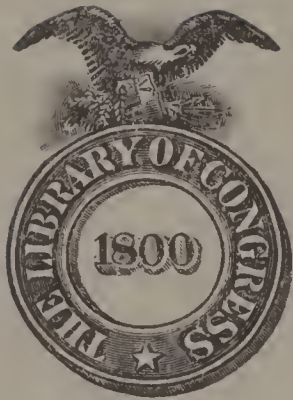


THE VALLEY OF STRIFE

MARSHALL R. HALL



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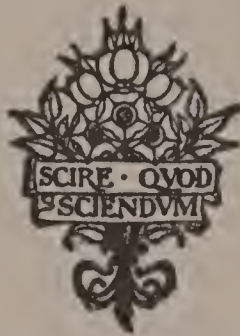
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THE
VALLEY OF STRIFE

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BY
MARSHALL R. HALL



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THE
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CHAPTER I

CLIVE FINDS A MYSTERY

CLIVE MORGAN stamped out the last remnant of his breakfast fire and turned to the stalwart black horse that grazed near by at the end of a picket rope. His light travelling pack was already rolled and tied in position behind the cantle of his saddle. He threw the ensemble across the black's sturdy back, talking gently into the animal's left ear as he drew the cinch tight.

"We got to be on our way, Thunder, old hoss. We got to find a job if we're a-goin' to keep on eatin'. 'Course, yuh old sinner, yuh ain't got no worries on that score, for all yuh need is some lush grass and yo're happy; but yore Uncle Dudley, now—well, that's a heap different, as the feller says."

He swung lightly into the saddle, touching a match to the end of a brown-paper cigarette and pinching out the blaze with careful fingers before tossing the charred ember aside. Then he urged the horse through the tiny stream he had camped

beside the night before, and turned it down the dim trail he had followed for days through the vastness of the Mogollon range.

An hour later horse and rider skirted one of the countless painted ribs that helped to form the Mogollons and came out on a narrow bench, down which the trail wound precipitously. The man again addressed his mount:

“It’s a-goin’ to be tough sleddin’, Thunder, old hoss, but I guess we b’en down worse ones than this. Get along, yuh old chromo.”

High overhead hung the perfect blue of the Arizona sky, while on either hand the painted ribs of the range glowed amber and crimson, yellow and brown. In the canyons and gorges the deeper shades of purple and blue-black blended in sublime harmony. Fresh and dry and warm the air carried the pungent scent of wild chokecherries, just coming into bloom; of acrid, gray-blue sage and strong palo verde. Indian paint brushes nodded gay plumes, brightening the scene but lending no aroma to the fragrant breeze.

It was a land of sheer delight; Arizona and spring. Nowhere on earth did the combination of time and place hold more charm, more lure, and nowhere was it more prone to awaken the latent urge in the human soul, bidding it be up and doing.

Clive, drawing in great lungfuls of life-giving ozone, sighed contentedly, dismissing worry and giving himself over to delight in the joys of a perfect day. His pony had negotiated the steep

descent into the foothills and was now loping smoothly along the crest of a gently sloping ridge, which apparently was leading into a valley.

A few minutes later man and mount left the ridge, crossed a purling stream and came out of the canyons and gulches onto a broad, smooth bench, where no obstacle rose up to obscure the vision. Clive, drinking in the sight thus afforded, swore happily.

Stretching far off on either hand and straight ahead was a valley — literally a paradise. Blanketed with the first verdant coat of lush grass and studded liberally with clumps of cottonwood the valley spread away in three directions.

To the north, towering peaks finally rose up to hem it in. Straight out and across the broad, level acres, more lofty pinnacles of the Mogollons reared their somber crests toward the cerulean blue. To the south the mountains closed in again, but not so abruptly. In that direction a saddle in the range indicated a pass existed, affording comparatively easy ingress and egress for the denizens of the valley. To the west were the main peaks of the Mogollons, from which Clive was even now emerging.

Again he addressed his horse:

“That shore is a likely lookin’ prospect for us, Thunder. See them cows? See them ranches all scattered up and down the river? Don’t that look like home, old timer? I’ll tell a man it does. We got to find a job here, old hoss, and that’s all there

is to it. Get along now, and mind yore manners when we hit civylization ag'in."

Thunder moved easily and rapidly down out of the hills, never slackening his pace. The valley, from Clive's recent vantage point, had seemed extremely near, but he knew this was partly because of the magnifying qualities of the Arizona air. Therefore, he was not surprised when his watch told him a good three hours had elapsed before his horse emerged from the last outjutting point of the foothills and turned out across the valley's fertile soil.

Then for Clive began a day devoted to that which he hated doing more than anything else in the world — hunting a job. An hour after entering the valley he rode into a well kept ranchyard and looked around. An air of silence hung over the place and there was distinctly lacking the usual jovial atmosphere of the western cattle ranch. He saw a hatchet-faced man sitting on the corral fence and asked him concerning prospects for a job.

A surly negative was the only response his question elicited and he turned down a narrow road leading to what seemed to be the main highway — a highway that led off toward the saddle in the hills, miles and miles to the south. It was two hours before he reached the next ranch.

Here his reception was even cooler than the one accorded him at the first ranch. It was almost noon and the tantalizing odor of cooking things, wafting from the kitchen, assailed his nostrils, causing his

mouth to water and his stomach to gnaw. He had visions of a sumptuous dinner surrounded by a crowd of boisterous buckaroos, but his visions were short-lived.

A gruff-voiced foreman with only one eye and a badly mutilated ear informed him no hands were needed, and intimated that it would be as well if he skedaddled right along. And once again Clive was impressed with the air of unnatural quiet. Back on the highway he meditated sourly.

“Fine bunch of dodderin’ old dodo birds them fellers is. What in hell’s wrong with everybody? Yuh’d think, by cripes, I was a cow thief, the way they looks at me and insinooates my absence is preferred to muh comp’ny. Aw, shucks, Thunder; mebbe they just got indigesting or somethin’. We’ll try the next place.”

He fancied he was about midway of the valley. He was still heading south. He had no way of telling how long it would be until he came across another ranch, but he did know it would be a considerable time, for before him, as far as his eyes could reach across the rolling valley there were only vistas of undulating green, clumps of cottonwood and grazing herds. Off to his right, a long, snaky line of willows and higher, greener cottonwoods told him a river purled along, probably the stream he had visioned earlier in the day from his vantage point on the bench. He found the road was heading toward it.

Hunger was beginning to gnaw keenly at his

vitals and for a time he considered the advisability of stopping and cooking something from the dwindling supplies in his saddle roll. In the end he drew the belt of his chaps tighter, lit another cigarette and urged Thunder on at a faster pace.

After a time he passed what apparently was the last of the line fences and came out on a vast territory of range land, and ideal cattle country. Scattered herds of unattended steers grazed here and save for the gray-blue clumps of sage, scrub cottonwood and an occasional suhuara cactus, the earth was a solid mass of tall, luscious grass. The river drew nearer and Thunder pricked up his ears at the promise of refreshments.

Keen and sharp, like the crack of a bull-whip, the report of a rifle crashed through the stillness of the valley. Clive reined in Thunder and gazed at a tiny wisp of pale smoke that curled upward from some scrub willows, a hundred yards ahead. His impulse was to drop from the black's back and seek shelter, but when a second report split the silence he decided there was something ahead that was worth investigating.

Touching his stirrups to the horse's foam-flecked sides he urged it onward. His right hand swung loosely near the bone-handled grip of a .45 which hung at his hip. As he neared the willows his body tensed and his gray eyes became more alert. But nothing untoward happened. With a rush he rounded the willows and paused on the brink of the purling stream, a startled oath on his lips.

In the middle of the river was a buckboard and the waters swirled and foamed in an angry torrent across the bodies of two dead horses that were still fast to the traces. On the seat of the buckboard, her body rigid and her eyes fear-filled, sat a girl.

And such a girl! She was dressed in a flaring tan skirt and white shirtwaist, while from her throat hung a brilliant scarlet muffler. Her head was bare and crowned with a mass of soft brown hair. Her face was pale, but her fear had not driven the vivid scarlet from her lips, nor marred the perfect contour and form of her beautiful features.

As Clive, staring at her, regained his breath and started to call out, the girl saw him. In a flash her rigid pose vanished and the fear in her eyes was replaced by flaring hate. Her right hand moved upward and forward. Clive saw the gleam of sunlight on the nicked barrel of a pistol and even as she shot he dropped from the saddle and rolled swiftly into the protecting willows.

“What the hell?” he cried in surprise; then, regaining his poise, he peered cautiously through the slender trunks, his gaze seeking the girl. She was standing, but her revolver was no longer aimed; instead, it hung at her side and she obviously was seeking a glimpse of him. He heard her voice:

“Whoever you are, I beg your pardon. I thought it was you who shot my horses, but I see I was mistaken. Please come out.”

Clive raised his head a trifle.

“Are yuh dead shore yuh won’t take no more pot shots at me, ma’am?” he called.

“I shan’t shoot,” she replied. “I see by your horse that you are not the man I took you for. He was riding a piebald.”

Clive left the willow clump and regained his mount, swinging lightly into the saddle and urging the animal forward into the stream. Beside the buckboard he drew rein and lifted his broad-brimmed, dimpled sombrero, hanging it across his saddle-horn.

“Yuh seem to be havin’ a heap of trouble, ma’am,” he observed mildly, eyeing her calmly. “Can I help yuh any?”

“You can help me out of this buckboard and set me on dry land,” she answered, thrusting her gun into a businesslike holster that swung from a belt about her slender waist.

Clive set his hat slantingly on his moist brown locks and maneuvered his horse close to the buckboard. The girl stepped to the top of a wheel and leaned toward him. He reached out and clasped her in one lithe, muscular arm, swinging her against his side. Holding her thus he pointed his pony’s head toward the shore opposite to that he had recently vacated.

He felt the girl’s lithe form pressed against him, felt the cling of her soft, firmly-moulded arms. A wisp of her hair blew across his face and he breathed of some subtle aroma that hinted of the mystery that is woman. His arm held her firmly.

Twenty feet beyond the water's edge he stopped the black, leaned down and deposited the girl gently on her feet. Then he dropped quickly from the saddle and stood before her, hat in hand.

"There yuh are, ma'am," he said easily. "I'm uncommon su'prised at findin' yuh like I did, and I'd plumb admire to be a-hearin' how yuh come to be in such a dang' onhandy fix."

The girl's face was still pale and he saw that she was trembling. It was the reaction from the strain of her recent adventure working on her, and he suggested that she find a seat on a fallen willow near by; but she shook her head, her eyes darting about her, a worried look in their depths.

She gazed at him searchingly and something she saw in his eyes perhaps made her more at ease. After a moment she said:

"I was where you found me because a hidden gunman shot my horse." She endeavored to make her voice firm. "I did not see his face, but I know he rode a piebald horse. I glimpsed the animal immediately after the second shot, when the man rode upstream under cover of the willows. I think he heard your horse's hoof-beats and was frightened off. At first I thought you were his confederate; that is why I shot at you."

"But what is the idea of anybody shootin' yore hosses, ma'am?"

It was a natural question under the circumstances, and one that ordinarily would call for an answer. The girl shook her head, a little sadly.

“ I don’t know you, nor how much I can say to you. I have said things before, to my sorrow. What outfit are you riding for?”

For the first time Clive grinned.

“ Me? I’m a-workin’ for the first *hombre* that hires me. Just at the present my only occupation is huntin’ a place to sling my turkey and shove muh feet under a chuck table. In short, as yuh prob’ly surmise by now, I ain’t got any more job than a horned-toad’s got whiskers.”

The girl appeared surprised and a little suspicious. Clive found himself wondering if she were about to exhibit the same spirit of sullen unrest he had found elsewhere in this valley; if she, too, were going to turn out to be sour and surly. She looked at him keenly.

“ Then, what on earth are you doing here?”

“ I’m a-doin’ the most natural thing in the world, ma’am — lookin’ for a job, and I’m a-needin’ one mighty bad. I was just a-tellin’ Thunder, that’s my hoss, there, this mornin’ that if I didn’t get a job purty soon I’d have to quit eatin’. ’Course, that didn’t worry Thunder none, ’cause he can most always find some lush grass and when he’s got plenty of that he’s happy. A *caballo* like Thunder don’t know how gosh dang’ lucky he is.”

“ How long have you been here?” she questioned.

“ I pree-sume yuh mean how long since I hit this valley, and it ain’t no trouble to answer that. I blowed out of the Mogollons (he pronounced it

Mokiyones) this mornin' shortly after sunrise and I be'n here ever since. 'Tain't be'n much of a visit, though; leastwise, I wouldn't call it such. First place I hits up for a job, I'm given the high sign to pull muh leather and pull it quick. I reaches another place, 'long about noon, and they was a-cookin' dinner. Say, them onmannerly cusses didn't even invite me to chaw. Foreman told me to skedaddle and keep right on skedaddlin' till I got tired. I was a-hittin' it down this-a-way to find another ranch when I heard a shot and then another. I come a-runnin' to find you high and skeered out there in that water."

The girl was betraying fresh symptoms of nervousness. She was plainly anxious about something.

"I hardly know how to take you. You seem to be truthful, yet I have been deceived so many times that I am fearful of trusting any one. However, we must not remain here. That rifleman may return and he may bring help. If he does, we do not want to be found here. Your revolver would be no match for a rifle; besides, I have had enough excitement for one day. Come, we will go."

"Whatever yuh say," replied Clive. "But where'll we go?"

The girl again glanced at him keenly.

"Will your horse carry double?" she asked quickly.

"Ma'am, that horse'll do most anything I tell him, even to tryin' to stand on his haid. You just

climb aboard and I'll swing up behind yuh, then we'll be off whichever way yuh want to head."

Without further ado she swung into the saddle and he vaulted up behind her, swaying gracefully as the black took a restless, tentative step forward. The girl picked up the bridle reins and touched a smooth-heeled boot to Thunder's ribs. Despite his double load and the fact that he had already travelled far that day, the black sprang forward swiftly and easily and the girl felt a quick glow of interest in the handsome, high-headed animal.

For a half hour they rode in silence through rich and verdant range-land. There were no fences anywhere, as is to be desired in your ideal cattle country, and Clive recognized the fact that they were crossing open range, where the herds of a dozen outfits had been turned out to graze pending the round-up and the sorting of brands. It was any man's land and no man's land, all in one. After a while the girl straightened a little in the saddle, then pulled Thunder sharply to the right and they set off along a dimly outlined wagon trail.

Clive ventured a question.

"I take it yo're headed for a ranch, ma'am?"

She gave a dispirited nod.

"We are going to the Swinging J," she replied.

"That is, we are going to what is left of it."

He ventured again.

"Would they, do you think, now, be a-needin' of a top hand over that-a-way?"

At this the girl laughed mirthlessly.

“Now I know you are a stranger here,” she said, “else you would not be asking that question. The Swinging J just now is little more than a name.”

Clive sighed.

“It shore does seem that I just naturally can’t pick up a job nohow; it shore does beat the band the way a job just keeps one jump ahead of me all the time. It’s gettin’ to be plumb oncanny, by cripes.”

The girl was instantly sympathetic, turning her head so she could see his face.

“I am sorry you have no work and if there was any place for you on the Swinging J I would gladly give it to you. But just now the Swinging J ranch consists of some thousands of acres of ground, some steers, myself and one Chinaman. Even the steers and the Chink may be gone before we arrive.” She spoke bitterly and Clive pondered.

“Yuh shore have got me guessin’, ma’am. Would this Swingin’ J, now, by any chance, be yore’n?”

She nodded, urging Thunder to a faster pace and swaying gracefully as the black broke into a smooth, uninterrupted lope.

“’Tain’t none of my business, like, but I’d plumb admire to be knowin’ if yuh be’n havin’ trouble with yore ranch. Somehow, I gets the impression all ain’t merry here, so’s to speak.”

The girl laughed again, with even less mirth in her tones.

“Trouble?” she repeated. “That is all I have had; all I have known since I came here to live, and it has finally driven me to the point where I am getting out.”

“Are yuh aimin’ to sell yore holdin’s here, ma’am?”

“Who would buy? No, I shall not sell. The Swinging J and all its vast acres will revert to what they were before I came to them. For ten years it lay idle and run down, its acres the prey of all the cowmen of this valley. Then I came here and started my own herds and have had a constant fight ever since.”

Clive reached up a tentative forefinger and scratched his nose.

“Then yo’re sort of quittin’ under fire, like?” His voice held a subtle barb, and it evidently went home, as he intended it should, for she retorted rather sharply:

“What do you know about it, Mister Man? You don’t know what I’ve gone through; you don’t know what it is to watch your herds vanish, see your hands turn traitor and leave you, see your lands run over by herds that legally have no right there, and — yes, even be threatened with an invasion of sheep!”

“Hell!” he ejaculated. Then, “I beg yore pardon, ma’am; that sorta slipped out. When yuh said ‘sheep’ I just naturally had to swear.”

“Granted,” she answered. “Now, we are coming to the ranch. I have enough supplies, thank

heaven, to set us up a hot meal and then you might as well be riding on. Perhaps you can pick up something at Bender's, about twelve miles south of me. But if you wish, you are welcome at the Swinging J for the time being, even though I have no job to offer you."

"Thank yuh, ma'am," he said gently. "I shore would like to ketch on down this-a-way. Yuh see I've always hankered to punch cows in Arizony. I generally have ranged up 'round Montany, but the winters there sorta got to me and I drifted into Wyomin'. That wasn't no better and I lit into Texas, where I hooked up with the Rangers for a spell. But I got lonesome for cows and tired of man rustlin' all the time and wantin' to git out this-a-way, I chucked the Ranger business and here I am. Begins to look like it's a-goin' to be 'here I go' in a minute, though. Don't seem like there is any jobs over here a-tall."

