’t know you run with Gorman’s crowd. Reckon Middleton’ll be some surprised, too.”

“You’re a devil!” gasped Miller. “You can’t be killed! We killed you — heard you roll off your bunk and die on the floor, in the dark. We kept shooting after we knew you were dead. But you’re alive!”

“You didn’t shoot me,” grunted Corcoran. “You shot a man you thought was me. I was comin’ up the road when I heard the shots. You killed Joe Willoughby! He was drunk and I reckon he staggered in here and fell in my bunk, like he’s done before.”

The men went whiter yet under their bushy beards, with rage and chagrin and fear.

“Willoughby!” babbled Miller. “The camp will never stand for this! Let us go, Corcoran! Hopkins and his crowd will hang us! It’ll mean the end of the Vultures! Your end, too, Corcoran! If they hang us, we’ll talk first! They’ll find out that you’re one of us!”

“In that case,” muttered Corcoran, his eyes narrowing, “I’d better kill the three of you. That’s the sensible solution. You killed Willoughby, tryin’

to get me; I kill you, in self-defense.”

“Don’t do it, Corcoran!” screamed Miller, frantic with terror.

“Shut up, you dog,” growled one of the other men, glaring balefully at their captor. “Corcoran wouldn’t shoot down unarmed men.”

“No, I wouldn’t,” said Corcoran. “Not unless you made some kind of a break. I’m peculiar that way, which I see is a handicap in this country. But it’s the way I was raised, and I can’t get over it. No, I ain’t goin’ to beef you cold, though you’ve just tried to get me that way.

“But I’ll be damned if I’m goin’ to let you sneak off, to come back here and try it again the minute you get your nerve bucked up. I’d about as soon be hanged by the vigilantes as shot in the back by a passle of rats like you-all. Vultures, hell! You ain’t even got the guts to be good buzzards.

“I’m goin’ to take you down the gulch and throw you in jail. It’ll be up to Middleton to decide what to do with you. He’ll probably work out some scheme that’ll swindle everybody except himself; but I warn you — one yap about the Vultures to anybody, and I’ll forget my raisin’ and send you to Hell with your belts empty and your boots on.”

The noise in the King of Diamonds was hushed suddenly as a man rushed in and bawled: “The Vultures have murdered Joe Willoughby! Steve Corcoran caught three of ‘em, and has just locked ‘em up! This time we’ve got some live Vultures to work on!”

A roar answered him and the gambling hall emptied itself as men rushed yelling into the street. John Middleton laid down his hand of cards, donned his white hat with a hand that was steady as a rock, and strode after them.

Already a crowd was surging and roaring around the jail. The miners were lashed into a murderous frenzy and were restrained from shattering the door and dragging forth the cowering prisoners only by the presence of Corcoran, who faced them on the jail-porch. McNab, Richardson and Stark were there, also. McNab was pale under his whiskers, and Stark seemed nervous and ill at ease, but Richardson, as always, was cold as ice.

“Hang ‘em!” roared the mob. “Let us have ‘em, Steve! You’ve done your part! This camp’s put up with enough! Let us have ‘em!”

Middleton climbed up on the porch, and was greeted by loud cheers, but his efforts to quiet the throng proved futile. Somebody brandished a rope with a noose in it. Resentment, long smoldering, was bursting into flame, fanned by hysterical fear and hate. The mob had no wish to harm either

Corcoran or Middleton — did not intend to harm them. But they were determined to drag out the prisoners and string them up.

Colonel Hopkins forced his way through the crowd, mounted the step, and waved his hands until he obtained a certain amount of silence.

“Listen, men!” he roared, “this is the beginning of a new era for Wahpeton! This camp has been terrorized long enough. We’re beginning a rule of law and order, right now! But don’t spoil it at the very beginning! These men shall hang — I swear it! But let’s do it legally, and with the sanction of law. Another thing: if you hang them out of hand, we’ll never learn who their companions and leaders are.

“Tomorrow, I promise you, a court of inquiry will sit on their case. They’ll be questioned and forced to reveal the men above and behind them. This camp is going to be cleaned up! Let’s clean it up lawfully and in order!”

“Colonel’s right!” bawled a bearded giant. “Ain’t no use to hang the little rats till we find out who’s the big ‘uns!”

A roar of approbation rose as the temper of the mob changed. It began to break up, as the men scattered to hasten back to the bars and indulge in their passion to discuss the new development.

Hopkins shook Corcoran’s hand heartily.

“Congratulations, sir! I’ve seen poor Joe’s body. A terrible sight. The fiends fairly shot the poor fellow to ribbons. Middleton, I told you the vigilantes wouldn’t usurp your authority in Wahpeton. I keep my word. We’ll leave these murderers in your jail, guarded by your deputies. Tomorrow the vigilante court will sit in session, and I hope we’ll come to the bottom of this filthy mess.”

And so saying he strode off, followed by a dozen or so steely-eyed men whom Middleton knew formed the nucleus of the Colonel’s organization.

When they were out of hearing, Middleton stepped to the door and spoke quickly to the prisoners: “Keep your mouths shut. You fools have gotten us all in a jam, but I’ll snake you out of it, somehow.” To McNab he spoke: “Watch the jail. Don’t let anybody come near it. Corcoran and I have got to talk this over.” Lowering his voice so the prisoners could not hear, he added: “If anybody does come, that you can’t order off, and these fools start shooting off their heads, close their mouths with lead.”

Corcoran followed Middleton into the shadow of the gulch wall. Out of earshot of the nearest cabin, Middleton turned. “Just what happened?”

“Gorman’s friends tried to get me. They killed Joe Willoughby by mistake. I hauled them in. That’s all.”

“That’s not all,” muttered Middleton. “There’ll be hell to pay if they come to trial. Miller’s yellow. He’ll talk, sure. I’ve been afraid Gorman’s friends would try to kill you — wondering how it would work out. It’s worked out just about the worst way it possibly could. You should either have killed them or let them go. Yet I appreciate your attitude. You have scruples against cold-blooded murder; and if you’d turned them loose, they’d have been back potting at you the next night.”

“I couldn’t have turned them loose if I’d wanted to. Men had heard the shots; they came runnin’; found me there holdin’ a gun on those devils, and Joe Willoughby’s body layin’ on the floor, shot to pieces.”

“I know. But we can’t keep members of our own gang in jail, and we can’t hand them over to the vigilantes. I’ve got to delay that trial, somehow. If I were ready, we’d jump tonight, and to hell with it. But I’m not ready. After all, perhaps it’s as well this happened. It may give us our chance to skip. We’re one jump ahead of the vigilantes and the gang, too. We know the vigilantes have formed and are ready to strike, and the rest of the gang don’t. I’ve told no one but you what Hopkins told me early in the evening.

“Listen, Corcoran, we’ve got to move tomorrow night! I wanted to pull one last job, the biggest of all — the looting of Hopkins and Bisley’s private cache. I believe I could have done it, in spite of all their guards and precautions. But we’ll have to let that slide. I’ll persuade Hopkins to put off the trial another day. I think I know how. Tomorrow night I’ll have the vigilantes and the Vultures at each others’ throats! We’ll load the mules and pull out while they’re fighting. Once let us get a good start, and they’re welcome to chase us if they want to.

“I’m going to find Hopkins now. You get back to the jail. If McNab talks to Miller or the others, be sure you listen to what’s said.”

Middleton found Hopkins in the Golden Eagle Saloon.

“I’ve come to ask a favor of you, Colonel,” he began directly. “I want you, if it’s possible, to put off the investigating trial until day after tomorrow. I’ve been talking to Joel Miller. He’s cracking. If I can get him away from Barlow and Letcher, and talk to him, I believe he’ll tell me everything I want to know. It’ll be better to get his confession, signed and sworn to, before we bring the matter into court. Before a judge, with all eyes on him, and his friends in the crowd, he might stiffen and refuse to

incriminate anyone. I don't believe the others will talk. But talking to me, alone, I believe Miller will spill the whole works. But it's going to take time to wear him down. I believe that by tomorrow night I'll have a full confession from him."

"That would make our work a great deal easier," admitted Hopkins.

"And another thing: these men ought to be represented by proper counsel. You'll prosecute them, of course; and the only other lawyer within reach is Judge Bixby, at Yankton. We're doing this thing in as close accordance to regular legal procedure as possible. Therefore we can't refuse the prisoner the right to be defended by an attorney. I've sent a man after Bixby. It will be late tomorrow evening before he can get back with the Judge, even if he has no trouble in locating him.

"Considering all these things, I feel it would be better to postpone the trial until we can get Bixby here, and until I can get Miller's confession."

"What will the camp think?"

"Most of them are men of reason. The few hotheads who might want to take matters into their own hands can't do any harm."

"All right," agreed Hopkins. "After all, they're your prisoners, since your deputy captured them, and the attempted murder of an officer of the law is one of the charges for which they'll have to stand trial. We'll set the trial for day after tomorrow. Meanwhile, work on Joel Miller. If we have his signed confession, naming the leaders of the gang, it will expedite matters a great deal at the trial."

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<code> CHAPTER 10

The Blood on the Gold

Wahpeton learned of the postponement of the trial and reacted in various ways. The air was surcharged with tension. Little work was done that day. Men gathering in heated, gesticulating groups, crowded in at the bars. Voices rose in hot altercation, fists pounded on the bars. Unfamiliar faces were observed, men who were seldom seen in the gulch — miners from claims in distant canyons, or more sinister figures from the hills, whose business was less obvious.

Lines of cleavage were noticed. Here and there clumps of men gathered, keeping to themselves and talking in low tones. In certain dives the ruffian element of the camp gathered, and these saloons were shunned by honest men. But still the great mass of the people milled about, suspicious and

uncertain. The status of too many men was still in doubt. Certain men were known to be above suspicion, certain others were known to be ruffians and criminals; but between these two extremes there were possibilities for all shades of distrust and suspicion.

So most men wandered aimlessly to and fro, with their weapons ready to their hands, glancing at their fellows out of the corners of their eyes.

To the surprise of all, Steve Corcoran was noticed at several bars, drinking heavily, though the liquor did not seem to affect him in any way.

The men in the jail were suffering from nerves. Somehow the word had gotten out that the vigilante organization was a reality, and that they were to be tried before a vigilante court. Joel Miller, hysterical, accused Middleton of double-crossing his men.

“Shut up, you fool!” snarled the sheriff, showing the strain under which he was laboring merely by the irascible edge on his voice. “Haven’t you seen your friends drifting by the jail? I’ve gathered the men in from the hills. They’re all here. Forty-odd men, every Vulture in the gang, is here in Wahpeton.