A new interest was in the girl's voice when she spoke again.

"So you were a Ranger?"

"Yeh," he answered carelessly. "I was with them Texas riders 'bout three years. When I got lonesome for the range-land, them *hombres* all said Arizony Territory was the place to hit out for. That coincided with my own idees, yuh see, and that's another reason I'm here."

"I'm glad you told me that," she said. "I feel, somehow, that my first judgment of you was correct. You are an honest man and not allied with

the valley element that is seeking to drive me off my own range."

He started.

"I'm beginning to see things better, ma'am. Yo're in trouble here and yuh thought I was one of that flea-bitten bunch that's after yuh; now, didn't yuh? Well, yuh c'n just ree-vise yore opinion."

"I have," she replied. "What is your name?" For the first time she evinced interest in him from a personal standpoint.

"Clive Morgan," he answered promptly. "In Montany they called me 'Shoshone' 'cause I was borned in the Shoshone country; in Wyomin' they called me 'Cactus,' and in the Rangers they called me 'Tex.' Yuh c'n call me whatever yuh please down here, I reckon."

"My name is Glade," said the girl. "My parents, evidently of poetic bent, saw fit to tack onto me the front name of Forest; rather silly, isn't it?"

Clive considered a moment, a grin on his face.

"Oh, I don't know, ma'am; Forest Glade is a right pert name, seems to me. It sounds like things yuh read in books; makes me think of the Montany mountings, all covered with spruce and fir and pine forests. There shore is plenty of forests there, too, I'd tell a man, but I'm not so shore about the glade. What is a glade, anyways?"

Despite the strain she so palpably labored under the girl laughed, a brief, silvery peal.

"You seem to have a sense of humor and poesy yourself, at any rate," she said, "and that is

something that is sorely needed here. I think I am glad I met you, Clive Morgan.”

“Same to you, ma’am,” responded the gallant Clive.

“Please stop calling me ‘ma’am,’” she commanded, “else I shall withdraw my invitation to dine. It sounds to much as though I were a school-ma’am.”

“Whatever yuh say ma’— I mean, miss,” said Clive, flustered briefly.

CHAPTER II

CLIVE MAKES A RESOLVE

AFTER a time Clive, looking over the girl's shoulder, saw a huge grove of cottonwoods, in which rested a rambling building of dirty white, having every appearance of being rundown and neglected. To the rear of this structure and just outside the cottonwoods was a large barn. Near this was a corral, but it held pitifully few horses. Around to one side and in the shade of the huge trees, was a long, narrow building with many windows. Clive knew this was the bunkhouse. For the rest, he saw the usual outbuildings to be found on any western cattle ranch, a wagon sitting idly before the barn, a rickety buggy and many rusted agricultural implements.

As they rode into the cottonwoods he realized how badly neglected the place was. The paint on the buildings was faded and worn, while fences needed repairs. The corral sagged in a dozen places and the plows, mowing machine and what tools were visible were grimy and in a sore state of dis-repair. The barn doors hung on hinges that were loose and the bunkhouse windows were shattered in a dozen places. Weeds and grass grew high and rank in the yard and even the small picket fence that enclosed the grounds about the house was tumbled and broken.

In the yard Clive slid from the horse and helped the girl to alight.

“Turn the horse into the corral, Mr. Morgan. You will find feed there, and water. Come to the house immediately and we shall have something to eat.”

He watched her as she walked through the open picket gate, crossed the broad veranda that surrounded the house on three sides, and vanished in a doorway. Then he led Thunder to the corral, pulled off saddle, blanket and bridle and turned the animal inside, carefully closing the rickety gate. Two minutes later he was crossing the broad veranda and entering the house.

If the outside of the structure showed evidence of neglect, the interior did not. It was scrupulously clean and tastefully appointed. Forest greeted him in the large living room, indicating a chair.

“Sit down, please, and rest. Charley Long, my cook, is still on the job. He will have a meal ready for us in a few minutes.”

Clive dropped into a chair, letting his hat fall to the floor. The girl chose another chair near by and sat facing him. He felt a tug at his heart strings as he noted the look of utter sadness in her countenance, the total lack of spirit he found there. He found her, however, distinctly fair to look upon. From her heavy, dark brown hair to her trim, small feet, she was all feminine. Her eyes were a shade between brown and black and her face was finely formed and of regular features. She

was just under medium height, slim-waisted and lithe. He wondered, seeing that she was so beautiful even in her despondent mood, what she would be like were happy smiles to chase each other across her face.

For her part, Forest found Clive to be a man among men. His tall, muscular body was barrel-chested, slim-waisted and lithe; his face, not exactly handsome, nevertheless was clean-cut and strong, and his steady gray eyes seemed to send out something that inspired confidence and trust. He wore a black shirt, black, high crowned sombrero, neatly dimpled; Angora chaps and the usual high-heeled, be-spurred boots of the cow country. A black silk kerchief was knotted about his throat. As she watched, he unbuckled his six-gun and dropped it beside his hat on the floor.

“Yuh shore I ain’t a-troublin’ yuh none about this eatin’ here?” he asked.

“On the contrary, I am glad to have you,” she answered. “Besides, I haven’t thanked you for coming to my aid out there on Cougar Creek. I probably would have had to wade ashore and walk all the way here if you had not so providentially happened along.”

“That brings back what yuh was a-sayin’ when we arrived here,” Clive said. “I’d plumb admire to know more about it. ’Course, I ain’t a-wantin’ to pry into yore affairs any, but I’m just a curious cuss on account of my nature, I reckon.”

“It is natural that you are curious, under the

circumstances. However, it is quite a story and I doubt if it would interest you. Besides, I am leaving the ranch and shall thus end my troubles."

He considered a moment before answering, then said:

"Are yuh really leavin' this place, Miss Glade, or are yuh bein' drove off?"

There was a defiant light in her eyes and a bitterness in her voice when she answered.

"From your way of looking at things, I am being driven away. Not that it concerns you, but in answer to your question."

"I knowed I was a-hornin' into somethin' that was none of my business," he countered contritely, "but it was 'cause I hated to see yuh bein' chased off yore own ranch like yuh was some danged c'yote or wolf that I spoke. Why don't yuh stay and fight 'em, Miss?"

Wearily, Forest shook her head, her despondency again upon her, stifling the brief flare of spirit she had shown.

"It is useless. I cannot fight them alone and I cannot get hands to come here and help me to run the ranch. The only way I can live here is to run steers and sell them; without help that is impossible. Besides, when I did have fat herds and many of them, I was constantly being made the victim of raids and rustling parties. Today, out of all the vast herds I owned not more than a year ago, I have fewer than a thousand head. They are running wild on the range at this very minute and

I am unable to round them up, count them and sell them.”

“That’s shore too bad, Miss; for a fact it is.”

“When I leave I suppose I shall just forget those steers. They will be absorbed into the valley herds where, I have no doubt, the remainder of my stock vanished long since.”

“Shucks, Miss; it seems to me the main trouble yo’re up ag’in’ right now is to get enough hands to fight yore battles, and if yuh had a bunch of hard ridin’ *hombres* down here that wouldn’t be afraid to sling a six-gun or pull on a rope yuh’d be all set for a finish fight. Ain’t that so?”

“Essentially, that is true, Mr. Morgan. Had my hands remained loyal and helped me to run down the raiders who thinned my herds, poisoned my water holes and shot my horses, then there might have been a different story to tell.”

“Then why don’t yuh send out and get another flock of riders and start the old ball a-rollin’ ag’in?”

“It would be too expensive for me now. My bank account has never been large since I bought this ranch, and I depended on my cattle to swell it. Instead of selling my stock as they fattened, however, I have lost them to thieves. What few I have left are, as I said, so scattered that I cannot round them up myself and, perforce, must lose them, too.”

Charley Long poked his head into the room and spoke: “Chuck, he leady.”

Forest rose with a graceful inclination of her head and Clive followed her into the dining room where a well appointed table was set for two. Across the expanse of snowy linen he resumed the conversation.

“Miss Glade, mebbe it sounds presumptuous and all that, but would yuh mind tellin’ me more ’bout yore troubles here? I got a idee and if I knowed just how things stand mebbe we could work out somethin’.”

“Oh, I don’t mind telling you,” she said. “I bought the ranch from a girl friend in college who was consumptive and needed money badly. It took almost all the fairly large fortune my father had left to me to do it. She had never seen the ranch, knowing it only from the descriptions her father had given her while he was living. But she had papers and legal data that indicated it was worth every cent I paid for it, perhaps more. Poor girl, she died soon after selling to me and I came here to claim my own.

“I arrived in the spring of the year and found I had bought a small empire here in Cottonwood Valley. My brand was the Swinging J and fifteen hands tended my recently acquired herds, as the attorneys had had everything attended to in the matter of stocking the ranch. The buildings were in poor shape, due to the ten years the place had been unoccupied, and I intended having everything fixed up, but never was given the opportunity to carry out my plans.

“ The second week after my arrival a committee of five men called on me. They told me the ranch had lain idle for so many years it had come to be looked on as open range. The cowmen hereabouts, they said, with their ranches already overstocked, and the open range also crowded, had taken advantage of my broad acres to increase their herds and allow the overflow to graze here. Naturally, my coming forced this overflow back into the home herds and there was not sufficient room on most of the ranches to accommodate them.

“ They made me an offer to buy the ranch, but the sum was so pitifully small that I refused it, then they insinuated cattle raising was poor business for an inexperienced girl, and that I probably would lose everything I had put into the venture. They hinted darkly about rustlers who infested the valley, spoke of water holes that were poisoned mysteriously, and what not. They even averred a big sheepman was figuring on turning flocks onto this range. Without fence, I would naturally be helpless to combat this evil.

“ A week later one of my riders found a number of my cattle lying dead at a water hole. Investigation showed it had been poisoned. Then, other holes were poisoned and finally my herds were raided and two hundred selected steers were stolen. I appealed to the sheriff in Sunset, forty miles away, and he spent a week here. When he left he advised me to get out, saying that it was impossible for him to trace down those who were

persecuting me and that it would be useless for me to call on him again, unless there was a killing.

“In the course of the next few weeks my hands quit a few at a time, bribed, I believe, by those who were fighting me. I brought in new ones and they quit, too. After a time I could get no men from anywhere and meantime my herds kept right on dwindling. Two months ago my last rider left and since then only Charley Long and I have held the fort as it were, and we have watched the herds grow smaller and smaller. What you saw today was the first actual hostility against my person.

“So, it has come to this: I have enough money left to recoup if I could get faithful men, but not enough to risk unless I know the men would be true to me. I have recently offered to sell my ranch to any one who would buy, but the valley ranchers laugh at me. The climax of it all was reached last week when a flock of sheep came in over Saddleback Pass and set about eating my grass. I protested to the herders, who were Mexicans, got laughed at and gave it up. Now, you see why I am leaving.”

So interested Clive had become in the tale that he let his steak grow cold. Now he attacked it vigorously, the while a furrow plowed itself across his usually smooth brow. After a time he looked up:

“Miss Glade, it seems funny these ranchers would go so far as to steal yore land, and I reckon there’s somethin’ behind it all. Now, yuh can’t get no help from the sheriff of this man’s county,

yuh say, so by cripes the next best thing is recourse to the gun. If yuh'll just say the word, danged if I won't stay here with yuh and together we'll raise a merry little hell with them cow thieves and low down, onery skunks."

For an instant a gleam of hope flickered in her eyes, then it died out. Wearily she shook her head.

"No, Mr. Morgan, that will not do. You and I would be two and of course I would not count in the business you suggest. In the valley are ten enormous ranches. Each has from fifteen to thirty hands. You would be one against nearly three hundred. I thank you, but it is hopeless."

"Who said anything about just you and me alone?" Clive demanded, his jaw set pugnaciously. "S'posin' yuh had, say, twenty of the all-firedest, hell-spittin'est riders that ever rode a bronc' 'thout pullin' leather, down here? What then?"

"But I've told you I cannot afford to gamble on them remaining," she reminded him, although there was something in her voice that urged him on to voicing the resolve he had just made. "I could pay them, of course, but it would only be worth it to me if I could know positively I would retrieve what little I have left as the nucleus for a fresh start."

"Say, Miss Glade, if yuh'll say the word I'll have a bunch of hell-roarers down here in jig time that won't ask no pay until yuh get set and are goin' strong, just so long as yuh can find 'em a place to sleep and plenty of chuck. I'll be among

'em. In fact, I'll be yore foreman and yuh can gamble the last dollar yuh got left that what that bunch'll do to this valley will look like Rome was when Nero throwed away his dang' fiddle."

A light dawned in her eyes, a light of hope and joy — and a light that somehow seemed to say she had faith in Clive to carry out the daring plan he had hinted at, the resolve he had made to help her.

"Do you mean ——"

He interrupted.

"I mean just what I say. I come over this-a-way lookin' for a job. Well, there ain't none, so far's I can see, so by cripes I'm a-goin' to whittle one out for muhse'f. If I get back yore ranch and yore cows and clean up this place, I'm a-goin' to ask yuh to keep me on here permanent like and mebbe some of the boys I'll round up'll want to stay likewise."

On the instant, forgetting the remainder of her meal, she caught his enthusiasm. With a little, glad cry she said:

"Oh, if you only could."

"I can, and I will," he returned. "And while I'm about it I'll find out what's back of all these shenanigans, for it ain't natural for them ranchers to act so on their own hook, by cripes."

"If you can do all you have hinted at, Mr. Morgan, you would never leave here save of your own volition — that's how permanent you would be on the Swinging J."

He rose, one hand resting on the table, a smile on his face.

“Then, it’s a bargain, Miss Glade? In effect yuh’ll sorta turn things over to me for a spell and let me work out my own battle plans ag’in’ this crowd?”

She rose with him, hand extended, inviting his.

“It is a bargain. Go as far as you like. If I am to lose the Swinging J it seems to me, after all, that I could accept the blow more gracefully and with fewer tears if I went down fighting and — and — thank you for your offer.”

He gripped her hand an instant, then said:

“Then I can consider muhse’f officially on the job, so’s to speak?”

“From this instant,” she agreed.

“First off, then, I want to use yore Chink. Yuh say it’s forty mile to Sunset. Tell me, is there a telygraph office there?”

“Surely,” she said. “The Z. L. & G. goes through the town and you can send messages, if that is your plan. Of course you may use Charley Long.”

“That’s my plan, and I want that Chink to take a batch of telygrams down to Sunset and send ’em off as fast as the wire’ll carry ’em.”

“You will want him to start in the morning?”

“Tomorrow? Shucks, Miss, tomorrow’s a long ways off. Besides, if anybody sees him a-goin’ out that pass they might suspicion somethin’ and stop him, and I don’t want that. No, sír-ee, Bob.

Charley gets out this very night, after it's dark, and I want him to scoot like greased lightnin', so's he'll be in Sunset by mornin'."

"Very well," said Forest, now fully in harmony with his plan. "I shall tell him at once."

He heard her voice in the kitchen and Charley Long's sing-song voice raised in brief replies. Then both emerged into the dining room and the Chinaman did an unusual thing. He advanced toward Clive and looked him squarely in the eye for a long moment, and said:

"Yo' help Missey?"

Clive nodded.

"Then I he'p yo'. But yo' no fool Missey, else Chal-ley Long stick 'em knife along yo'."

Clive laughed, pleased at the show of loyalty.

"Charley," he said, "yo're a Chink, but I reckon yo're all square four ways from Sunday."

Silently the white man and the yellow man gripped hands. Then Clive tramped into the living room and, after a laborious half hour with paper and pencil, handed Charley the telegrams, along with a gold piece.

"Yuh take them there telygrams, Charley, and yuh send 'em *pronto*. They'll bring a reg'lar fire storm down on this valley hell bent for election."

The Chinaman stuffed the missives inside his blouse and soft-footed away, to await darkness and his trip through the pass. Clive turned to Forest:

"Now, where's them dang sheep yuh said was on yore place?"

“They are on the south fork of Cougar Creek, near the southern end of my ranch. I presume there are three or four thousand of them.”

“Just got one herder and three-four dogs?”

“There are five herders and I don’t know how many dogs.”

“Hunh,” he snorted. “That means they’re set for trouble. On’y one herder and three dogs needed for three-four thousand sheep. I know, ’cause I seen more sheep in Montany than I ever seen cows.”

At dusk Charley Long left the ranch, mounted on a fleet bay that somehow had escaped the hands of the marauders. A short time later Clive, tired and sleepy, bade Forest goodnight and strode to the bunkhouse, throwing open the door. Fifteen minutes later he had his blankets inside, and cleaned out a bunk, and was sleeping the sleep of the peaceful and just.

CHAPTER III

THE WAR IS OPENED

THE week that followed was a busy one for Clive; a week filled with hope for Forest. He did not visit the scene of the sheep camp, nor did he bother any of the valley ranchers. He had retrieved the buckboard from its place in the waters of Cougar Creek and the barn doors now hung tightly and swung true on well oiled hinges. Also the sags in the corral fence had disappeared and the little picket fence that surrounded the ranch house stood graceful and proud for all to see. Not a paling was missing, and the trim little gate swung to and fro readily and easily.

Clive had come upon window glass, several kegs of nails and staples, buckets of putty and sundry odds and ends in the barn, also considerable paint and great coils of barbed wire. He utilized his time in repairing the shattered panes in the bunk-house windows and touching things up with the paint.