“Now, get this: and McNab, listen closely: we’ll stage the break just before daylight, when everybody is asleep. Just before dawn is the best time, because that’s about the only time in the whole twenty-four hours that the camp isn’t going full blast.

“Some of the boys, with masks on, will swoop down and overpower you deputies. There’ll be no shots fired until they’ve gotten the prisoners and started off. Then start yelling and shooting after them — in the air, of course. That’ll bring everybody on the run to hear how you were overpowered by a gang of masked riders.

“Miller, you and Letcher and Barlow will put up a fight — “

“Why?”

“Why, you fool, to make it look like it’s a mob that’s capturing you, instead of friends rescuing you. That’ll explain why none of the deputies are hurt. Men wanting to lynch you wouldn’t want to hurt the officers. You’ll yell and scream blue murder, and the men in the masks will drag you out, tie you and throw you across horses and ride off. Somebody is bound to see them riding away. It’ll look like a capture, not a rescue.”

Bearded lips gaped in admiring grins at the strategy.

“All right. Don’t make a botch of it. There’ll be hell to pay, but I’ll convince Hopkins that it was the work of a mob, and we’ll search the hills

to find your bodies hanging from trees. We won't find any bodies, naturally, but maybe we'll contrive to find a mass of ashes where a log hut had been burned to the ground, and a few hats and belt buckles easy to identify."

Miller shivered at the implication and stared at Middleton with painful intensity.

"Middleton, you ain't planning to have us put out of the way? These men in masks are our friends, not vigilantes you've put up to this?"

"Don't be a fool!" flared Middleton disgustedly. "Do you think the gang would stand for anything like that, even if I was imbecile enough to try it? You'll recognize your friends when they come.

"Miller, I want your name at the foot of a confession I've drawn up, implicating somebody as the leader of the Vultures. There's no use trying to deny you and the others are members of the gang. Hopkins knows you are; instead of trying to play innocent, you'll divert suspicion to someone outside the gang. I haven't filled in the name of the leader, but Dick Lennox is as good as anybody. He's a gambler, has few friends, and never would work with us. I'll write his name in your 'confession' as chief of the Vultures, and Corcoran will kill him 'for resisting arrest,' before he has time to prove that it's a lie. Then, before anybody has time to get suspicious, we'll make our last big haul — the raid on the Hopkins and Bisley cache! — and blow! Be ready to jump, when the gang swoops in.

"Miller, put your signature to this paper. Read it first if you want to. I'll fill in the blanks I left for the 'chief's' name later. Where's Corcoran?"

"I saw him in the Golden Eagle an hour ago," growled McNab. "He's drinkin' like a fish."

"Damnation!" Middleton's mask slipped a bit despite himself, then he regained his easy control. "Well, it doesn't matter. We won't need him tonight. Better for him not to be here when the jail break's made. Folks would think it was funny if he didn't kill somebody. I'll drop back later in the night."

Even a man of steel nerves feels the strain of waiting for a crisis. Corcoran was in this case no exception. Middleton's mind was so occupied in planning, scheming and conniving that he had little time for the strain to corrode his willpower. But Corcoran had nothing to occupy his attention until the moment came for the jump.

He began to drink, almost without realizing it. His veins seemed on fire, his external senses abnormally alert. Like most men of his breed he was

high-strung, his nervous system poised on a hair-trigger balance, in spite of his mask of unemotional coolness. He lived on, and for, violent action. Action kept his mind from turning inward; it kept his brain clear and his hand steady; failing action, he fell back on whisky. Liquor artificially stimulated him to that pitch which his temperament required. It was not fear that made his nerves thrum so intolerably. It was the strain of waiting inertly, the realization of the stakes for which they played. Inaction maddened him. Thought of the gold cached in the cave behind John Middleton's cabin made Corcoran's lips dry, set a nerve to pounding maddeningly in his temples.

So he drank, and drank, and drank again, as the long day wore on.

The noise from the bar was a blurred medley in the back room of the Golden Garter. Glory Bland stared uneasily across the table at her companion. Corcoran's blue eyes seemed lit by dancing fires. Tiny beads of perspiration shone on his dark face. His tongue was not thick; he spoke lucidly and without exaggeration; he had not stumbled when he entered. Nevertheless he was drunk, though to what extent the girl did not guess.

"I never saw you this way before, Steve," she said reproachfully.

"I've never had a hand in a game like this before," he answered, the wild flame flickering blue in his eyes. He reached across the table and caught her white wrist with an unconscious strength that made her wince. "Glory, I'm pullin' out of here tonight. I want you to go with me!"

"You're leaving Wahpeton? *Tonight?*"

"Yes. For good. Go with me! This joint ain't fit for you. I don't know how you got into this game, and I don't give a damn. But you're different from these other dance hall girls. I'm takin' you with me. I'll make a queen out of you! I'll cover you with diamonds!"

She laughed nervously.

"You're drunker than I thought. I know you've been getting a big salary, but —"

"Salary?" His laugh of contempt startled her. "I'll throw my salary into the street for the beggars to fight over. Once I told that fool Hopkins that I had a gold mine right here in Wahpeton. I told him no lie. I'm *rich!*"

"What do you mean?" She was slightly pale, frightened by his vehemence.

His fingers unconsciously tightened on her wrist and his eyes gleamed with the hard arrogance of possession and desire.

"You're mine, anyway," he muttered. "I'll kill any man that looks at you. But you're in love with me. I know it. Any fool could see it. I can trust you. You wouldn't dare betray me. I'll tell you. I wouldn't take you along without tellin' you the truth. Tonight Middleton and I are goin' over the mountains with a million dollars' worth of gold tied on pack mules!"

He did not see the growing light of incredulous horror in her eyes.

"A million in gold! It'd make a devil out of a saint! Middleton thinks he'll kill me when we get away safe, and grab the whole load. He's a fool. It'll be him that dies, when the time comes. I've planned while he planned. I didn't ever intend to split the loot with him. I wouldn't be a thief for less than a million."

"Middleton — " she choked.

"Yeah! He's chief of the Vultures, and I'm his right-hand man. If it hadn't been for me, the camp would have caught on long ago."

"But you upheld the law," she panted, as if clutching at straws. "You killed murderers — saved McBride from the mob."

"I killed men who tried to kill me. I shot as square with the camp as I could, without goin' against my own interests. That business of McBride has nothin' to do with it. I'd given him my word. That's all behind us now. Tonight, while the vigilantes and the Vultures kill each other, we'll *vamose*! And you'll go with me!"

With a cry of loathing she wrenched her hand away, and sprang up, her eyes blazing.

"Oh!" It was a cry of bitter disillusionment. "I thought you were straight — honest! I worshiped you because I thought you were honorable. So many men were dishonest and bestial — I idolized you! And you've just been pretending — playing a part! Betraying the people who trusted you!" The poignant anguish of her enlightenment choked her, then galvanized her with another possibility.

"I suppose you've been pretending with me, too!" she cried wildly. "If you haven't been straight with the camp, you couldn't have been straight with me, either! You've made a fool of me! Laughed at me and shamed me! And now you boast of it in my teeth!"

"Glory!" He was on his feet, groping for her, stunned and bewildered by her grief and rage. She sprang back from him.

"Don't touch me! Don't look at me! Oh, I hate the very sight of you!"

And turning, with an hysterical sob, she ran from the room. He stood swaying slightly, staring stupidly after her. Then fumbling with his hat, he stalked out, moving like an automaton. His thoughts were a confused maelstrom, whirling until he was giddy. All at once the liquor seethed madly in his brain, dulling his perceptions, even his recollections of what had just passed. He had drunk more than he realized.

Not long after dark had settled over Wahpeton, a low call from the darkness brought Colonel Hopkins to the door of his cabin, gun in hand.

“Who is it?” he demanded suspiciously.

“It’s Middleton. Let me in, quick!”

The sheriff entered, and Hopkins, shutting the door, stared at him in surprise. Middleton showed more agitation than the Colonel had ever seen him display. His face was pale and drawn. A great actor was lost to the world when John Middleton took the dark road of outlawry.

“Colonel, I don’t know what to say. I’ve been a blind fool. I feel that the lives of murdered men are hung about my neck for all Eternity! All through my blindness and stupidity!”

“What do you mean, John?” ejaculated Colonel Hopkins.

“Colonel, Miller talked at last. He just finished telling me the whole dirty business. I have his confession, written as he dictated.”

“He named the chief of the Vultures?” exclaimed Hopkins eagerly.

“He did!” answered Middleton grimly, producing a paper and unfolding it. Joel Miller’s unmistakable signature sprawled at the bottom. “Here is the name of the leader, dictated by Miller to me!”

“Good God!” whispered Hopkins. “Bill McNab!”

“Yes! My deputy! The man I trusted next to Corcoran. What a fool — what a blind fool I’ve been. Even when his actions seemed peculiar, even when you voiced your suspicions of him, I could not bring myself to believe it. But it’s all clear now. No wonder the gang always knew my plans as soon as I knew them myself! No wonder my deputies — before Corcoran came — were never able to kill or capture any Vultures. No wonder, for instance, that Tom Deal ‘escaped,’ before we could question him. That bullet hole in McNab’s arm, supposedly made by Deal — Miller told me McNab got that in a quarrel with one of his own gang. It came in handy to help pull the wool over my eyes.

“Colonel Hopkins, I’ll turn in my resignation tomorrow. I recommend Corcoran as my successor. I shall be glad to serve as deputy under him.”

“Nonsense, John!” Hopkins laid his hand sympathetically on Middleton’s shoulder. “It’s not your fault. You’ve played a man’s part all the way through. Forget that talk about resigning. Wahpeton doesn’t need a new sheriff; you just need some new deputies. Just now we’ve got some planning to do. Where is McNab?”

“At the jail, guarding the prisoners. I couldn’t remove him without exciting his suspicion. Of course he doesn’t dream that Miller has talked. And I learned something else. They plan a jailbreak shortly after midnight.”

“We might have expected that!”

“Yes. A band of masked men will approach the jail, pretend to overpower the guards — yes, Stark and Richardson are Vultures, too — and release the prisoners. Now this is my plan. Take fifty men and conceal them in the trees near the jail. You can plant some on one side, some on the other. Corcoran and I will be with you, of course. When the bandits come, we can kill or capture them all at one swoop. We have the advantage of knowing their plans, without their knowing we know them.”