Charley Long had returned on the second night and had informed Clive that his messages had been forwarded as per schedule. Thereafter he worked side by side with the former Ranger.

Finally came a night, however, when all was

finished that the pair could attend to for the time being and they sat beside the big kerosene lamp in the living room. Clive for some days had been cheered by the change that had come over Forest. Her face was now vivacious and happy and her eyes were brilliant; there was color in her cheeks and her old dis-spirited walk had been turned into a firm, spritely stride.

It was almost midnight when Clive looked at the clock on the wall and reached for his hat.

“Time for me to be a-goin’,” he said. “Tomorrow may be a busy day. Most any time now some of the boys’ll be showin’ up and I want to be out to greet ’em.”

Came a clatter of hoofs outside. Like a flash Clive dropped his hat and bent over the light, blowing it out with a single, swift puff. Then, hand swinging lightly near his gun, he approached the door. A hail sounded from without.

“Hello in there. This the Swingin’ J ranch?”

Clive gave a whoop of joy and his hand left his gun. With a bound he was through the door and clattering down the veranda steps, making his way with long, swinging strides toward three silhouettes that sat calmly astride horses in the starlight. As he dashed forward he yelled:

“Shad Stevens, you wall-eyed old porpoise, yuh got here, didn’t yuh? Who’s with yuh?”

“Howdy, Tex,” said three voices in unison and Clive, hearing the tones, identified the other two riders.

“Honey Malloy, yuh walrus, how are yuh? And that other galoot, that spavined old he-wolf, that’s Bull Ellerby, I’m bettin’ muh hat.”

With a bound he was among them and they slid from their mounts. Hands pumped and hands thumped backs. Came a clamor of voices and contented laughter. After a time Clive drew off a little and said:

“Come into the house, yuh old man-eaters. I want yuh to meet the boss. Besides, yuh must be hungry, and Charley Long’ll be tickled pink to get yuh a swell feed.”

The quartet clumped across the veranda and into the living room where Forest stood beside the lamp she had re-lighted. Clive led an embarrassed trio before her and said:

“Miss Glade, I want yuh to meet three of the fightin’est fools that ever come out of Texas. They was all Rangers same time I was and quit ’bout the same time I did. This yere’s Shad Stevens; he was a sergeant and a good one, and yere’s Honey Malloy, the geezer what chased old Jeff Lorillard across the Rio Gran’ and brought him back regardless of what Mexico said about it. Last, but not least, this is Bull Ellerby, my sleepin’ mate in the barracks when we was to hum; other times, in our tents or out under the stars.”

The girl’s face held a high color and her eyes gleamed happily as she shook each man individually by the hand. Tongue-tied and embarrassed they stood before her, shifting from foot to foot,

unable to say what they wanted to say, afraid to speak at all for fear they would blurt out that which they did not want to say.

Forest realized their feelings and sympathized with them archly. She guided them one at a time to easy chairs and forced them to sit down. Then she told Charley Long to prepare something hot, and when the three would have protested, despite the gnawing at their stomachs, she held up a firm hand and told them they must eat.

After a time with the animated chatter of Clive to help them, they lost their timidity and began bandying words with each other at a clip that warmed the girl's heart. Bull Ellerby finally turned to Clive and said:

"What's this all about, Tex? Yore telygram said to come a-runnin' if we wanted to mix in somethin' real interestin'. Well, we're here. Might as well tell us now as to hold off."

"Yeh, we're curious cusses, Tex, as yuh know," said Honey. "Loosen yore old bazoo and elucidate."

So Clive told them. While Charley Long, making a din with his pots and pans, rustled a rousing meal, Clive went back to the very start of what Forest had told him and related incident for incident the whole sorry tale down to the present. At its finish Bull Ellerby brought his heavy hand thwacking against his chaparahoed thigh and said:

"Well, they's four of us now, ain't they? What's the use of waitin' till them other *hombres* git here.

Let's start out in the mornin' and comb this old valley like she was never combed afore. I'll bet a *concho* off muh Sunday chaps ag'in' a gnat's whiskers that us four c'n make them buzzards git down on their hunkers and ask their Maker to he'p 'em, that's what I'll bet."

"Aw, shut up, Bull," said Honey Malloy. "You let Clive run this leetle shindig, and don't yuh go a-gittin' so all-fired previous."

Bull glared at Honey, growling in his throat and hunching his massive, iron-thewed shoulders.

"Honey, if yuh was any bigger 'n a pint of bay-
rum I'd turn yuh across muh knee and spank yuh,
so help me I would. As it is, yore size saves yuh,"
he threatened.

Forest laughed. Although not entirely familiar with the rough banter of the range-land, she was human enough and sensible enough to recognize that hearts of gold beat beneath these bulging chests and that this was the method her allies were taking to relieve their feelings.

After the meal Clive led the others to the bunkhouse, where they went over the whole situation again and began the definite laying of plans for the campaign they would wage against the girl's enemies.

With the coming of dawn the quartet went into action, directing their initial efforts against the sheep. Clive had previously ridden all over the ranch with Forest and knew the approximate lay of the land. He had found most of her landmarks

destroyed, but still he was sure enough of the limits of the ranch to feel he was on safe ground in any action he would take to establish mythical boundaries.

A two-hour ride brought them to the lip of an arroyo and they plunged down the banks. The horses waded the shallow water at the bottom and toiled up the farther bank. Then they saw the sheep.

A billowing wave of dirty gray and white spread across the lush grass, all fairly and squarely on Forest's property. With Clive in the lead, they bore down on a dingy tent pitched close to a water hole. Evidently this was a hole that had not been poisoned, else it was fresh again.

A squat, swarthy Mexican, with greasy countenance and filthy ears greeted them, a rifle in his hands. Clive addressed him.

"Whose sheep, *ladron*?"

The Mexican drew a hissing breath at the epithet and shifted his rifle.

"Eet is none of your beez-ness," he said.

With a leap Clive left his saddle and sprang upon the man. He tore the rifle from his grip and hurled it aside, the while his swinging fists beat a tattoo on his face. When the Mexican, with a cry for mercy, sank to the sod, Clive asked again:

"Whose sheep?"

"Ah, *señor*, *quien sabe*? I hire for to drive heem; you ask camp tender."

"Where is he?"

The Mexican pointed. Following the direction indicated by the finger, Clive's glance fell upon another tent, a half-mile distant. He could discern figures moving about it. He turned again to the greaser.

"Let me tell yuh something, *ladron*; yore days here is numbered. The best thing yuh ever done was 'fess up that yuh didn't know who owned these woolies. Now, yuh pack up yore things and get to hell out of here. If yo're here when we come back yuh'll be strung up, and that's flat. *Comprende?*"

"*Si, señor, I comprende, and I go,*" said the trembling wretch.

"Number one," said Clive grimly. "Come on, cowboys, let's go. There's more game over that-a-way," and he led off in the direction of the other tent.

While they were still fifty yards distant the crack of a rifle split the air, sounding sharply above the clicking jaws of the sheep. Honey Malloy's hat lifted gently on his head briefly, then settled back. Two clean holes were bored through the towering crown.

The shot brought immediate action. With yells, the quartet drew six-guns and a peppering fusillade was turned on the tent. Four men came running from between the dirty flaps, hands thrust in the air. All were Mexicans.

"Who fired that rifle?" Clive asked belligerently as he dismounted and walked among the herders,

feeling them over for hidden knives or revolvers. Finding two knives he drew them forth and hurled them far to one side. No one answered his question.

“Aw, to hell with who fired the shot, Tex,” said Honey Malloy. “Let’s give them *hombres* a ride and let it go at that. They spoiled muh hat, I reckon, but I’ll just put it on muh expense account.”

Clive looked at a tall Mexican who had the air of being in charge.

“Whose sheep?” he asked.

The man shifted uneasily and his tongue rolled out the soft patio of the country south of the Rio Grande.

“Speak American, yuh damn’ greaser,” cried Clive, “and tell us who owns them dirty sheep.”

“Meester Bender,” sullenly said the other.

“Now we know as much as we did afore,” said Shad. “To hell with who owns ’em. Make ’em git the damn’ things off ’n here; that’s the main idee, I reckon.”

But Clive had a different idea.

“Not on yore tintage, Shad. I knows of this Bender geezer. He owns a ranch down toward the pass. Miss Glade told me about him the fi’st day I saw her; said he might give me a job if I rode down that-a-way. So Mr. Bender owns these woolies, hey?” he said, turning to the Mexican again. “Well I’m sorta glad to hear it. Now, you dang’ *ladrons*, round all them dirty sheep up and get ’em started down towards Bender’s.”

The Mexican turned and spoke to his companions. Immediately they called to the dogs and these darted off in swift, bounding lopes, flying far around the sheep and turning them into a compact mass. Clive watched until this was done, then spoke again:

“Now, yuh know the way to Bender’s, I reckon. Drive them woolies along. We’re a-goin’ right with yuh and when we reach Bender’s we’re a-goin’ to turn that bunch of grass-killers into his alfalfy field. *Sabe?*”

Fear darted into the leader’s eyes.

“*Señor* Bender weel rave, he weel keel, ” he protested.

“Well, we’ll rave and kill if yuh don’t, old timer, so suit yorese’f.”

Ten minutes later the sheep were moving slowly down the valley, while the Mexicans struck their tents and tied them, together with their equipment, on pack horses, and followed. Clive and Bull rode ahead together, with Shad and Honey Malloy in the rear, menacing the herders.

It was twelve miles from the Swinging J ranch house to Bender’s house, but from where the sheep had been grazing to Bender’s alfalfa field was a matter of a bare six miles. Even then it required two hours of constant urging to get the animals that far.

Outside the alfalfa field, purple-green, knee-high and rich in promise of the crop it would be, Clive dropped from Thunder and pulled a pair of

wire-cutters from his pocket. Five snips and five strands of barbed wire fell back, with brief, musical "pung-g-gs" as they parted. Through the gap thus created the sheep were herded.

It was a ticklish job and the soft Arizona twilight was falling over the valley, obscuring the Mogollons in shadows when the last dirty gray animal was driven within. Eagerly clicking teeth and clamping jaws attested to the greed of the sheep and the thoroughness with which they were setting about the work of demolishing the alfalfa.

"Cripes," exclaimed Shad as he helped Clive refasten the wire and hide as much as possible the marks of the snippers, "but I hates to see them woolies spoilin' that field, but I reckon they belong to the same man as owns the hay, and if he thought it was up to Miss Forest to feed 'em, he shore ortn't to kick when he finds out she refused and sent 'em back to his own little pet alfalfy patch."

Honey Malloy laughed softly and Bull Ellerby grunted contentedly. They had drawn first blood in the fight they were opening and all were highly satisfied. The wire again in place and the sheep hemmed in securely, Clive turned to the waiting, fear-filled Mexicans.

"Listen, you *hombres*. Yo're a-goin' to ride back with us as far as the road and we're a-goin' to see that yuh skedaddle out of here *pronto*. If yo're not over that pass afore midnight, yuh every damn' one will eat lead. *Sabe?*"

The frightened men understood and made no

objections when Bull herded them ahead much as he might have driven so many sheep, and in this wise the party left the scene. Honey Malloy laughed gleefully.

“Oh, mama, if them woolies last in there all night what they’ll do to that hay will be a shame. I’m sorry for the sheep, though; they’ll shore git indigesting or somethin’ and like as not it’ll kill a lot of ’em.”

“Let it,” said Shad sententiously, heartless wherever sheep were concerned. “L’arn ’em not to git in people’s yards no more when they ain’t wanted.”

They cut straight across the range, making for the highway where it wound, a ribbon of white in the moonlight, off toward the pass. The four rode with the Mexicans until they were well past the Bender place, then Clive said:

“Now, don’t none of yuh try to come back here and chin-chin with Bender, ’cause if yuh try it yuh’ll shore as hell git shot. We’re a-goin’ to wait right around here until mornin’ and it won’t be healthy for nobody to come buzzin’ down this-a-way tonight. *Comprende?*”

But Clive knew his was a needless warning. Not only were the Mexicans fearful of the guns of the four, but they also dreaded the wrath of Bender when the latter found his sheep in his own alfalfa field. It was not likely they would stop their forward movements until they reached Sunset, forty miles distant, and even then it was probable they

would keep going until they either came to sheep country or were far enough away to feel safe from the vengeance of the cowboys who had just threatened them.

With the feeling that a day of good work had been done in an excellent manner the party waited an hour, then turned back to the Swinging J. As they clattered into the yard a chorus of joyful yells sounded from the veranda and six leaping figures descended on them. Clive gave a whoop and left his saddle, striding among the others, giving and taking greetings and good-natured jests.

Six more of his former comrades were here — six more roaring knights of the range who feared neither man nor devil. He called their names aloud as he greeted them:

“Spud Garrett, Lazy Turner, Pink Sellers, Mojave Evans, Brindle Thorp and Piute Allen.”

All had partaken liberally of Charley Long's bountiful offering at the table, and all had met Forest Glade. Naturally they all were glad to see Clive and joyfully they accompanied him to the bunkhouse.

Before any one turned in the new arrivals were apprised of the status of things and what Clive, Shad, Bull and Honey had accomplished with the sheep. Clive, gazing at the nine now gathered with him in the bunkhouse, felt his heart swell with pride. They were now ten men, all told, but he knew that within the next few days they would be a score, perhaps more. He had sent thirty tele-

grams, but made allowances for the possibility that five, at the most, could not come.

Spud Garrett, a fiery Texan whose reputation as a six-gun artist had spread the length and breadth of the Pan Handle, was for starting hostilities first thing in the morning, but cooler heads prevailed. If there was, as Forest suspected, a combination of virtually all the valley ranchers in a plot against her, they would have at least two hundred and fifty men to fight. To start open warfare with their present force, therefore, would be folly. Until far into the night they sat and planned.

CHAPTER IV

THE RANGERS GATHER

THE clanging jangle of Charley Long's triangle awakened punchers and girl alike next morning and Forest dressed hurriedly and descended from her room, to glimpse a scene that brought back memories of what her ranch had been in the first heyday of her arrival. Ten boisterous cowhands were romping about basins and water buckets, jesting and roughing each other. At breakfast she set a precedent and joined the men at the long table in the dining room.

When Forest entered and made known her intentions Clive hastily vacated his place of honor at the head of the table and found a place beside Piute Allen. Forest's little democratic act won the hearts of her allies as nothing else would or could have done. From that moment they were for her first, last and all the time, as Lazy Turner expressed it in his slow, characteristic drawl.

"We're a-goin' to stage a leetle round-up on our own hook beginnin' today, Miss," Clive said, over the hot cakes and bacon. "Yuh said yuh had some steers a-runnin' wild out there on the range and we aims to get started at findin' out just how many yuh *have* got. If we finds any a-grazin' where they ortn't to be, like in somebody's back

yard, f'r instance, we're a-goin' to yank 'em plumb out of the yard and maybe see that they stays out."

Later Clive told Piute and Mojave to remain at the house while the rest rode out to the range.

"Yuh two's the only *hombres* I knows of that has Injun names," he added, "so yuh can stay here together and keep Miss Forest company. If anybody comes 'round for any information like, just tell 'em the information office is closed for the day. If anybody gets rough yuh know what to do, cowboys, and if any more of them bow-laiged rattlers from over Texas way shows up, make 'em to hum. Like as not yuh'll know some of 'em. I'm 'spectin' Hokum Smith and Bing Summers to blow in and both you fellers teamed up with 'em over on the old Rio Pecos."

As Clive led the others from the ranch yard he looked back over his shoulder and saw Piute and Mojave sitting on the veranda, Forest nearby. For the first time since he had come to the Swinging J and learned of the girl's troubles he drew a breath of real relief. He knew that with Mojave and Piute on the job there was small likelihood of anybody molesting her this day.

An hour's ride from the ranch they found a few Swinging J steers and, riding on, they found scattered small herds on various parts of the range. By nightfall they had rounded up more than a hundred that were grazing a good ways off from the ranch. These were driven back onto the Swinging J acres

and allowed to resume their wanderings. During the search they had come across numerous other brands and, Clive knew, once they worked the extreme southern and northern tips of the ranch they would find thousands of steers running there, none of which would bear the Swinging J mark.

A start had been made. Until their forces were brought up to a point where they could feel they were equal to cope with any situation that might arise they felt there was little more that they could do. Late in the evening they were back at the ranch and shortly after dusk were at supper. And after supper trouble came.

A penny-ante game in the bunkhouse was holding the attention of all when a clatter of hoofs drew Clive, Honey Malloy and Spud Garrett outside. A beefy man with drooping mustaches, who rode a sorrel stallion, had entered the yard. He was accompanied by a half-dozen punchers. His face, clearly visible in the light of the brilliant Arizona moon, was a black mask of anger and his eyes gleamed savagely.

“Where’s the gal that’s a-runnin’ this place?” he asked.

“Who wants to know?” Clive countered coolly. His eyes were on the riders, noting all were armed heavily and that hands were resting lightly near gun-butts.

“None of yore damn’ ’pertinence, cowboy,” rasped the other. “I want to talk with that gal, and immedjutly, too.”

“I reckon yo’re talkin’ to her foreman, Mister, and yuh can be a-tellin’ me most anythin’ yuh got to say to her, so’s to speak,” Clive answered.

“Foreman?” yelled the other. “When’d she git a foreman? How long yuh be’n here? How many hands yuh got? I thought she was done here and was pullin’ out. That’s the word that went ’round the valley, leastwise.”

“What do yuh want?” Clive asked sharply. “Yo’re a-speelin’ a-plenty, but yuh ain’t a-sayin’ a damn’ thing. Now, if yuh got somethin’ important to tell her, just spout it out to me, or get out of here. We got a poker game on and we wants to get back to it.”

“I’m a-talkin’ to that gal,” said the other. “Yuh’ll call her, too, if yuh know when yo’re well off. I got somethin’ important to say to her, and yuh ——”

“How do you do, Mr. Bender?”

It was Forest’s voice, tinged with excitement; a vague fear that she strove vainly to hide. The big man turned to her, watching as she strolled gracefully through the gate in the little picket fence, and out into the ranch yard. He glanced at her stormily.

“I don’t do a-tall, young woman,” he growled. “I come over here to ask yuh if you turned them damn’ sheep into my alfalfy. Did yuh?”

“Certainly not; I have hardly been out of the house for a week, Mr. Bender.”

“Oh, hell; yuh know what I mean. It was yore

orders I reckon that turned them sheep onto me. Well, they ruined a alfalfy patch that was wo'th more'n two thousand dollars, and I'm a-goin' to make yuh pay. *Sabe?*" His eyes were hard in the moonlight.

"Say, you," broke in Clive. "Whose sheep was they?"

Bender's eyes flicked around to Clive's, little fires gleaming in their depths. He glared down at the tall Montanan and rasped:

"'Tain't a question of whose sheep they was, it's a question of muh alfalfy field, that's what it is."

"That's where yo're wrong, mister," said Clive. "Them sheep, we was told, belong to you. Well, yeste'day I went out with some fellers and we found 'em on the Swingin' J and by the looks of the range they had been here some leetle time, too. I asked a feller that was tendin' 'em who owned 'em and he says 'Meester Bender.' Well, you was the only Bender we knowed of 'round here and we just nacherally made them Mex shepherds of yore'n take 'em home. Did they sick 'em onto yore alfalfy?" he ended innocently.

Bender strangled on a snort and coughed huskily.

"Did they sick 'em on muh alfalfy?" he mimicked, rage blurring his voice. "Why, yuh low-down, wall-eyed ——"

Spat!

Like a rifle crack came the smack of Clive's open hand across Bender's face. In the golden light of the brilliant moon, which made the scene

almost as clear as day, Spud Garrett saw a movement of arms back among Bender's riders and, together with Honey's, his own arms moved. At the same time a yell sounded from Honey, and the others, who had been listening inside the bunkhouse door, came out on the run. Revolvers gleamed in the moonlight and Bull Ellerby's hoarse voice roared:

"Now, if you *hombres* wants to start somethin', one of yuh go ahead and lift a gun, that's all. Yuh hear me, cowboys?"

It was ten to seven. Bender's men acknowledged the situation by thrusting their guns back in their holsters, but Bender, raging and cursing, swung his horse and attempted to ride Clive down. The latter calmly ducked, then leaped. His crashing fist caught Bender in the neck and the beefy form toppled from the stallion, landing with a thud and a grunt on the hard-packed earth. He lay supine for a moment, then struggled painfully to his feet. Like his men, he now retreated:

"Yo're a-goin' to be sorry for this, cowboy; mark muh words. Yuh'll be damn' glad to get out of this afore another week's gone by, and yuh can brand that on yore bunkhouse door. Come on, fellers," and with a swish of his quirt he sent his stallion lunging off in the moonlight, his riders closing in on either side and accompanying him.

Out past the barn and well along toward the narrow trail that led to the valley highway, little torches of light flared and a volley of shots crashed

through the stillness. Clive and Forest, standing together, heard the menacing hum of bullets, droning like angry bees. The others heard them, too, and leaped to points of vantage, guns coming out and into line for action.

But there were no more shots. Evidently Bender had meant the volley as a farewell salute and a promise of dire things to come. With a shrug, Clive turned and called to his companions:

“Put up yore guns, fellers; they ain’t really a-shootin’ at us, I reckon. Just thought they’d give us a little scare, seems like. Miss Forest, if I was you, I’d get back in the house and stay there temporary like. No tellin’ when a stray hunk of lead might come yore way.”

Forest shuddered.

“Mr. Morgan,” she said, “you see how desperate these men are, and how far they will go to drive me away from here. Perhaps, after all, it would be wiser for me to leave. Even if you gain a victory over them now, that does not insure my future here, for never again, so long as either myself or those men are alive, will there be anything except bad blood between us. Can’t you see what I mean?”

“Whoop,” yelled Brindle Thorp, “if that’s the case, Miss, yuh leave them buzzards to us and we’ll drive ’em out of the valley and yuh can have the whole dang place all to yore lonesome.”

Before she could respond, there came faintly, from far off, the sound of firing bursting out

afresh. Scattered shots, as though six-guns were playing between forces about equal in numbers crashed through the night. The ex-Rangers pricked up their ears.

Came a sharp, rattling outburst, then the shooting ceased and the normal silence of the valley settled down once more. Clive and Forest, with the others gathered near, stood quietly, waiting and watching, nerves tense. Forest found that she was not afraid, and was thankful. She knew that ten hands were swinging lightly near blue-barrelled six-guns and that ten hearts were waiting eagerly for whatever the firing might forefend.

After a time there came out of the night a clatter of hoofs and a chorus of yells. At the first sound of the voices Clive relaxed his tension and gave a shout:

“That’s more of muh old side-kicks, Miss Forest, a-comin’ on the run. I bet they met them c’yotes of old Bender’s out there some place, got tackled and shot it out with ’em.”

“And I bet,” came in Bull Ellerby’s heavy tones, “I can tell yuh who pulled out fust.”

Around the barn came plunging, foam-flecked horses, each carrying a yelling rider. A voice cried out:

“Hey, is this the Swingin’ J ranch? If it ain’t, yuh better say so afore yuh start shootin’ or we’ll just nacherally chaw up yore danged old place.”

Mojave Evans was first to respond.

“Aw, shut up, Hokum Smith; yuh always was

too fresh with yore bazoo. Come on down here and I'll tan yore danged hide for yuh."

"Yipee-e-e-e! That's old Mojave Evans or I'm a pie-eyed cockroach," said the other voice, whereupon still others sounded:

"Hey, Tex! Yuh here? What do yuh say, old hoss? Sing out, yuh bow-laiged cattypillar, let's hear yore silvery voice."

Clive turned to Forest, a grin of joy on his face, a mist that he was not ashamed of filming his eyes.

"Hear 'em, Miss Forest? Sound kinda good to yuh? Think a bunch like that won't get back yore cows? Heck, they just be'n a-mixin' it out there with old Bender's gang and some of 'em might 'a' got shot, yet here they be a-yellin' and a-whoopin' just as though nothin' had happened."

"It is wonderful, such friendship, such loyalty," she breathed, then laughed happily. She was close behind Clive when he started among the dismounting horde. She counted them. There were nine; nine glorious fighting faces to augment her forces, nine more rough riding, hard hitting, fearless men of the range come to pick up her gauge and hurl it at her foes! Her heart swelled as she grasped the spirit of it all — the spirit of the old west that was thus being bared!

She saw Clive shaking hands, saw Shad and Honey and Spud also milling around, hands pumping; she heard prodigious clumps on the back, heard genuine affection sound in voices that cried out greetings and good cheer, then, tears filling

her eyes, a great thankfulness welling up in her heart, she turned and fled toward the house.

There Clive found her when he led the nine inside a few minutes later. She had regained her composure, save for her slightly luminous eyes, and had lighted the huge living room lamp. Already she had spoken to Charley Long and that worthy was busy with his pots and pans, beginning now to get used to these nocturnal arrivals of Clive's friends, and glad that they were come.

"Miss Forest," said Clive, his tones joyous, "I want yuh to meet some more of muh old side-kicks. They all met in Sunset, where they bought their hosses, and rode out yere together. Here, now, this windy geezer with the big nose is Hokum Smith; that long-eared ape beside him's Bing Summers, and that solemn lookin' buzzard is Jingle Jones, thinks he's a poet; and there's Brick Howard, and Chick Purdy. Behind him is Lonesome Hines, the lonesomest feller yuh ever saw. There's Wag Deering, nicknamed 'cause his tongue's always waggin', and there's Reb Sefton, whose dad fit for Lee in the Civil War, and Blaze Ormsby. Ormsby's the shinin' light of the bunch and 'bout the slickest two-gun feller yuh ever see. Wipe yore paws now, yuh dang' apes, and greet yore new boss."

Grinning, heads ducking and feet shuffling, they crowded about and shook Forest's hand. Ormsby was the last to greet her.

"I am, indeed, glad to be here, Miss Glade,"

came his soft, modulated tones, no trace of the range dialect in his voice. "Clive failed to indicate that we were to work for such a charming young lady, else we would have hastened our arrival considerably."

"Hear that?" chortled Clive. "Didn't I say he was our shinin' light? But don't hold that ag'in' him, Miss Forest; he don't mean nothin' by it, it's just that he can't help it."

Forest laughed tremulously. Hope, which had slowly been fanned into flame in her heart under Clive's constant optimism, now burst forth and burned high. In that instant she would willingly have gambled all her remaining dollars that these men would conquer in her name, and in conquering carve out in the Cottonwood Valley an enviable position for the Swinging J ranch.

Charley Long's sing-song call reached them and the nine clumped off to a steaming meal. Clive asked:

"Was you fellers a-doin' some shootin' down the road a spell back?"

Wag raised a grinning face from a blistering hot cup of coffee.

"Did yuh hear that, *amigo*? Say, that was the dangedest thing yuh ever heard tell of. Here we was, all a-ridin' along easy and peaceful like and Brick, Lonesome and Blaze a-singin' some sob-song when all to onct, whang! and then crack, bang and smash! We was set on by a lot of ridin' fools who was either drunk or crazy; leastwise, they

couldn't shoot straight. Well, we just nacherally lit into that gang and chased merry hell out of 'em. They was six or seven, I didn't count how many, but I know a big *hombre* with a black mustache was a-leadin' 'em."

"That was old Bender and his gang," said Clive. "Bender's one of the buzzards we got to smoke out of here. He had just left us and we had a leetle shindig with him ourselves, afore he was persuaded to *vamoose*."

"One thing about that fight, though," said Hokum Smith, "it busted up that danged love song that near-trio was a-singin', and I reckon we ort to be thankful for that."

Forest, watching and listening, felt that her cup of hope and thankfulness was running over, but as it turned out it was not yet full. Even before the others had finished their meal, hoof-beats once more sounded outside and more yells rent the air. Bull Ellerby's deep bass could be heard in joyous acclaim, while the softer voice of Shad Stevens also broke in.

Clive hastened outside and his eyes lit with pleasure. His fondest hopes had been fulfilled, for in the yard seven men were dismounting. Every man he had expected and had counted on as a certainty had now arrived. A voice was saying:

"Did that other bunch of lop-ears arrive? We heard about 'em in Sunset and we rode like two kinds of hell tryin' to ketch 'em, but I reckon they was a-ridin' the same way; leastwise, we didn't

git nary a sign of 'em, not even their dang' dust."

Bull Ellerby's heavy voice assured them the others had arrived top-side up and even now were being dined. Then Clive was among them. The hand-shaking and back-thumping was gone through with once more and once more Forest was called on to greet new allies. As before, Clive acted as master of ceremonies.

A tall, lithe youth, with black eyes and a pale, handsome face, stood in the forefront, and toward him Clive pointed an unmannerly finger, indicating first of all the silver-mounted six-guns that swung at his hips.

"There, Miss Forest," Clive declared, "is the king-pin two-gun man of the Texas Rangers; leastwise, he was until he quit bein' a Ranger. Meet Two-Gun Farrell, the fastest man with a gun in the Southwest, I reckon, and standin' there beside him is his pal, Faro Latimer. There's Laramie Wilkins, Fog Carruthers, Milk River Ellis, Silk Kingsbury and Wyomin' Red Hargrave. Now, yuh've met 'em all. Here we are, twenty-six of us, and me the porest cuss of the lot, if I do say it muhse'f. We're here to see yuh gets justice, and if we can't get in no other way, why dang our hides, we'll dig in and find it for yuh with our six-guns. There ain't a man in the bunch that won't go the limit for yuh, Miss Forest, and when we get through with Cottonwood Valley, yuh shore won't know the old place nohow."

The reunion that followed lasted until well after midnight, and when Forest finally retired there was

a great peace in her heart, and a great thankfulness; also, a feeling was being born there that was new to her — and it had to do with Clive Morgan.

Next day Clive held a council of war at which all were present and at this gathering Forest's status was gone over carefully and her persecutions recounted. No one could offer a really sane reason as to the motive behind the attacks on the girl.

Definite plans of action were discussed and the first thing that was agreed on concerned her strayed cattle — it was decided that every head of Swinging J stock that could be found would be rounded up and brought back to the Swinging J acres. It was about time for the annual spring round-up, but no one could be sure that one would be held in Cottonwood Valley, so it was decided the boys would fare forth over the whole region and comb every herd for Forest's stock. If opposition to the move cropped out, they would know how to deal with it; in fact, this was exactly what they had come here for. At the conclusion of what Spud termed the "big pow-wow" it was decided action would be started at once.

That evening Forest formally designated Clive as her foreman, and told him a wagon load of supplies would have to be brought in from Sunset. Later she arranged the finances with him and, bearing a sizeable check on the bank at Sunset, Clive sought the bunkhouse and appointed Silk, Fog, Laramie and Wag as those who would hitch up the four-horse team next morning and start for town, forty miles away.

CHAPTER V

FIRE AND CONFLICT

THE day had been peaceful. Clive had rather anticipated a visit from Bender, this time with more punchers behind him, or possibly a force augmented by riders from other ranches of the Cottonwood Valley, but night came on apace without anything of an untoward nature having occurred.

An hour before midnight a series of yawns and prodigious stretches of arms and legs apprised Clive that the new official family of the Swinging J was getting sleepy and preparing to turn in, and he made a suggestion that had been in his mind all evening.

“Yuh know, fellers, things has been too peaceable to suit me, 'specially when yuh consider what's be'n a-happenin' yere and what's apt to come. Now I figgers the sensible thing for us to do is to establish a reg'lar night watch and I'm goin' to suggest that we set one tonight. Pink, yuh always was a danged old night owl, so s'posin' yuh sashay outside and find yorese'f a hole and keep a eye on things. If yuh think yuh'll get lonesome, yuh can take Chick with yuh to keep yuh company,” he said.

Pink Sellers rose. “Come on, Chick,” he said. “You and me is designated as night riders of this

yere outfit, so quit yore danged yawnin' and move along. Some day, shore as hell, yo're a-goin' to bust yore jaw gap'in' like that."

Peace still hovered over the ranch at midnight. Pink and Chick, sitting by the corral in the shadow of the fence, dozed despite their good intentions. A smiling moon rode high in the heavens and brilliant, low-hanging stars studded the velvet bowl of the sky. It seemed that a place so quiet and serene of sheer necessity must remain so. But evil was abroad that night and dark plots were working against the Swinging J.

Something, about three o'clock, awakened Pink. He sniffed the air, then tugged at Chick's arm, rousing him. Excitedly, Pink put his lips to Chick's ear.

"Wake up, Chick, but keep quiet; I smells smoke, shore as hell. I reckon they's somethin' burnin' down there by the barn. Lively, now, but for cripe's sake, we mustn't make no noise."

Silently they skirted the corral. Near the barn they dropped to their hands and knees and crept forward cautiously. Suddenly a flare of light toward the rear of the structure apprised them that flames were springing into being, and Pink forthwith abandoned caution. He let out a yell and his six-gun fired three rapid shots into the air.

Three figures, running rapidly, darted from behind the barn, made their ways to waiting horses and fled swiftly off into the night. But Pink had glimpsed a heavy face for just an instant as a

tongue of flame, eating at a whisp of straw, had flared brightly. As Clive, with the others at his heels and only half-clad came running up, Pink shouted:

“They fired the barn, old timer, but I seen one of the geezers what done it, and I’d know him ag’in if I met him in hell.”

Desperately every man of the outfit set about the task of saving the barn, but even as they made their first frantic attempts they saw it would be a hopeless endeavor. The structure had been fired in three places and the flames, billowing and waving through the dry straw piled inside, were eating their way rapidly up the walls and toward the roof.

So long as they could stand the heat they worked in relays and threw buckets of water wherever they could reach, but in ten minutes they had been driven off by the fierce blaze and stood despondently while the big barn toppled and sent up a shower of sparks that soared high toward the heavens.

Fortunately, the barn set outside the cottonwood trees and was far enough removed from the house as not to threaten the latter structure. The bunkhouse, too, was safe. The ex-Rangers had managed to save most of the implements inside the barn and these, including the buckboard and many rolls of barbed wire, were now piled in an ungainly mass to one side. At dawn the ruins still smoldered, and where had been a giant structure only

a few hours earlier there was now only a smoking ruin of charred wood and bits of iron.

Clive turned bitter eyes on Pink.

“Yuh say yuh saw one of the snakes that done this, Pink? Tell me what he looked like. I’m a-goin’ through this valley till I find ’im, and then he’s a-goin’ to dance on air if I have to string ’im up all by muh lonesome.”

Forest was sobbing softly at his side. For hours she had stood and watched the valiant fight the men had made to save what they could. Now she listened intently to Pink’s reply.

“Shore, I seen one, Tex; just like I told yuh. He was a big guy with on’y one eye and he had somethin’ wrong with one of his ears; leastwise, it didn’t seem to be all there.”

Forest drew a quick breath and Clive gave a violent start, then turned to the girl.