“That’s a good plan, John!” warmly endorsed Hopkins. “You should have been a general. I’ll gather the men at once. Of course, we must use the utmost secrecy.”

“Of course. If we work it right, we’ll bag prisoners, deputies and rescuers with one stroke. We’ll break the back of the Vultures!”

“John, don’t ever talk resignation to me again!” exclaimed Hopkins, grabbing his hat and buckling on his gun-belt. “A man like you ought to be in the Senate. Go get Corcoran. I’ll gather my men and we’ll be in our places before midnight. McNab and the others in the jail won’t hear a sound.”

“Good! Corcoran and I will join you before the Vultures reach the jail.”

Leaving Hopkins’ cabin, Middleton hurried to the bar of the King of Diamonds. As he drank, a rough-looking individual moved casually up beside him. Middleton bent his head over his whisky glass and spoke, hardly moving his lips. None could have heard him a yard away.

“I’ve just talked to Hopkins. The vigilantes are afraid of a jail break. They’re going to take the prisoners out just before daylight and hang them out of hand. That talk about legal proceedings was just a bluff. Get all the boys, go to the jail and get the prisoners out within a half-hour after midnight. Wear your masks, but let there be no shooting or yelling. I’ll tell McNab our plan’s been changed. Go silently. Leave your horses at least a

quarter of a mile down the gulch and sneak up to the jail on foot, so you won't make so much noise. Corcoran and I will be hiding in the brush to give you a hand in case anything goes wrong."

The other man had not looked toward Middleton; he did not look now. Emptying his glass, he strolled deliberately toward the door. No casual onlooker could have known that any words had passed between them.

When Glory Bland ran from the backroom of the Golden Garter, her soul was in an emotional turmoil that almost amounted to insanity. The shock of her brutal disillusionment vied with passionate shame of her own gullibility and an unreasoning anger. Out of this seething cauldron grew a blind desire to hurt the man who had unwittingly hurt her. Smarting vanity had its part, too, for with characteristic and illogical feminine conceit, she believed that he had practiced an elaborate deception in order to fool her into falling in love with him — or rather with the man she thought he was. If he was false with men, he must be false with women, too. That thought sent her into hysterical fury, blind to all except a desire for revenge. She was a primitive, elemental young animal, like most of her profession of that age and place; her emotions were powerful and easily stirred, her passions stormy. Love could change quickly to hate.

She reached an instant decision. She would find Hopkins and tell him everything Corcoran had told her! In that instant she desired nothing so much as the ruin of the man she had loved.

She ran down the crowded street, ignoring men who pawed at her and called after her. She hardly saw the people who stared after her. She supposed that Hopkins would be at the jail, helping guard the prisoners, and she directed her steps thither. As she ran up on the porch Bill McNab confronted her with a leer, and laid a hand on her arm, laughing when she jerked away.

"Come to see me, Glory? Or are you lookin' for Corcoran?"

She struck his hand away. His words, and the insinuating guffaws of his companions were sparks enough to touch off the explosives seething in her.

"You fool! You're being sold out, and don't know it!"

The leer vanished.

"What do you mean?" he snarled.

"I mean that your boss is fixing to skip out with all the gold you thieves have grabbed!" she blurted, heedless of consequences, in her emotional

storm, indeed scarcely aware of what she was saying. "He and Corcoran are going to leave you holding the sack, tonight!"

And not seeing the man she was looking for, she eluded McNab's grasp, jumped down from the porch and darted away in the darkness.

The deputies stared at each other, and the prisoners, having heard everything, began to clamor to be turned out.

"Shut up!" snarled McNab. "She may be lyin'. Might have had a quarrel with Corcoran and took this fool way to get even with him. We can't afford to take no chances. We've got to be sure we know what we're doin' before we move either way. We can't afford to let you out now, on the chance that she might be lyin'. But we'll give you weapons to defend yourselves.

"Here, take these rifles and hide 'em under the bunks. Pete Daley, you stay here and keep folks shooed away from the jail till we get back. Richardson, you and Stark come with me! We'll have a showdown with Middleton right now!"

When Glory left the jail she headed for Hopkins' cabin. But she had not gone far when a reaction shook her. She was like one waking from a nightmare, or a dope-jag. She was still sickened by the discovery of Corcoran's duplicity in regard to the people of the camp, but she began to apply reason to her suspicions of his motives in regard to herself. She began to realize that she had acted illogically. If Corcoran's attitude toward her was not sincere, he certainly would not have asked her to leave the camp with him. At the expense of her vanity she was forced to admit that his attentions to her had not been necessary in his game of duping the camp. That was something apart; his own private business; it must be so. She had suspected him of trifling with her affections, but she had to admit that she had no proof that he had ever paid the slightest attention to any other woman in Wahpeton. No; whatever his motives or actions in general, his feeling toward her must be sincere and real.

With a shock she remembered her present errand, her reckless words to McNab. Despair seized her, in which she realized that she loved Steve Corcoran in spite of all he might be. Chill fear seized her that McNab and his friends would kill her lover. Her unreasoning fury died out, gave way to frantic terror.

Turning she ran swiftly down the gulch toward Corcoran's cabin. She was hardly aware of it when she passed through the blazing heart of the

camp. Lights and bearded faces were like a nightmarish blur, in which nothing was real but the icy terror in her heart.