“Miss Forest,” he asked, “who owns the next ranch to yuh on the no’th?”

“It’s the Box O, Clive,” she replied. “Jeb Horner owns it. I know what you are thinking, and I agree with you. The man Pink saw was Clem Jacobs, old Horner’s foreman.”

Clive nodded grimly.

“Yep, that’s the buzzard, all right,” he said. “He’s the *hombre* that told me to skedaddle when I poked muh haid in there that day at dinner time a-huntin’ a job.”

Forest looked at him questioningly, but Clive only said:

“ Well, I knows of a way to get that dang’ pole-cat.”

After breakfast, and with the burning rays of the Arizona sun pouring over the mountain peaks to the east, Silk, Fog, Laramie and Wag went to the harness shed near the corral and brought out the equipment for the horses and a half-hour later, Silk climbed onto the high seat and picked up the reins. He already had been handed the check Forest had given Clive, and was prepared for the drive into Sunset for supplies.

Those who were to accompany him had mounted their wiry cayuses and ranged alongside the wagon. Bull Ellerby, watching the proceedings, turned to Clive.

“ ’Tain’t any of muh business, maybe, Tex, but hadn’t yuh ort to send a couple more fellers with them bozos?” he asked. “ S’posin’ eight or a dozen of them skunks that has be’n a-honin’ for trouble fr’m us was to jump ’em over there in that pass?”

“ I reckon yo’re right, Bull,” Clive answered, and he turned to the waiting group and called: “ Here, Bing, you and Brick and Reb go along with ’em and be dang’ shore yuh bring back that grub top-side high.”

The wagon departed with a grim escort of six riders who ached for battle. As the outfit rattled off down the lane, Clive called the others about him and suggested they take a walk down past the ruins of the barn. Scenting something in Clive’s mind, they followed him eagerly. Outside the cotton-

woods they gathered in a circle about their leader, and Clive said:

“I didn’t want to say much where Miss Forest might accidental like have heard, ’cause what I’m a-goin’ to put up to you *hombres* might not set well with her. Now, listen. Pink, here, seen a one-eyed pole-cat with a tin-ear. I know where that gopher slings his leather. Tonight, we’re a-goin’ to pay him a leetle visit. Now, gather in close while I spouts to yuh a leetle plan I got in mind.”

For five minutes the drone of Clive’s voice was the only sound that broke the silence. Forest, from the veranda of the house, could see them but she could not hear what was being said, therefore she wondered when she heard a series of whoops, saw the men break up and slap each other on shoulder and back. Nor, that night after midnight, did she see five silent forms steal softly from the bunkhouse, go to the corral and saddle five horses, then ride easily away in the moonlight. A half-mile from the house, Clive straightened in his saddle.

“We can cut loose now, boys, ’thout her hearin’ our ponies. Yuh shore yuh got them matches, Two-Gun?”

“I got a whole dang’ pocketful, Tex.”

“You other fellers got enough?” Clive continued.

“I got plenty,” said Lonesome Hines.

“Me, too,” answered Wyoming Red.

“Don’t you worry about me, Clive,” said Blaze Ormsby. “I have enough matches on me to burn down a whole damned forest.”

“Good,” said Clive. “I got a supply muhse’f. Now, let’s make some speed.”

In another hour they crossed Cougar Creek and Clive pointed toward the center of the ford.

“Settin’ right there in a buckboard, both of her hosses shot, is where I fust seed Miss Forest,” he told them.

They had heard the story and looked with interest at the gurgling stream. On past the clump of scrub willow, out across the open range and toward the fenced-in country they spurred. Another hour and they came to a line fence, the one Clive had noticed the day he met Forest. He knew it would now be less than an hour until they reached the Box O. In a little while he led the way from the highway, turning in toward the Box O fence and drew forth his wire snippers.

“I s’pose old Horner’s got some night riders, so we got to be careful, boys,” he said as, the wires down, they rode onto the Box O acres.

“I’d shore admire for one of ’em to try and stop us,” said Two-Gun Farrell, his pale face gleaming in the moonlight, and his smooth white fingers twitching as though eager to get at his gun-butts.

Jeb Horner had built all his ranch structures among cottonwood trees and an orange grove. The latter spread out in back of the barn and stalked

off toward the mountains that towered to the northeast, several miles distant. This proved favorable to the night raiders, for the last ten minutes of their cautious journey was made in the shadows of these trees, only recently plucked of their ripened fruit; so recently, in fact, that golden balls still hung in odd places on the branches.

In this grove they left their horses, reins dropped over their heads. There would be no danger of them neighing, for there were five, and generally it is only when a horse is alone that it will neigh when it sights or hears another of its kindred.

From shadow to shadow the five silent forms approached the giant Box O barn. Before reaching the barn itself, one shadow detached itself from the others and crept toward the harness and tool shed. Still another stepped aside and made its way to the fruit-house, where Horner sorted and graded his oranges.

Came a quick dash across a moonlit patch, then the shadows blended with the deeper shades around the buildings.

Silent hands worked rapidly. A door in the barn was opened and three figures crept inside. Meantime, Ormsby, over at the shed, and Two-Gun, in the fruit-house, were busy. Ormsby sighted a pile of refuse in the shed, struck a match along the underside of his *chaparajoed* leg and cast it down among the litter of paper and shavings, while Two-Gun set a match going in a heap of

soft, pitchy pine boxes. Both waited only long enough to see the flames start, then made their ways hurriedly back into the orange trees.

In the barn, at three separate places, Clive, Lonesome and Wyoming threw blazing matches into piled-up straw. They noted that no animals were inside the structure, therefore had no compunctions about what they were doing. They paused only long enough to see the flames lick swiftly across the straw, then joined Blaze and Two-Gun back at the horses.

No signs of life had shown from the ranch house or about the bunkhouse. It was evident that old Jeb Horner, serene in the belief that all was well on his own ranch, had closed up tightly for the night, and if any night riders were kept busy at all, they were somewhere off with the herds, out across the broad acres of the Box O.

As the first startled yells and a few scattered shots sounded from the ranch; as the first flaring tongue of flame burst from the barn, the five from the Swinging J emerged through the gap they had cut out in the Box O fence, and clattered off down the highway.

Charley Long had not finished with his breakfast dishes when a troupe of riders swung into the yard of the Swinging J, a huge, one-eyed man with a mutilated ear at their head. Clive, showing no visible signs of his nocturnal activities, watched them approach, counting ten riders in all. With Two-Gun, Faro, Bull, Pink and Blaze at his side

he waited quietly as the others came up. Pink whispered:

“That’s the jasper I saw a-runnin’ from our barn, Tex.” Clive nodded that he understood and gave Pink a warning nudge with his elbow.

Jacobs, for it was Jeb Horner’s burly foreman, reigned in his pony a scant dozen feet from where Clive and his companions were standing.

“Any of you *hombres* out ridin’ last night?” he asked, his voice razor-edged.

Clive saw the men behind Jacobs swing light hands near their gun-butts. He wiggled his fingers at Pink and the latter nonchalantly strolled off toward the bunkhouse, reading aright the old Ranger signal that Clive had given him.

“Might ’a’ be’n,” Clive said evenly. “Why?”

“And maybe yuh might ’a’ set our barn and shed and fruit-house on fire too, hey?” rasped Jacobs.

“Was yore barn set on fire last night?” Clive asked, his voice innocently sympathetic. “Now ain’t that the dangest thing yuh ever heard of? Our barn was burned, too; on’y that was the night afore last. Yuh reckon the same fellers could-a set both fires?”

Jacobs’ face whitened swiftly and rage flared in his narrow-set eyes.

“No, I don’t reckon they could,” he ground out. “I reckon the *hombres* what visited our place come from the Swinging J, and I’m a-aimin’ to find out for shore.”

“He’p yorese’f to the information, cowboy,” said Clive. “Yo’re welcome to all yuh can learn here.” He waved a careless hand about the grounds and spat contemptuously.

“Yuh danged whelp,” roared Jacobs, “I reckon yuh had a hand in that fire last night yorese’f, Mister Man. Git yore hoss and come along with us to the old man’s, and see what he’s got ready and waitin’ for yuh.”

“I reckon yo’re a-referrin’ to yore mangy old boss,” said Clive easily. “Howsumever, if he wants to see me yuh tell ’im to come over this-away. Last time I was at yore place yuh was so danged onmannerly when I asked yuh for a job that yuh wouldn’t even invite me to chuck, and I was hongry as hell.”

“No, not the last time yuh was at our ranch, yuh pie-eyed buzzard,” yelled Jacobs, “for the last time yuh was at the Box O was last night, and I reckon I can prove it,” he added, triumphantly.

Clive repressed a start. He saw Jacobs’ hand rising and from it dangled a *concho* from a pair of chaps; it was the exact counterpart to others that hung on Clive’s legs. Somehow, it had been cut off during the previous night’s affair, and Clive had not noticed it. Jacobs held the *concho* out.

“Did yuh ever see that afore?” he asked.

Clive gazed at it, perfect innocence and wonder simulated in his eyes.

“Why,” he cried, as though delighted that he

had made a discovery. "That's muh *concho*. I be'n a-missin' that ever since the day yuh told me to skedaddle off yore ranch. I'm shore glad yuh found it."

"Quit yore damn' play-actin', Mister. That *concho* was found out under our orange trees, and yuh wasn't near them trees the day yuh asked me for a job."

Clive decided to take Jacobs' advice. He quit his "play-actin'," but not in the manner the burly Box O foreman wished. In the first place, he made a flying leap and retrieved the tell-tale *concho*; in the second place he cried:

"I ain't here to answer a lot of damn' fool questions for yuh, yuh dang' Piute. Now, yuh herd them buzzards of yore'n around and take 'em to hell off this ranch."

As though this were a signal he had been awaiting, Jacobs' hand flashed for his gun, while behind him his men scattered and rushed. Six-shooters flared and crashed, spouting smoke and flame. Bull Ellerby grunted and sat down heavily, blood staining his shirt at his right shoulder. Ormsby's hat flew from his head and sailed a dozen feet distant, while Faro's left arm jerked queerly, then flopped limply against his side. Clive felt the scorching sear of a bullet across his ribs and felt, too, the wind temporarily driven from his lungs.

Meantime, Two-Gun Farrell had gone into action, gun in either hand, and they were roaring their blasts of death and destruction; a blast that anni-

hilated whichever way it struck. Two-Gun's pale face was deathly white and his black, somber eyes were twin flames of green. A smile twisted the corners of his mouth. His guns blazed with a precision that was as deadly as it was steady.

Jacobs pitched from his saddle, striking the ground heavily, while behind him a rider went slumping across his saddle horn, a tiny blue hole growing like magic between his eyes. Just then a volley belched from the bunkhouse as the Swinging J riders went into action. Almost as one, three men pitched from their saddles and joined Jacobs on the ground.

Surprised by the fire from the bunkhouse and by the numbers of the punchers who had appeared from there, the Box O riders hastily put up their guns and turned to flee. Clive's voice roared:

"Stay where yuh are, cowboys, or yuh'll every damn' one eat lead. Take yore boss and them stinkin' hawgs layin' there on the ground with yuh when yuh go, and do it *pronto*."

The Box O riders dropped from their saddles, hands held carefully away from their guns. Jacobs they found shot through each shoulder, victim of Two-Gun Farrell's first devastating blast. He was unconscious. Two of the men on the ground were dead as was also the one who still was slumped across his saddle horn. Three others were wounded.

On the other hand, Bull Ellerby would be out of commission for some time. A bullet had

smashed into his right shoulder. Faro Latimer's left arm had a deep gash through the flesh below the elbow, and Milk River Ellis had a bullet in the calf of his right leg. Clive felt blood running from a sore spot on his ribs, but otherwise seemed no worse for his experience.

While Bull and Milk River were being carried into the bunkhouse, Clive watched the Box O riders tie their dead comrades onto their recent mounts; watched while they made their wounded men as comfortable as possible and started on the long ride back to the Box O, then said:

“Now, you fellers keep goin’ and don’t none of yuh ever come back here. We’re a-goin’ to put the Swingin’ J back on its feet and from now on ‘no trespassin’ ’ is the sign over the whole dang’ shebang. Fust man that sets foot on Swingin’ J property hereafter, ’thout he’s got honest business here, eats lead. Just keep that under yore hats and tell it to that old sheep-killin’ dog yuh work for.”

Bitter oaths and threats were hurled at him, but the Box O men were too wise to offer further show of violence, and rode, cursing, from the yard. Clive doubted whether Clem Jacobs would survive until he reached Horner's place.

CHAPTER VI

ROUND-UP PLANS ARE LAID

CLIVE saw Forest leave the house and come toward him. Her face was white and her eyes were horror-filled. He knew she had witnessed the affair in the yard. She came directly to him.

“Clive, this fighting is terrible, and I cannot stand it. Some of those men were killed and I saw two of your friends being carried into the bunkhouse, wounded. Isn't there any way to run my ranch without shooting people?”

“Not when said people just nacherally comes a-gunnin' for yuh,” he answered grimly. “I'm sorry yuh saw this leetle shindig, Miss Forest, but I reckon it can't be helped now. But don't yuh worry none. We ain't a-killin' nobody that ain't tryin' to do us fust.”

“Those wounded men must be cared for,” she continued. “Are they hurt seriously?”

“I don't reckon they're a-goin' to die, if that's what yuh mean. Bull's hurt worse'n anybody else. He got a bullet in the shoulder. I reckon they're fixin' him up now, and if yuh got anything in the way of clean bandages like, I reckon it would be appreciated.”

Forest fled to the house, returning almost immediately with clean linen strips, iodine and cotton. She handed these to Clive, asking:

“ I wonder if I might be of assistance?”

“ I don't reckon yuh can. Blaze Ormsby's studied medicine and holds a diplomy 'long with his other accomplishments, and I reckon he'll see that Bull's fixed top shape. Howsumever, if he needs yuh, I'll let yuh know, *pronto*.”

Forest watched Clive as he disappeared inside the bunkhouse. Her heart was torn with mixed emotions. She loathed the bloodshed and turmoil, yet she was sensible enough to realize that the fight in the yard had not been of her own outfit's choosing. The men had merely defended themselves.

She felt a thrill of excitement tug at her heart-strings as she recalled the glorious manner in which Two-Gun Farrell, shooting with a speed and precision that had been astounding, had splayed the ranks of the enemy with messengers of death; how the others of the Swinging J had gone into action on the instant without fear for selves or the outcome.

It attested to their marksmanship that dead men were being taken back to the Box O, while only one badly wounded Swinging J man was in the bunkhouse. She sighed, but decided to say no more. The thing was settled so far as she was concerned; her gauge was in Clive's capable hands, and she would let him pursue his own methods of fighting her persecutors.

Inside the bunkhouse Bull Ellerby had been attended to first by Ormsby, while Milk River

Ellis, painfully, but not seriously hurt, lay back on his bunk and allowed Jingle Jones to bathe his leg. He probably would have to keep off his feet for some time, but otherwise was no worse for the encounter. As for Faro Latimer, he made light of the gash in his arm, permitting only that it be lightly bandaged and refusing even to place it in a sling.

Surveying the scene Clive summed up the net results of the last few days of hectic events.

“Well, things is a-goin’ right along with a rush and a bang,” he grinned. “First, we had a leetle brush with some Mex shepherds, then we turns a bunch of woolies into old Bender’s alfalfy and has a leetle argyment next day with old Bender hisself. Then them damn’ skunks from the Box O burns our barn and we burns their barn, tool shed and fruit-house. Finally we has a smash with the Box O hands and we gets three men hurt to their three daid and three hurt. Looks to me like we was ahead all the way ’round.”

“What about yorese’f, Clive? Yuh be’n a-bleed-in’, ain’t yuh?” It was Lonesome who asked.

For the first time since that searing flame had pained him Clive remembered his own condition and hurriedly drew off his shirt. The skin was broken over his left ribs, but the bleeding had ceased and he was in no pain. He washed off the dried blood and Ormsby strapped a piece of clean linen over the wound, holding it in place with a heavy piece of adhesive plaster. Choosing fresh

shirts, Clive drew them on and declared himself to be as fit as ever.

“What are we goin’ to do next, Tex? ’Pears to me we ain’t a-goin’ to have a lot of peace around yere, now that the ball’s started rollin’. Shore as yore gran’mammy didn’t have chin-whiskers we’re a-goin’ to have more trouble.”

Lonesome was speaking again and the others concurred in what he said.

“Well, we gotta take things easy till the wagon gets back with our fodder and then with all hands on deck ’ceptin’ Bull and Milk River, I don’t reckon we’re a-goin’ to worry a lot over what happens,” Clive replied.

“I bet them Box O *hombres* come at us right, next time,” opined Chick Purdy.

“Let ’em,” snapped Clive. “I ain’t a-worryin’ none. Fust thing we ort to do now, seems to me, is to get Miss Forest’s cows rounded up. Blaze, in addition to yore bein’ a singer, a langwidge slinger, a gun artist and a dang’ good doctor, yuh used to draw purty pictures and make little doodads with a pen and ink. I wonder can yuh make me some signs that they’s a-goin’ to be a round-up. Make ’em warn everybody that we’re a-goin’ to stage it all by our lonesome onless the rest of the valley cares to send hands to protect its interests. I want about twenty, so’s I can post ’em prominent like where every sheep nose in the place will see ’em. And make ’em big.”

“I’ll be happy to oblige you, Tex,” said Blaze,

his soft, slow voice eager. "You will have to round up something for me to work with, however."

"Me, I'm a-tellin' yuh that what we want is to paint them signs dang good and big on boards, then nail 'em up, so's nobody can say we didn't do it proper like," said Hokum, and the others agreed at once that he was right.

As a result, about an hour later Blaze Ormsby was seated in the shade of the bunkhouse, small brush and can of black paint before him, painting beautiful letters on what once had been the tops of cases containing canned foods. Charley Long had supplied the material. When Blaze finished, after two hours of endeavor, he stood one of the boards up where it was prominent and the punchers stood back to admire it.

On this board, Blaze had given his artistic bent full play. Above the lettering was a remarkable likeness of a steer, on its broad flank the ranch's brand, a swinging capital J. Beneath this appeared the words:

NOTICE

The undersigned will round up, beginning at once, all cattle on the open range bearing the Swinging J brand. If any are interested they are hereby notified to send riders, in order that the interests of all ranches may be served and protected. If no help is forthcoming, the undersigned will conduct the round-up independently.

F. GLADE.

Lazy Turner, surveying the pictured likeness of the steer, gasped.

“Say, Blaze,” he said, “what’ll yuh take to draw muh pitcher for me?”

Brindle Thorp let out a guffaw.

“Yuh pore shote, Blaze cain’t draw no pitcher of a jackass,” he jeered.

“Just ee-magine Lazy’s ears in a pitcher,” chortled Pink Sellers.

“And them two by twenty-two feet,” snickered Piute Allen.

“And them eyes,” snorted Mojave Evans.

“And them nose ——” but Honey Malloy’s further comment was cut short by a roar from Lazy.

“Yuh danged, onmannerly gophers,” he yelled. “What do yuh think yuh know about art, anyhow? I reckon I’d look a dang’ sight better in a pitcher than some of you shad-bellied pin-dogs, at that.”

“You *hombres*, forget art and go get yore ponies,” broke in Clive. “I want yuh to come with me. Grab them boards and we’ll go put ’em up. Chick, yuh go to the tool shed and rustle some hammers and nails. Jingle, yuh go tell Miss Forest what we’re up to. Wyomin’, you and Two-Gun and Faro will stay here at the ranch and keep yore eyes peeled. Somebody’s got to keep guard here, and besides that Bull and Milk River may be a-needin’ things. Everybody else will travel with me.”

“Yuh figgerin’ on coverin’ the whole valley with these, Tex?” asked Lonesome as the party spurred away from the house.

“I reckon so, Lonesome. We don’t want to do nothin’ that them c’yotes can say wasn’t a fair shake for them. Looks like we got a lot of ridin’ ahead of us, cowboys. How many signs did yuh make, Blaze?”

“Thirty, I believe. I anticipated that you would be placarding the entire country hereabouts at vantage points, so I tried to make enough. Only the one has the decoration, however.”

They rode rapidly, knowing the way would be far and perhaps that trouble would be met before they were finished. The Swinging J line ended before they reached Cougar Creek and from there on Clive watched for places he thought would be proper points to post his boards. At the ford he nailed the sign that carried the steer’s likeness, fastening it to a large willow and trimming away the branches so that all who passed on the highway might see it. At the line fence, marking the northern end of the open range and the beginning of the Box O, he nailed another, then the party clattered up the road.

They passed the Box O without a pause, although all looked with interest back through the orange trees and into the clump of cottonwoods that held the ranch house. A few derisive yells and curses greeted them, but there was no openly hostile demonstration aside from that. Their next notice was nailed to a cottonwood directly on the line fence between the Box O and the M-Bar-T, and after that they nailed the boards handy to the Dol-

lar M, the Lazy X, the Square D and the Crazy H.

By now the day was well advanced and they had ridden nearly forty miles. Their course had taken them to the extreme northern end of the valley and they had swung back on the western side of the range. The Bar T, Diamond L, Circle C and Bender's were yet to be taken care of, and they gave their ponies no opportunities to lag. There still remained nine signs.

They had left the Crazy H and were spurring across the Bar T when Shad Stevens, riding beside Clive, said:

"There's a bunch of riders comin' our way, Tex; looks like they was aimin' to pick us up."

Clive drew rein and looked to his right. From the direction of the Square D came a large crowd of men on horseback. They were riding rapidly and heading directly toward the Swinging J outfit.

"We goin' to wait for 'em, Tex?" asked Honey Malloy.

"Might as well, I reckon," he answered.

A red-haired, lanky puncher with lean features and a dour face rode at the head of the oncoming men. As they drew up with the Swinging J riders, this individual advanced ahead of the others and raised his right hand in the universal peace greeting of the range-land. Clive responded in kind. The red-haired man spoke:

"You fellers the ones that's puttin' up them round-up notices?"

"I reckon we are," Clive answered.

“Then I guess yo’re part of the bunch that’s ridin’ for the Swingin’ J now.”

“Yuh guessed right, first try.”

“Don’t yuh want to throw in with better outfits?” The red-haired man’s tones were ingratiating.

Clive pretended to be extremely interested, and he cast a meaning wink in the direction of Shad before he spoke.

“Meanin’ what?” he countered.

“Well, the Square D can use five good men and the Crazy H needs three. I onderstands the Dollar M and some of the others want top hands, too. They all pay fifty and chuck, and that is more’n yo’re gettin’ where yuh are, I reckon.”

“Yep, that’s some money, all right,” Clive said. “How do yuh know we could get jobs at them places?”

“Well, I ain’t sayin’ how, but I know, and yuh can take my word for it that if yuh go to any of them places and let ’em know what yo’re after, yuh’ll be taken on right off. I used to work for that gal over to the Swingin’ J, but she was just a jelly-fish, not able to run her place. Every time somethin’ happened she’d come around yowlin’ for us to do somethin’ about it and wantin’ us to go out and raise merry hell. We was bein’ paid to punch cows, not to fight, and then we got the same kind of a offer I’m makin’ yuh now, and most of us pulled out.”

“I’ll think over what yuh say, cowboy,” Clive

informed him. "Mebbe, a leetle later, we'll be comin' around yere a-takin' them jobs."

"Them jobs ain't a-goin' to be open less'n yuh take 'em right away," the other rejoined.

"Then I reckon we ain't interested, not any," Clive declared.

The red-haired man showed yellow teeth in a sardonic grin.

"'Pears like it's true, then, what I heard," he observed.

"Meanin'?" queried Clive, softly.

"Meanin' yo're a passel and part of them gunmen the gal brought in from Texas. Well, yuh won't git far. Yuh be'n lucky up to now, but watch yore rope, cowboy, or yuh'll find it draggin', shore as hell."

"If muh rope drags, they'll be somebody fastened to t'other end of it," said Clive.

"Aw, hell, Cherry," exclaimed a voice among the riders, "don't chin-chin with them *hombres* no longer. Come on, we got to git busy, and Spear didn't tell us to start no fannin' bee with these geezers."

"I guess yo're right, Boots," said Red-Head, obviously the man addressed as Cherry. "Well, s'long," he rasped to Clive, and turned his pony. In a trice he was leading his party at a reckless gallop, headed toward the Bar T.

"Now, what do yuh think of that?" asked Clive of no one in particular as he watched Cherry and his companions spur off. "We're bribed to quit

Miss Forest, and we're told we be'n lucky to get as far as we have. Well, come on, cowboys, we got a long ride and a lot of work to do yet."

"Hey, Tex, did yuh see that bunch of signs some of them buzzards was a-carryin' with 'em?" asked Spud. "They was new-made ones, too; I could tell by the clean boards and they was 'no trespassin'' signs."

"I seen somethin' them bozos was carryin', but I couldn't make out what they was," he replied.

At the line fence that separated the Crazy H and the Bar T they swung to the left, seeing an opening in the barbed wire. When they reached it, they found their way was barred by a huge notice posted on the gate:

NO TRESPASSEN

Misspelled, the letter S turned backward wherever it occurred, the sign was obviously meant for their benefit. Clive eyed it reflectively, then grinned.

"Saves us a heap of trouble. If they put that sign up there, it's a shore bet more people'n us comes this-a-way, so we'll just nail one of our'n below that'n let it go at that. We can cut across the tip of the Box O, hit the open range, then put up a sign at the Diamond L. I reckon by then it'll be time to scoot for home. We'll ride out after supper and post old Bender's place and the Circle C, and we'll put our last two signs clear over

by the beginnin' of the trail through Saddleback Pass."

"Hell, Tex," cried Blaze Ormsby. "Are you going to allow that sign to stop us? If you are, then I would like to know how we shall get out of here, for of course by now the Box O will have similar signs posted. It is impossible to get around without using these private roads, and these men know it. That is why they have set these notices against us."

"Well," said Clive, "it really is savin' us time if we don't go clear across the Bar T. As for anybody keepin' us from goin' across the Box O, I'd like to see 'em try it. They already had a taste of our smoke and I reckon they ain't wantin' any more of it sudden like. Hurry with that sign, Shad, and we'll sail across the Box O right here."

The notice nailed into place, Clive led the way and they rode back to the Box O line fence. Here, Clive drew forth his wire snippers, having carried them with him constantly, and cut the top two strands, waiting until the others were over and then urging Thunder to the leap. He and Honey Malloy skilfully repaired the damage they had done and the party struck off once again toward the open range.

They rode warily, eyes and ears alert, for they knew the Box O outfit would make it hot for them if they could. However, nothing untoward transpired and late in the afternoon they came to the fences of the Diamond L. Signs were nailed here,

too, and after posting their own notice, the party swung off toward home.

Crossing the ford of Cougar Creek they glanced toward the willow where the first sign had been nailed. It was still there, but had been splintered from top to bottom under the crashing impact of a hundred bullets that had perforated it from end to end and side to side.

Clive chuckled.

“Well, I reckon somebody’s shore seen it, anyways.”

CHAPTER VII

THE FIGHT IN THE PASS

AT the ranch they found Charley Long had held supper pending their arrival, and were informed that nothing of moment had occurred during the day. Clive, while pleased at the news, knew that it probably meant their enemies were lying low temporarily, the while they laid plans for one swoop that would wipe out the aspirations of the Swinging J.

Two-Gun Farrell, after supper, declared he was going out with the night party, so Clive designated Mojave Evans to remain behind and assist in guarding the ranch. Then the party, mounted on fresh horses and carrying the remainder of their signs, struck off down the road toward Saddle-back Pass.

Bender's ranch, the Circle C and the Swinging J joined at the same point on the highway, with only the road itself separating the two former. The road cut the Swinging J in half from its northern to its southern sides.

At the meeting of the Swinging J and the Circle C there was a line fence, and across the road, to the right as one faced the pass, the Bender fence stalked back across the valley, Forest's property paralleling. Here, a notice was posted, then Clive said:

"Now, we're a-goin' on down the road, put up

signs at the lane leadin' to old Bender's house and at the one that runs to the Circle C ranch house. After that we want to put one at the far end of these yere ranches and take the last one to post at the valley end of the pass. I reckon that'll wind us up and we can go home and be peaceable like for the time bein'."

And so it was done. As Shad drove the last nail into the last sign, which he posted on a huge cottonwood just where the trail up over the Saddleback Pass left the valley, a clatter of hoofs coming down the steep road gave them pause. Hands swinging lightly near their guns, they waited. Shad hit the nail a final blow and stuck the hammer into a saddle pocket he had attached for that purpose, then drew back among the others and waited with them.

They could tell by the drumming of the approaching horse's hoofs that some one was riding furiously, and, judging by the sounds, there was only one animal coming — a lone rider storming down out of the pass. They watched closely to see who it would be that would burst out of the shrouding *palo verde* and *chaparral* that lined the roadside. Then the horse came in view, racing recklessly, furiously, down the hill, a rider clinging to the saddle horn and weaving from side to side as though he were about to pitch to the ground. The moonlight struck on his face, unshielded because his hat was missing, and Shad let out a whoop:

“That’s Brick Howard, and he’s be’n shot!”

The others recognized Brick on the instant and spurred to meet him. He greeted them with a weak smile and quick words:

“They’re after the wagon, ’bout six — eight miles back, Tex. Must be twenty or more of ’em. Ambushed us. Fust shots brought down the hosses and knocked out Bing and Wag. I reckon Wag’s daid, and I know Bing’s got a busted arm and laig. Yuh’ll have to hurry, cowboy. I managed to git through to ride for you *hombres*, and I’m Gawd-awful thankful yo’re this close. They pinked me twice, once in muh arm and twice in muh laig.”

Clive was instantly alert, his face setting in stern lines and his eyes flashing. He turned in his saddle, raising his voice:

“Jingle, you ride back with Brick. He mightn’t make it, and yuh’ll have to help ’im if he tuckers out. The rest of you buckaroos come a-runnin’; we’re a-goin’ after that wagon, and if they’ve killed Wag Derrin’, God help ’em.” His voice was razor-edged, strong and vibrant.

Brick spoke up:

“Jingle, you go with ’em. I can make it to the ranch, ’specially now that I don’t have to ride so hard. Yuh’ll be needin’ all of yuh to straighten that bunch out, if I’m any judge of their force.”

Clive looked swiftly toward Brick, saw him straighten in his saddle, a brave smile on his face. Clive nodded his head toward the pass and touched

his heels to his pony's sides. He darted forward like a streak, the others closing in behind him.

Brick watched them depart, holding his upright position, but when they were fairly out of sight in the pass, he slumped weakly across his saddle horn, let his arms hang loosely across the horse's neck, and gave the animal its own rein. It started on a slow walk, for it was fairly winded, along the road. Brick fought to retain consciousness.

Up into the pass rode the riders from the Swinging J, hearts swelling, eyes alert, lips tight and faces tense. Two-Gun Farrell, his silver-mounted six-guns gleaming in the moonlight, spurred his mount viciously and ranged alongside of Clive. Blaze Ormsby followed suit and lined up with Clive on his other side, and thus, the three abreast, they led the furious pace up the steep hill-trail, the others following so closely that it was a miracle men and horses did not come down in a tangled, scrambled mass.

Six or eight miles, Brick had said, and a good portion of the way uphill. With Brick, Bing and Wag out of the fight, that left only Reb Sefton, Laramie, Fog and Silk Kingsbury able to throw a gun, and Brick had said at least twenty were in the attacking party. Clive spurred his horse to greater effort and the others followed suit. No words were spoken and aside from the drumming of the clattering hoofs, the only sound that broke the stillness of the somber pass was the heavy breathing of the laboring animals.

On and on they rode. The crest of the pass was reached and the road became fairly level, dipping at intervals, rising at others, but on the whole fairly easy to travel. After a time the sound of shooting reached them and Clive drew his winded pony to a slower pace, raising a hand.

“Easy, boys,” he called. “If they’s twenty of ’em, we got to sorta su’prise ’em. Like as not they’ll be a-bushwhackin’ from behind boulders and things and they’s no use in us rushin’ ’em and lettin’ ’em pulverize us right off th’ reel. Some of our boys is left, or there wouldn’t be no shootin’ yet, I reckon, so from here on we go easy like and when we get closer we leave the hosses, circle back from the road and come down on them skunks like the Red Sea came down on old Pharaoh.”

There was wisdom in his plan. The horses, welcoming the easing from the strain of the long, tumultuous ride, went forward at a steady, moderate pace. The sounds of shooting grew louder and seemed to come from a point to their right. They sensed that the road turned near here, passing around an outjutting ridge, and that just across this they probably would find the wagon.

Clive drew rein and dismounted, tossing the reins across his pony’s head and allowing them to drag on the ground. The others followed suit and the horses stood silently, heads down, nostrils flaring as they struggled to recoup from the terrific ride through the pass.

It is no easy task to climb a rough, treacherous

Arizona hillside in the high-heeled boots of the cow country, but the Swinging J riders did it, wincing never at all at the outrage to their sensitive, under-sized feet. They finally gained the crest of the ridge and from this vantage point they could see their wagon in the road below them, perhaps five hundred feet away. The moonlight bathed the scene in a brilliant, golden flood.

The horses were lying dead in the traces. From both sides of the defile came little flashes of light and the cracking pops of six-guns, mingled with an occasional spiteful, whiplike spang of a rifle. The air was pungent with the acrid smell of burned powder. Clive looked closely for signs of life at the wagon and wondered where its defenders were hiding. A rattling volley told him. The men of the wagon were inside, using the boxed and baled goods as a rampart, and were firing at the flashes on the hillside. Two or three silent forms, sprawled in the moonlight, indicated a rush had been made on the wagon with dire results, and that the attackers had decided on a long-distance battle. Clive laid his battle plans carefully, with the aid of Two-Gun Farrell and Blaze Ormsby.

The others were gathered near, hands on their guns, anxious to get going, and they waited impatiently while Clive, Two-Gun and Blaze conferred, then:

“That bein’ settled, then,” Clive whispered to Ormsby, “you and Shad take six men, go back along the point, cross the road and work in back of

them *hombres* over there. We'll wait here gettin' our men spotted and we'll not move till yo're ready. When yuh get set, let 'er rip and with yore first shot we'll pile hell-bent down out-a here and take these galoots from this side. I think we'll smash 'em *pronto* if we handle it right."

Blaze breathed an affirmative, adding:

"I'll bet you a new hat there are more than twenty men in this gang, Tex. I would judge there are at least thirty, perhaps more."

"The more, the merrier," said Clive grimly. "We got to clean 'em out, so damn the difference how many there is. Let's get busy."

He watched silently as Blaze, Shad and the others crawled off cautiously, careful that they kept clumps of sage and sun-baked boulders between them and possible enemy eyes. Then Clive and those with him worked a careful way down the ridge. All had been watching the pin-points of light that flared in the shadows, picking their men. Two-Gun Farrell stayed close to Clive and the two led the way. A blot behind a boulder attracted their attention and Clive put a warning hand on Two-Gun's arm. The latter stopped his stealthy crawl and remained silent.