She did not realize it when the clusters of cabins fell behind her. The patter of her slippered feet in the road terrified her, and the black shadows under the trees seemed pregnant with menace. Ahead of her she saw Corcoran's cabin at last, a light streaming through the open door. She burst into the office-room, panting — and was confronted by Middleton who wheeled with a gun in his hand.

"What the devil are you doing here?" He spoke without friendliness, though he returned the gun to its scabbard.

"Where's Corcoran?" she panted. Fear took hold of her as she faced the man she now knew was the monster behind the grisly crimes that had made a reign of terror over Wahpeton Gulch. But fear for Corcoran overshadowed her own terror.

"I don't know. I looked for him through the bars a short time ago, and didn't find him. I'm expecting him here any minute. What do you want with him?"

"That's none of your business," she flared.

"It might be." He came toward her, and the mask had fallen from his dark, handsome face. It looked wolfish.

"You were a fool to come here. You pry into things that don't concern you. You know too much. You talk too much. Don't think I'm not wise to you! I know more about you than you suspect."

A chill fear froze her. Her heart seemed to be turning to ice. Middleton was like a stranger to her, a terrible stranger. The mask was off, and the evil spirit of the man was reflected in his dark, sinister face. His eyes burned her like actual coals.

"I didn't pry into secrets," she whispered with dry lips. "I didn't ask any questions. I never before suspected you were the chief of the Vultures —"

The expression of his face told her she had made an awful mistake.

"So you know that!" His voice was soft, almost a whisper, but murder stood stark and naked in his flaming eyes. "I didn't know that. I was talking about something else. Conchita told me it was you who told Corcoran about the plan to lynch McBride. I wouldn't have killed you for that, though it interfered with my plans. But you know too much. After tonight it wouldn't matter. But tonight's not over yet —"

“Oh!” she moaned, staring with dilated eyes as the big pistol slid from its scabbard in a dull gleam of blue steel. She could not move, she could not cry out. She could only cower dumbly until the crash of the shot knocked her to the floor.

As Middleton stood above her, the smoking gun in his hand, he heard a stirring in the room behind him. He quickly upset the long table, so it could hide the body of the girl, and turned, just as the door opened. Corcoran came from the back room, blinking, a gun in his hand. It was evident that he had just awakened from a drunken sleep, but his hands did not shake, his pantherish tread was sure as ever, and his eyes were neither dull nor bloodshot.

Nevertheless Middleton swore.

“Corcoran, are you crazy?”

“You shot?”

“I shot at a snake that crawled across the floor. You must have been mad, to soak up liquor today, of all days!”

“I’m all right,” muttered Corcoran, shoving his gun back in its scabbard.

“Well, come on. I’ve got the mules in the clump of trees next to my cabin. Nobody will see us load them. Nobody will see us go. We’ll go up the ravine beyond my cabin, as we planned. There’s nobody watching my cabin tonight. All the Vultures are down in the camp, waiting for the signal to move. I’m hoping none will escape the vigilantes, and that most of the vigilantes themselves are killed in the fight that’s sure to come. Come on! We’ve got thirty mules to load, and that job will take us from now until midnight, at least. We won’t pull out until we hear the guns on the other side of the camp.”

“Listen!”

It was footsteps, approaching the cabin almost at a run. Both men wheeled and stood motionless as McNab loomed in the door. He lurched into the room, followed by Richardson and Stark. Instantly the air was supercharged with suspicion, hate, tension. Silence held for a tick of time.

“You fools!” snarled Middleton. “What are you doing away from the jail?”

“We came to talk to you,” said McNab. “We’ve heard that you and Corcoran planned to skip with the gold.”

Never was Middleton’s superb self-control more evident. Though the shock of that blunt thunderbolt must have been terrific, he showed no

emotion that might not have been showed by any honest man, falsely accused.

“Are you utterly mad?” he ejaculated, not in a rage, but as if amazement had submerged whatever anger he might have felt at the charge.

McNab shifted his great bulk uneasily, not sure of his ground. Corcoran was not looking at him, but at Richardson, in whose cold eyes a lethal glitter was growing. More quickly than Middleton, Corcoran sensed the inevitable struggle in which this situation must culminate.

“I’m just sayin’ what we heard. Maybe it’s so, maybe it ain’t. If it ain’t, there’s no harm done,” said McNab slowly. “On the chance that it was so, I sent word for the boys not to wait till midnight. They’re goin’ to the jail within the next half-hour and take Miller and the rest out.”

Another breathless silence followed that statement. Middleton did not bother to reply. His eyes began to smolder. Without moving, he yet seemed to crouch, to gather himself for a spring. He had realized what Corcoran had already sensed; that this situation was not to be passed over by words, that a climax of violence was inevitable.

Richardson knew this; Stark seemed merely puzzled. McNab, if he had any thoughts, concealed the fact.

“Say you *was* intendin’ to skip,” he said, “this might be a good chance, while the boys was takin’ Miller and them off up into the hills. I don’t know. I ain’t accusin’ you. I’m just askin’ you to clear yourself. You can do it easy. Just come back to the jail with us and help get the boys out.”