Creeping careful, Clive came up behind the shadow under the lee of the boulder and his gun-barrel made a flashing arc in the moonlight. It crashed heavily across a high-crowned sombrero and the wearer promptly crumpled up and flattened out in the sand. Clive bent over him, turning the

man on his back. A red thatch and a lean, hawk-like face, its eyes closed, stared up at him. It was Cherry of the Square D. He put his hand over the man's heart and felt it pulsing feebly, then he raised up. Cherry was knocked completely out, but he had not been killed.

Two-Gun joined him and together they yanked off Cherry's shirt and bound the man's hands and feet with strips taken from it. From the dirty bandana that swung at Cherry's neck they made a gag and then left the sorrel-thatched one trussed like a fowl and helpless behind the boulder.

The gun fire was now all around and below them. They were in the rear ranks of the force which was attacking from this side of the road. A voice suddenly called:

“What's the matter, Cherry? Yore lead all gone?”

Clive realized that the absence of firing from the boulder which sheltered Cherry had been noticed and not caring to hurt his own plans he decided on a subterfuge. He thrust his own six-gun over the boulder, held it high and aimed at a flash of light on the opposite slope. He pulled the trigger and almost immediately an answering volley lit up the sides of the wagon. A yell from across the road sounded and a man rose from beside a boulder, spinning briefly before he pitched forward on his face. Clive knew his bullet had gone home under cover of the fire from the wagon.

He wondered how soon Blaze would open the

counter-attack, and his fingers were itching to pull his six-gun on the shadows all about him. Across the road there sounded all at once a rattling volley.

“Yipee-e-e-e!” It was the battle cry of the range-land that sounded from the farther slope. “Yipee-e-e-e!”

Clive’s heart thrilled. It was Blaze Ormsby’s voice and the shooting came from Ormsby and the men with him. At the first crash of their shots a furor broke loose across the road and men rose from behind boulders, seeking to protect themselves from this surprise attack in the rear. Clive saw the hidden marksmen about him rising and making ready to go to the aid of their suddenly beset comrades. He raised his own voice:

“Yipee-e-e-e! Let ’em have it, cowboys; shoot ’em up, yuh wild, roarin’ buckaroos. Kill the damn’ rattlers and chop off their tails. Yipee-e-e-e!”

He heard a roar beside him and saw Two-Gun Farrell, his silver-mounted revolvers flashing in the moonlight, standing beside a boulder, firing with cool deliberation and deadly aim across the scarred surface of the rock. Men were dropping like flies and on all sides guns were exploding while shrill yells of fear and rage thundered through the pass. Clive realized for the first time that he was pulling the trigger of his own six-gun and he cursed when the hammer fell on an empty shell. Cherry’s gun was in his other hand and he lifted it, continuing to pour lead toward every flitting

shadow that crossed his vision. He let out another yell:

“You in the wagon, there, give ’em hell. We’re all here, cowboys, and we’re a-goin’ to clean up this bunch of skunks *pronto!*”

Fog Carruthers’ voice sounded from the beleaguered wagon:

“Give ’em hell yorese’f, Clive; we be’n a-handin’ it to ’em for hours.”

Men were now running from behind boulders, cacti clumps and *palo verde* bushes, making for the road. A yell and a clattering of hoofs sounded up the road and around the point came more than a score of horses, plunging madly. Two had burning pieces of paper attached to their flaring tails.

“Yipee-e-e-e!” It was Honey Malloy’s voice. “Watch ’em run, cowboy. Like to see them skunks git away from us now. There go their hosses.”

Curses and angry cries followed. A voice shouted:

“Quit shootin’ and git over the hill; every man watch hisself and make yore way out of here damn’ fast. Keep close to me and we can stand off these *hombres*; they must be fifty of ’em.”

Clive let out a derisive yell when he heard the fear note in the voice, and he thrilled at this quick acknowledgment of defeat.

His voice was drowned in a fresh outburst of firing and from the wagon there came pronounced activity.

Fog Carruthers stood up on the high seat and by the light of the brilliant moon calmly dropped as many men as he could before they vanished among the boulders far up the ridges and Two-Gun Farrell, standing on a tall rock, his deadly six-guns working with a certainty of aim that was astounding and disheartening to their enemies, also was picking off the fleeing raiders. A final rattle of shots, then Ormsby yelled:

“There aren’t any left to shoot at; they have all chased across the hill and are out of sight, Clive.”

“Then make for the hosses,” Clive ordered, whereupon the Swinging J riders converged on the tip of the point, rounded it and mounted their ponies, spurring rapidly back to the wagon. A guard was thrown out in case the enemy attempted a surprise come-back attack.

Fog Carruthers, standing in the road beside the wagon, grinned and greeted them as they showed up.

“Say,” he asked, “how in hell did you fellers git here so quick? ’Twasn’t no time after Brick said he was a-goin’ for yuh till I heard yuh shootin’ and yellin’ like a bunch of locoed Apaches. He must ’a’ rode like a streak of greased lightnin’.”

“We met him ’bout six miles back, where we was a-doin’ some work,” Clive explained briefly. “He said Wag was daid, Fog; what’s yore damage total?”

Fog’s face turned melancholy on the instant and his mouth drooped.

“Yep, Wag’s daid, I reckon, Clive,” he answered sorrowfully, “and Bing’s got it bad in the arm and laig; both busted, seems like. Silk Kingsbury’s got a bullet in his shoulder and Laramie cain’t talk. Reb was shot in the laig. I reckon I’m the on’y one that wasn’t knocked out. I was drivin’, yuh see, and when that first volley let go from the rocks and bushes I just dropped the lines and gave muhse’f one Gawd-awful heave backwards and went plunk in among them groceries and things; then I begun to shoot from behind a pile of canned peas. The other fellers that could move managed to git inside the wagon and them as could shoot he’ped me stand off them buzzards. I shore thought we was gonners, though; for a fac’ I did.”

Swiftly they set to work. Wag Deering, loveable, talkative Wag, was lying in the shadow of the wagon. Two bullets had struck him in the head and he had died instantly, according to Ormsby. In the wagon they found the others, with makeshift bandages already applied, grinning bravely and cheerfully. That is, all were grinning who could. Laramie Wilkins had received a bullet in his left cheek and the lead had passed out the opposite side of his face, taking several teeth with it. His was a painful, but not serious wound. Bing, his left leg and arm limp and helpless, was the most seriously hurt. Silk’s wound was high enough on the shoulder not to be dangerous, but the bone had been shattered and he was suffering untold agony.

Clive turned to Ormsby:

“Blaze, yo’re a doctor, and I reckon there’s plenty here for yuh to practice on.”

“I’m already at work, Tex,” the versatile Ormsby answered. “I’ve just finished putting a bandage on Fog’s left arm. He said he wasn’t hurt, but his left biceps were almost severed by a slug of lead. Now, get aside while I fix up Bing.”

Ormsby knelt inside the wagon where the cased-goods had been pushed aside in order that a place could be made for the injured. Hastily, but carefully, he examined them all, then announced:

“These temporary bandages will have to do until we get back to the ranch, boys. I have my tools there, you know, and I think I can get them started back to Wellville once I have them in their bunks and where I can watch them.”

Blaze stayed inside with the wounded, his quick, gentle hands soothing when a pain shot through an injured part. The others attached lariats to the wagon and put harness from two dead horses on a wheel team, and with eight cow ponies dragging on the lariats and Lonesome Hines at the brake, the cavalcade started. An advance guard preceded it and two men rode considerably to the rear. They did not intend to be taken by surprise, but none felt there was a great deal of danger from this source since, with Honey’s stampeding of their mounts, the attackers probably were cursing a weary-footed way homeward.

Hours later they arrived at the ranch, worn and

wearily. Wag Deering's body was carried inside and laid tenderly in a bunk. Brick Howard occupied another, swathed in makeshift bandages and endeavoring to be cheerful.

It was then that Blaze Ormsby demonstrated that the country lost a mighty good physician and surgeon when he decided he preferred the life of the range to that of a doctor in some small settlement and the cares that went with the calling. With painstaking care and skillful touch he probed gently, antisepticized and bound up wounds and while he was about it, he re-dressed Bull Ellerby's hurts, noting with satisfaction that the latter was coming around nicely.

When Blaze finally finished with his task, Clive said:

"Now I want five of you fellers to go outside and keep watch. Ride off a ways from the house and hide yorese'ves and stay where yuh can see all approaches. Stay there till mornin' for there's no tellin' what them pole-cats may do. We scrotched some of 'em in the pass and when the survivors reaches home I reckon they'll just nacherally get ready to come over yere and chaw us up."

Came a knock at the bunkhouse door and Forest put her head inside. Clive walked over and joined her out in the yard. She turned to him with worried eyes and melancholy face.

"Clive, I saw you coming in a while ago. There has been trouble again, hasn't there? I saw men being carried into the bunkhouse and one of them,

I know, was dead. Ugh! It is horrible. If this must go on I think I shall carry out my original intention of leaving the Cottonwood Valley."

"Miss Forest," said Clive, soberly, "there was a fight in Saddleback Pass tonight, shore enough, and they killed pore old Wag Deering. But I reckon he's a-looking' down on us this minnit a-grinnin' that slow grin of his on account of the bunch of snakes we sent to hell when we avenged him."

There were tears in Clive's eyes, the tears of a strong man touched deeply, and impulsively Forest reached out and clasped his hands warmly within her own.

"I'm so sorry, Clive," she whispered, her own eyes moist, "but now that sorrow has touched you, has reached so closely home to you, don't you think it better for us to stop than to continue fighting?"

Still holding his hands, she waited for his reply. He winked rapidly several times, forcing the tears away. His voice was full and firm as he replied:

"Miss Forest, if that was my own brother layin' in there 'stead of pore old Wag, I'd be just as daid set on wipin' out them on-Godly skunks; his death don't change things any, 'cept that there won't be no mercy showed none of them yaller dawgs when we clashes ag'in. I reckon they found that out tonight in the pass. I don't know how many we got, but if I was to guess, I'd say a-plenty. Yuh lost four good horses, I reckon, and most of them tinned things has got punctures that let the juice run out,

but in the end all them losses will be cheap, for we're a-goin' to get yore ranch back and clean out every low-down whelp in this valley."

Next day a guard was maintained, but things remained peaceful and on the day following they held Wag's funeral. Wag had never owned to a home so they made him a grave in the prettiest spot they could find, beneath a huge cottonwood and only a short distance from a spring that made that particular part of the ranch a veritable oasis. Forest read from a tiny Bible and they left Wag in his last peaceful sleep.

As they walked back to the house, new lines had come into their faces and sorrow was heavy on their hearts. Even Forest found herself grimly hating those who were responsible for Deering's death, and a slowly welling lust for battle was coming up in her heart. She found herself praying silently that Clive and his hard-riding companions would be able to wipe out the killers and rustlers who infested this valley of strife.

CHAPTER VIII

THE ROUND-UP

WITH eight men on the hospital list Clive decided that for the time being their activities would be confined to business near to and having to do with the immediate ranch. There was nothing to gain through courting trouble or in riding far in their present weakened state. He did not propose to take any unnecessary chances with his crippled force, valiant though he knew his comrades to be.

Two-Gun Farrell was in favor of sending for additional men to strengthen them, but Clive was not sure this was the proper thing to do. He decided finally that things should go on as they were for the time being, while, in the meantime, an effort would be made to round up Forest's strayed cattle.

Taking into consideration the huge numbers of steers that were grazing on the open range, this would be an enormous task, and one that would be worthy of ten times their number; but it had to be done, so he gave the necessary orders. For a week they were busy on the construction of a counting chute, then the actual work of round-up got under way.

Blaze Ormsby, Jingle Jones and Lonesome remained at the ranch house, to care for the wounded and act as a guard. The others followed Clive and

set out to handle the task cut out for them as best they could. Thousands of steers were on the range, filling the great open spaces, and from these Forest's animals had to be cut out and banded together and tallied.

Day after day, from sunrise until dark, the work went on and after the first week a literal sea of tossing horns and waving tails had passed under their hands. By the end of the second week the riders had become lean of body and tanned of face and their eyes showed the strain of long hours in the saddle. Their ears ached from the constant thunder of bellowing steers and from the never-ending clump of thousands of hoofs. At the end of the third week they felt their work was nearing a successful conclusion.

By this time Faro Latimer's arm was healed and Milk River Ellis was back on his feet; also Silk Kingsbury, his face showing wicked scars on either cheek, was in the saddle again. Such are the healing properties of the warm, dry Arizona air when it is backed by the robust constitutions of those who have spent their lives in open places. Bull Ellerby and Bing Summers, the two who had been most seriously wounded, were improved so much that they no longer lay in their bunks, but riding was still out of the question with them.

Brick, Laramie and Wyoming Red would be available in another week and Clive was beginning to see daylight again, as he expressed it. All missed Wag Deering, and his name was frequently

mentioned. At such times a tensing of faces and a frosty glinting of eyes told all beholders that Wag's death was not forgotten, nor plans for further vengeance cast aside.

The middle of the fourth week saw a score of riders cross the range and lope up to the great cattle herds, where the work of tallying and cutting out the Swinging J stock was drawing near an end. A lanky cowboy who introduced himself as Monte McCourt of the Lazy X, led the outfit. He asked Clive how the work was coming along.

"Fair to middlin'," Clive answered. "I reckon, though, another week or so will see us finished."

"Findin' many Lazy X cows, pard?" continued Monte.

"Quite a few, I reckon."

"Yo're tallyin' 'em, ain't yuh?"

Clive glared resentfully.

"Say, Mr. Monte, what do yuh think we are? Yuh reckon we're a-keepin' tabs on all these cows for you *hombres* when yuh wouldn't send no help over this-a-way after we put up them notices?"

"Well, hell's bells, Morgan; yuh know damn' well everybody at a round-up helps to tally the other feller's stock, don't yuh? We nacherally s'posed yuh was doin' the same this time and I just rode over to git a leetle information. Our ranch is the last one in the valley as yuh go north, clear over ag'in the Moki-yones, and we're a leetle short-handed. We thought yuh'd shore be accommodatin' enough to keep tabs for us."

“Then yuh got another think comin.’ We be’n a-tallyin’ Swingin’ J cows and lettin’ the rest go as is.”

“I never heard of a round-up bein’ conducted in no such damn’ fool way,” insisted Monte. “Yuh orta know ezakly how many cows of each brand yuh’ve handled.”

“Listen here, McCourt, yuh got twenty men there; now, if you fellows want to pitch in and help us with the rest of these cows yo’re welcome and yuh can tally yore damn’ heads off, and yore fingers, too, but far as we’re concerned we ain’t tallyin’ nothin’ but our own animals, and that’s that. If yuh’d come at the start and some of them other outfits had sent men, this thing would’ve be’n over two weeks ago and yuh’d all know how many steers yuh got out here. As it is, I reckon yuh’ll have to stage a round-up of yore own, same as we did.”

“How’d we know yuh wasn’t goin’ to tally everythin’?” cried Monte.

Clive snorted.

“Yuh shore got yore nerve, I’d tell a man, ’spectin’ us to do all the work while you *hombres* hung back and spent yore time a-figgerin’ how yuh could waylay more of our wagons or burn more of our buildin’s or turn more sheep on us. Hell of a way to do, is what I mean.”

“Now, look-a here, Morgan; they wasn’t none of the Lazy X in that shindig at the pass, and they wasn’t none of the Lazy X burned yore barn. I

don't reckon yuh ever saw any of this outfit mixed up in anythin' that wasn't strickley accordin' to Hoyle, and I don't like yore danged insinooations."

"Yuh can like 'em or leave 'em alone, it don't make no difference to me," said Clive with finality, his eyes wary and sweeping over the riders who were assembled behind McCourt. The latter said:

"I reckon we ain't a-goin' to fight about it, Morgan, 'cause if muh bunch here ever mixed with yore gang, yuh would soon find yuh wasn't fightin' no such dang' sheep chasers as them yuh met in the pass, I'm a-tellin' yuh."

"Interestin', if true," said Clive sarcastically, "but I ain't aimin' for fight if you ain't. Me, I'm plumb peaceable like as a rule, but when some pole-cat jumps me, they's liable to be fireworks pop right sudden."

"I reckon," said McCourt calmly, "that yuh got the idee the Lazy X is mixed up with old Bender and Horner and them Square D bozos. Well, yuh can ree-vise yore opinion 'cause we're a-tootin' our own horns. I reckon we've had as many fights with them geezers as you have, and then some. That's one reason we come over yere today. We thought maybe we could help yuh some, but since yuh ain't be'n a-keepin' no tallies 'cept on yore own stock, I reckon we'll have to start the whole shebang all over again."

Clive looked at Monte suspiciously. The latter was a clean looking, alert, clear-eyed man, under thirty-five and those who rode with him were happy-

go-lucky, carefree-looking chaps who did not in the least give the impression that they would fight an underhanded war on a woman. But Clive was taking no chances; he could not afford to be lured into any false sense of security because a few range riders happened to look honest. He said:

“Well, if you geezers want to tally yore cows, I reckon yo’re welcome to start, far as we’re concerned. Yuh can start some tally-men right now and then go after them cows we’ve finished with. We’ll give yuh any help we can, now that yo’re here, and yo’re welcome to our countin’ pen. Our help might be considerable, at that, seein’ as we’re just about through tallyin’ the Swingin’ J stock, also seein’ as they ain’t many of our cows to count.”