Middleton’s answer was what Richardson, instinctive man-killer, had sensed it would be. He whipped out a gun in a blur of speed. And even as it cleared leather, Richardson’s gun was out. But Corcoran had not taken his eyes off the cold-eyed gunman, and his draw was the quicker by a lightning-flicker. Quick as was Middleton, both the other guns spoke before his, like a double detonation. Corcoran’s slug blasted Richardson’s brains just in time to spoil his shot at Middleton. But the bullet grazed Middleton so close that it caused him to miss McNab with his first shot.

McNab’s gun was out and Stark was a split second behind him. Middleton’s second shot and McNab’s first crashed almost together, but already Corcoran’s guns had sent lead ripping through the giant’s flesh. His ball merely flicked Middleton’s hair in passing, and the chief’s slug smashed full into his brawny breast. Middleton fired again and yet again as

the giant was falling. Stark was down, dying on the floor, having pulled trigger blindly as he fell, until the gun was empty.

Middleton stared wildly about him, through the floating blue fog of smoke that veiled the room. In that fleeting instant, as he glimpsed Corcoran's image-like face, he felt that only in such a setting as this did the Texan appear fitted. Like a somber figure of Fate he moved implacably against a background of blood and slaughter.

"God!" gasped Middleton. "That was the quickest, bloodiest fight I was ever in!" Even as he talked he was jamming cartridges into his empty gun chambers.

"We've got no time to lose now! I don't know how much McNab told the gang of his suspicions. He must not have told them much, or some of them would have come with him. Anyway, their first move will be to liberate the prisoners. I have an idea they'll go through with that just as we planned, even when McNab doesn't return to lead them. They won't come looking for him, or come after us, until they turn Miller and the others loose.

"It just means the fight will come within the half-hour instead of at midnight. The vigilantes will be there by that time. They're probably lying in ambush already. Come on! We've got to sling gold on those mules like devils. We may have to leave some of it; we'll know when the fight's started, by the sound of the guns! One thing, nobody will come up here to investigate the shooting. All attention is focused on the jail!"

Corcoran followed him out of the cabin, then turned back with a muttered: "Left a bottle of whisky in that back room."

"Well, hurry and get it and come on!" Middleton broke into a run toward his cabin, and Corcoran re-entered the smoke-veiled room. He did not glance at the crumpled bodies which lay on the crimson-stained floor, staring glassily up at him. With a stride he reached the back room, groped in his bunk until he found what he wanted, and then strode again toward the outer door, the bottle in his hand.

The sound of a low moan brought him whirling about, a gun in his left hand. Startled, he stared at the figures on the floor. He knew none of them had moaned; all three were past moaning. Yet his ears had not deceived him.

His narrowed eyes swept the cabin suspiciously, and focused on a thin trickle of crimson that stole from under the upset table as it lay on its side

near the wall. None of the corpses lay near it.

He pulled aside the table and halted as if shot through the heart, his breath catching in a convulsive gasp. An instant later he was kneeling beside Glory Bland, cradling her golden head in his arm. His hand, as he brought the whisky bottle to her lips, shook queerly.

Her magnificent eyes lifted toward him, glazed with pain. But by some miracle the delirium faded, and she knew him in her last few moments of life.

"Who did this?" he choked. Her white throat was laced by a tiny trickle of crimson from her lips.

"Middleton — " she whispered. "Steve, oh, Steve — I tried — " And with the whisper uncompleted she went limp in his arms. Her golden head lolled back; she seemed like a child, a child just fallen asleep. Dazedly he eased her to the floor.

Corcoran's brain was clear of liquor as he left the cabin, but he staggered like a drunken man. The monstrous, incredible thing that had happened left him stunned, hardly able to credit his own senses. It had never occurred to him that Middleton would kill a woman, that any white man would. Corcoran lived by his own code, and it was wild and rough and hard, violent and incongruous, but it included the conviction that womankind was sacred, immune from the violence that attended the lives of men. This code was as much a vital, living element of the life of the Southwestern frontier as was personal honor, and the resentment of insult. Without pompousness, without pretentiousness, without any of the tawdry glitter and sham of a false chivalry, the people of Corcoran's breed practiced this code in their daily lives. To Corcoran, as to his people, a woman's life and body were inviolate. It had never occurred to him that that code would, or could be violated, or that there could be any other kind.

Cold rage swept the daze from his mind and left him crammed to the brim with murder. His feelings toward Glory Bland had approached the normal love experienced by the average man as closely as was possible for one of his iron nature. But if she had been a stranger, or even a person he had disliked, he would have killed Middleton for outraging a code he had considered absolute.

He entered Middleton's cabin with the soft stride of a stalking panther. Middleton was bringing bulging buckskin sacks from the cave, heaping

them on a table in the main room. He staggered with their weight. Already the table was almost covered.

“Get busy!” he exclaimed. Then he halted short, at the blaze in Corcoran’s eyes. The fat sacks spilled from his arms, thudding on the floor.

“You killed Glory Bland!” It was almost a whisper from the Texan’s livid lips.

“Yes.” Middleton’s voice was even. He did not ask how Corcoran knew, he did not seek to justify himself. He knew the time for argument was past. He did not think of his plans, or of the gold on the table, or that still back there in the cave. A man standing face to face with Eternity sees only the naked elements of life and death.

“*Draw!*” A catamount might have spat the challenge, eyes flaming, teeth flashing.

Middleton’s hand was a streak to his gun butt. Even in that flash he knew he was beaten — heard Corcoran’s gun roar just as he pulled trigger. He swayed back, falling, and in a blind gust of passion Corcoran emptied both guns into him as he crumpled.

For a long moment that seemed ticking into Eternity the killer stood over his victim, a somber, brooding figure that might have been carved from the iron night of the Fates. Off toward the other end of the camp other guns burst forth suddenly, in salvo after thundering salvo. The fight that was plotted to mask the flight of the Vulture chief had begun. But the figure which stood above the dead man in the lonely cabin did not seem to hear.

Corcoran looked down at his victim, vaguely finding it strange, after all, that all those bloody schemes and terrible ambitions should end like that, in a puddle of oozing blood on a cabin floor. He lifted his head to stare somberly at the bulging sacks on the table. Revulsion gagged him.

A sack had split, spilling a golden stream that glittered evilly in the candlelight. His eyes were no longer blinded by the yellow sheen. For the first time he saw the blood on that gold, it was black with blood; the blood of innocent men; the blood of a woman. The mere thought of touching it nauseated him, made him feel as if the slime that had covered John Middleton’s soul would befoul him. Sickly he realized that some of Middleton’s guilt was on his own head. He had not pulled the trigger that ripped a woman’s life from her body; but he had worked hand-in-glove with the man destined to be her murderer — Corcoran shuddered and a clammy sweat broke out upon his flesh.

Down the gulch the firing had ceased, faint yells came to him, freighted with victory and triumph. Many men must be shouting at once, for the sound to carry so far. He knew what it portended; the Vultures had walked into the trap laid for them by the man they trusted as a leader. Since the firing had ceased, it meant the whole band were either dead or captives. Wahpeton's reign of terror had ended.

But he must stir. There would be prisoners, eager to talk. Their speech would weave a noose about his neck.

He did not glance again at the gold, gleaming there where the honest people of Wahpeton would find it. Striding from the cabin he swung on one of the horses that stood saddled and ready among the trees. The lights of the camp, the roar of the distant voices fell away behind him, and before him lay what wild destiny he could not guess. But the night was full of haunting shadows, and within him grew a strange pain, like a revelation; perhaps it was his soul, at last awakening.

He braced himself against the sight as he entered the cabin of death. Then he started and went livid under his sun-burnt hue. *Glory was not lying as he had left her!* With a low cry he reached her, lifted her in his arms. He felt life, pulsing strongly under his hands.

“Glory! For God’s sake!” Her eyes were open, not so glazed now, though shadowed by pain and bewilderment. Her arms groped toward him. He lifted and carried her into the back room, laid her on the bunk where Joe Willoughby had received his death wounds. His mind was a whirling turmoil, as he felt with practiced fingers of the darkly-clotted wound at the edge of her golden hair.

“Steve,” she whimpered. “I’m afraid! Middleton — “

“He won’t hurt you any more. Don’t talk. I’m goin’ to wash that wound and dress it.”

Working fast and skillfully, he washed the blood away with a rag torn from her petticoat — as being the cleanest material he could find — and soaked in water and whisky. Corcoran had just ceased bandaging her head when she struggled upright, despite his profane objections, and caught at his arm.

“Steve!” Her eyes were wide with fear. “You must go — go quick! I was crazy — I told McNab what you told me — told Middleton, too, that’s why he shot me. They’ll kill you.”

“Not them,” he muttered. “Do you feel better now?”

“Oh, don’t mind me! Go! Please go! Oh, Steve, I must have been mad! I betrayed you! I was coming here to tell you that I had, to warn you to get away, when I met Middleton. Where is he?”

“In Hell, where he ought to have been years ago,” grunted Corcoran. “Never mind. But the vigilantes will be headin’ this way soon as some of the rats they’ve caught get to talkin’. I’ve got to dust out. But I’ll take you back to the Golden Garter first.”

“Steve, you’re mad! You’d run your head into a noose! Get on your horse and ride!”

“Will you go with me?” His hands closed on her, hurting her with their unconscious strength.

“You still want me, after — after what I did?” she gasped.

“I’ve always wanted you, since I first saw you. I always will. Forgive you? There’s nothin’ to forgive. Nothin’ you could have ever done could be

anywhere near as black as what I've been for the past month. I've been like a mad dog; the gold blinded me. I'm awake now. And I want you."

For answer her arms groped about his neck, clung convulsively; he felt the moisture of her passionate tears on his throat. Lifting her, he carried her out of the cabin, pressing her face against his breast that she might not see the stark figures lying there in their splashes of crimson.

An instant later he was settled in the saddle, holding her before him, cradled like a child in his muscular arms. He had wrapped his coat about her, and the pale oval of her face stared up at his like a white blossom in the night. Her arms still clung to him, as if she feared he might be torn from her.

"How the lights blaze over the camp!" she murmured irrelevantly, as they climbed toward the ravine.

"Take a good look," he said, his voice harsh with suppressed and unfamiliar emotions. "It's our old life we're leavin' behind, and I hope we're headin' for a better one. And as a beginnin', we're goin' to get married the first town we hit."

An incoherent murmur was her only reply as she snuggled closer in his arms; behind them the lights of the camp, the distant roar of voices fell away and grew blurred in the distance. But it seemed to Corcoran that they rode in a blaze of glory, that emanated not from moon nor stars, but from his own breast. And perhaps it was his soul, at last awakened.

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