Monte turned in his saddle and raised his voice:

“Hey, Chuck, you and Digger and Frog and Sleepy come yere and range up on that tally platform and keep tab on all the Lazy X and Swingin’ J cows yuh see. The rest of you *hombres* stay with me.” He turned to Clive:

“It’s dang’ nigh onto thirty miles to our ranch and I reckon we got enough work here to make it worth while bringin’ a chuck-wagon over. If I leaves these four men here to count and help you fellers, too, will yuh give ’em chuck till tomorrow? Two can help yuh ride herd tonight and we’ll be here with our whole outfit by ten bells, shore.”

“I reckon we can ’commodate yore men,” said Clive.

At twilight he called a halt, leaving the custom-

ary number of riders with the herd to await the coming of those who would stand watch during the night. Chuck and Digger had been designated by Monte as the ones who were to help night ride for the Lazy X, and Frog and Sleepy rode with the others to the Swinging J bunkhouse. They turned out to be genial, wholesome youths and very soon were on good terms with Clive and his riders.

“What I can’t understand,” said Shad to Sleepy as they rode along, “is why you birds didn’t show up three weeks ago and help us from the very start of things.”

“We wasn’t figgerin’ on pokin’ our noses into no range war, that’s why,” said Sleepy. “We was given the impression that about the time you fellers got things purty well in hand there would be a night raid and yore herds would be scattered and all mixed up ag’in. We knowed that would prob’ly mean a fight and we wasn’t goin’ to horn into somethin’ we could just as easy stay out of.”

Clive, who was riding with them, perked up his ears.

“Where’d yuh get that idee, Sleepy?” he asked.

“Cain’t say,” the Lazy X rider rejoined. “It was the general impression we all got, though. I reckon it was from somethin’ a bunch of Bar T and Square D buzzards said when yuh first was stickin’ up them round-up notices.”

“They was plannin’ to stampede us, was they?” Clive mused. “Wonder what made ’em change their minds?”

“ I reckon they got word to call off the gun-play and use a leetle more of dee-plomacy,” Sleepy opined.

Clive grunted.

“ Now, what in hell do yuh mean by that?” he demanded.

Frog, who had been riding with them, chimed in:

“ They prob’ly figgered they was more ways of gittin’ you short-horns outa here than killin’ yuh,” he said. “ Yuh don’t see them big geezers goin’ round a-shootin’ at each other, do yuh? And they round up all the dough, don’t they? Huh, them fellers uses dee-plomacy, yuh betcha. Well, I figger, and so does the rest of our bunch, that them Chicawgo cow barons has passed the word that yo’re to be gently discouraged in yore noble endeavors here, as it were, but that they’s to be no more gunnin’ for yuh.”

“ Yuh talk like a law feller,” said Shad. “ What do yuh mean ’bout them Chicawgo cow barons?”

“ That’s what I want to know,” said Clive.

“ Didn’t anybody tell yuh they controls this valley?” asked Sleepy, surprise tinging his voice.

“ How control it?” Clive wanted to know.

“ Why, they owns seven of these yere valley ranches, I reckon, and what they says goes, too, yuh betcha. That’s why we ain’t be’n a-hornin’ into things. We ain’t goin’ to fight no Chicawgo beef buyers and shut off our market, not if we knows what we’re a-doin, we ain’t. I reckon yore ranch,

the Lazy X and the Circle C are the on'y ones in the Cottonwood that ain't owned outright or controlled all the way through by them Chicawgo buzzards."

Clive whistled tunefully. Here was news indeed. He questioned further:

"Who are the Chicawgo geezers yuh refers to, Sleepy?"

Sleepy gazed at him pityingly.

"Ain't yuh never heard of the Henley Cattle & Sales Company?"

Clive started. The Henley people he knew, were a gigantic commission sales firm that did business all over the country, acting for any big packing interest that would patronize it. They usually bought steers on the hoof at their point of origin, shipped them to Chicago and then turned them over to the big packers, charging a stated commission for their services. He did not know they were raising cattle on their own initiative, nor that they owned or controlled any ranches.

"I knows of 'em, all right, but I thought they only acted as commission men."

"That's all they're supposed to be doin'," Sleepy agreed, "but they must 'a' be'n branchin' out to beat the cards these last few years. I reckon if them big packers what patronizes 'em knowed what Henley was a-doin' here in this valley they'd shut down on 'em dang' quick."

"Elucidate some more," urged Clive.

"There ain't much more I can tell," Sleepy

responded. "I knows, though, or leastwise everybody in our outfit onderstands, that the Henley people have either bought, leased or taken options on every dang' ranch in the Cottonwood 'ceptin' the three we already mentioned. They are raisin' their own cows and makin' bigger profits that-away. They tried to gobble in the Lazy X, but old Simmons, who owns it, wouldn't sell. Then they said they wouldn't buy his cows and he went through a sorta range war, but finally started stickin' to our own little bailiwick and the trouble finally stopped. But they never did buy no more of our cows. Old Simmons sends all his stock out through the north pass and up to the loadin' pens on the Santy Fay, and now he's shippin' 'em direct on his own hook. He don't make as much money by about five per cent, he says, but I reckon he'd rather make less quick cash and keep his ranch, at that."

"That information shore puts a different face on things yereabouts," said Clive seriously. "I be'n thinkin' all the time that it was damn' funny these buzzards here in the valley would raise so much hell over Miss Glade a-steppin' in and raisin' cows. So the Henley crowd is after her, hey? Now, I wonder if a leetle telygram to some of the big packers would help things?"

"None whatever," said Frog. "Yuh couldn't prove nothin' ag'in the Henley firm. Old Simmons tried that and the biggest house in Chicawgo sent a agent down to the county seat at Sunset and

he looked up records and deeds and mor'gages and such like, but they wasn't nothin' to indycate old Horner don't own the Box O, Jeb Griff's the Square D, and so on. But I betcha that old Henley hisself is holdin' unrecorded deeds and leases and other agreements and such back there in his private strong boxes just the same. That agent come right here into this valley, too, and the old man gave him a earful; howsumever, a earful ain't a eyeful and what them agents want is to be showed, that's all. Every dang' one of 'em was borned, raised and eddycated in Missouri, I reckon."

Clive scowled thoughtfully.

"Well," he said, after a time, "I'm shore thankful if they are a-goin' to ease up on the gun-play. Me, I've had enough to do me the rest of muh nacheral borned days. But somebody's a-goin' to pay for killin' pore old Wag Deerin'. I hope I finds out what buzzards fired the shots that killed 'im, that's all."

The peace that had descended on the valley after the fight in the pass seemed destined to continue, and although there were no visible signs of conflict, Clive felt they were living in a state of false security. There was a tenseness in the air and mystery brooded over everything.

Clive could now understand why strife filled the valley. If the Henley people were doing as Frog and Sleepy had said, it meant the firm was building for its future, against the possibility of losing the trade of the big packers and, by controlling a

goodly strip of the range, force business whether or no.

Cottonwood Valley was a beautiful place, rich and fertile. Nowhere was the location more suitable for cattle raising, and if the Henley company could acquire absolute control over it, they would have a range free from the menace of drouth and scarcity of feed. In times when the remainder of the Southwest suffered from these periodical calamities, Henley would be in a position to reap rich profits off the fat and healthy steers he would be able to supply for the ever growing markets in the east.

Clive knew that in a battle for dollars and firm prestige an unscrupulous concern, with a dignified name and a successful eastern organization, could carry on shady transactions in a country like this, far removed from every place, and none might ever be the wiser. Arizona was a comparatively little known territory and fewer than one hundred and fifty thousand souls made up its entire population. The open spaces were many and far reaching; the law was coming, but its progress was slow and those appointed to represent it were not adequate in numbers to safeguard the entire countryside as yet.

The only way to fight the Henley crowd, therefore, was with its own tactics. Fight fire with fire, was Clive's motto, as he had demonstrated in the burning of the Box O barn.

The round-up went along peaceably and in due time the Swinging J stock was cut out from the

others, while the Lazy X riders had an accurate tally of their animals, also. Monte and his outfit had worked side by side with the Swinging J riders and Clive found that he was liking the elongated Monte more and more as time passed. The feeling between them was mutual, it seemed, for when the time came for the Lazy X riders to return to their ranch, Monte drew Clive to one side and said:

“Listen, Tex; we got strick orders from Old Simmons to pull our leather at the first signs of trouble, but that don’t suit none of us *hombres* a leetle bit, ’specially since we’ve seen what yore she-male boss is up ag’in. Now, if them shad-bellied shotes starts anything more and yuh need help, just pass the word along, will yuh? We’ll come a-hootin’ if it means every damn’ one of us gits fired the next minnit. What say, cowboy?”

“I say thanks, pard, and many of ’em,” said Clive, touched visibly and pumping the other’s horny fist. “Yuh can bet yore best Sunday pants that if we run into any trouble we can’t handle all by our lonesome, we’ll shore shoot a rider hot on yore trail.”

The round-up had revealed that Forest had sixteen hundred steers remaining. Originally she had owned thirty-six hundred, which meant that two thousand of her animals had been stolen or otherwise disposed of. She had calculated roughly that five hundred had died at the poisoned water holes, but even so, there were fifteen hundred or more that must be accounted for otherwise and

Clive intended that an accounting should be had, but just how or when he could not say.

By now the wounded men had recovered and were back in the saddle. The long, hot Arizona summer came on full blast and had it not been for the ever-flowing stream of Cougar Creek the valley grass would have dried out and burned away before July was fairly under way. The elaborate irrigation system of the valley, however, effectually did away with any danger of this sort, and while the territory in other sections was reporting the driest ranges in ten years, Cottonwood Valley bloomed and throve and its cattle waxed fat and contented.

And so the summer passed and September came on, fully as hot as July. All had grown into a perpetually cheerful frame of mind and danger seemed more remote than at any time since they had come to the Swinging J. Only the memory of Wag Deering marred their happiness.

Under Clive's never-tiring efforts, a line fence had been run the entire length of the ranch from the western end of the valley to the Diamond L, and Forest's cattle were kept as closely as possible on her own lands at all times. But a huge section was still without fence to the south and it was this that resulted in their next trouble, a catastrophe that threatened them more direfully than anything that had gone before.

CHAPTER IX

SHEEP!

THE first hint that some new deviltry was in the air came to Clive one day when he and Forest were riding across the range. Both had been eyeing the vast herds grazing there and both sought to account for an intangible something that seemed different. Finally, Clive got it and pinching out the hot end of a cigarette before tossing it away, he turned to the girl and said:

“Miss Forest, I wonder if yuh see what I see?”

“I rather imagine I do, Clive,” she replied. “The herds are smaller, as though large numbers had been pulled off the range.”

“Ezackly,” he answered. “There ain’t much more ’n half as many steers out here as there was a month ago. I wonder what’s up now?”

“Perhaps they have sold off some of the stock,” she suggested.

Clive shook his head.

“Nope, I don’t reckon that’s it. Just because we got nice weather here and all that don’t mean the folks back east and up north ain’t a-ketchin’ it right now from Old Man Blizzard, and winter’s the porest time of year to sell steers to the eastern packers, ’cause yuh can’t ship with no degree of success. The markets right now ain’t one-two with

what they'll be next spring. I reckon this means they're a-schemin' up somethin' new."

"At any rate," she said, "they can't do us any harm by withdrawing their herds from the range."

"But it ain't natural, Miss Forest, for 'em to do so. Most of them ranches has got too many cows on 'em now for proper feedin,' and I don't reckon they'd be puttin' all this surplus under fence 'thout they had somethin' onery in mind. Danged if they didn't get plumb away with a round-up 'thout us gettin' any wind of it, too."

A week later Clive, Shad, Bull Ellerby and Honey Malloy rode across the range and Clive was struck by the further depreciation in the grazing herds. They spent the better part of the day riding throught the steers and they kept watchful eyes on the various brands they saw. As they turned homeward late in the afternoon Bull voiced a thought that was in the mind of each:

"The only cows left out there, it 'pears to me, is Swingin' J, Circle C and Lazy X. I wonder what's become of all them other brands?"

"We'll see if we can find out tomorra," said Clive.

The following day they rode through the valley. The Box O ranch was the first to the north along the highway and they chose it for their initial investigation. They found the undulating acres of Jeb Horner's place dotted thickly with grazing herds, too thickly for economy or best range feeding. At the Dollar M, the Square D, and the

M-Bar-T the same conditions prevailed. Swinging back across the range they circled and passed the line fence of the Diamond L, riding along it for miles. Like the other ranches, the Diamond L acres were over-populated with steers.

Clive scratched his head, a puzzled expression on his face.

“Now, what do yuh s’pose them buzzards is up to?” he queried plaintively. “’Tain’t nacheral for them to put so dang’ many cows under fence, so’t ain’t, and they shore as hell are hatchin’ up somethin’, else they wouldn’t be a-doin’ it, either.”

Next day he sent Two-Gun, Pink Sellers and Jingle Jones to the Lazy X to ascertain if word of the changed range conditions had reached old Simmons, while, unaccompanied, he rode to the Circle C with the avowed intention of questioning Bud Hart, its owner. As he came to the intersection of Hart’s ranch with the Swinging J and Bender’s place he saw that the latter, too, was swarming with cattle. Setting his teeth on the puzzle and scenting a brooding menace in the very air, he swung into the road that led to the Circle C ranch yard.

He found Bud Hart at the corral, doctoring a horse that had fallen and sprained its leg. He had met Bud on two or three previous occasions, but did not know exactly how to take him. Bud had been taciturn and evasive; also, a little mysterious. Clive was not sure how much he could say in the man’s presence, or how little.

“Howdy, Hart,” he said, swinging easily from his saddle and approaching to where the cattleman had just finished applying a strong liniment to the injured animal’s leg.

“Same to you, Morgan,” rejoined Hart.

“How’s tricks?” Clive continued.

“This durned hoss stepped in a pin-dog hole and sprained his leg. I reckon everything else is all right. Why?”

“Yuh be’n over on the range lately?”

“Nope,” Bud answered, shaking his head. “Can’t say as I have. I don’t usually pull muh cows off there till later, and as it ’pears we’re a-goin’ to have plenty of range grass right through the winter this year, I was a-figgerin’ that mebbe I’d leave ’em right where they are till spring; then mebbe I’ll sell a bunch. Why?”

“Well,” said Clive, rolling a cigarette, “I be’n out there a couple of times recently and I see yore cows, ours and old Simmons’ is the only ones left in the lush-grass. Everybody else has pulled stock and put ’em under fence. See anything queer about that?”

Hart scratched his head with a tentative finger, then joined Clive in rolling and lighting a brown-paper cigarette.

“I reckon it does seem sorta queer,” he said finally. “All them other outfits has got their stock under fence, hey? Why?”

“For cripe’s sake,” rasped Clive, “quit askin’ me why every time yuh open yore mouth. How’d

I know what's up? If I knowed I wouldn't be here. I come over to see if you knowed why yorese'f."

"Well," said Hart, "I don't know why they've yanked their steers, but if they have, then I reckon it's time for me to pull mine, too. Nothin' like playin' safe, is they? And while yo're about it, yuh'd better yank yore'n off the range, too. If it ain't good for them other bozos, I don't reckon it's good for my stock to hang 'round out there either."

Clive left the Circle C as puzzled as ever and late in the afternoon, when Two-Gun, Pink and Jingle returned from the Lazy X, he was no nearer a solution as to what was going on under cover than he had been when first he noticed the dwindling range herds. Monte McCourt, Sleepy and Fog accompanied the Swinging J riders back to the ranch and Monte, swinging lightly from his saddle, said:

"Say, Tex, I come over to see how about yuh rentin' us some of yore pasture."

"Meanin' what?" as Clive.

"Well, yuh see, soon as old Simmons heard them birds was yankin' their stock from the range, he said they was up to some devilment and that he don't want to be caught with his guns a-hangin' on a nail, so's to speak. He says yuh got plenty of grazin' land over yere, 'specially since yore herds has slumped to on'y sixteen hundr'd cows, and he wants to pull his stock off the range. He says for me to larn if yuh'll let his animals run with yores ontill he can make room on the Lazy X for 'em.

He ain't got no room just now, 'thout he does like them other fellers and makes his feedin' ground too skeerce to take care of all his stock properly. 'Course, he'll pay yuh for the 'commodation."

"I reckon we can take care of yuh, all right," Clive said. "Yuh can arrange with Miss Forest about the pay. I see Bud Hart is a-goin' to pull his stock back to the Circle C, too, so I s'pose if that's the way the rest of you *hombres* look at it, then we might as well get them Swingin' J steers back here in their own yard, too."

"Well, that's that," said Monte, relief in his voice. "Frog, you ride back to the ranch and tell the old man Tex says everything's O. K., and to send along them riders. Me and Sleepy'll stay here and start gettin' our cows over this-a-way. Now, fog along, old timer, 'cause it'll be late 'fore yuh git there as it is."

Frog waited only for supper, then spurred off toward the Lazy X. Monte and Sleepy found places in the bunkhouse and made themselves at home, glad to be back again with the genial riders of the Swinging J. Next day the work of driving the stock in from the open range got under way.

Simmons sent ten riders to handle his drive while Bud Hart had his entire force of fifteen men on the job. Clive, having by far the smaller number to handle, used only six men. Essentially, a new round-up was staged, for it was necessary to cut out the Circle C stock from the others. Clive still wondered how he had missed the other and

larger round-up that must have been staged when the valley ranchers pulled their stock and put it under fence.

By nightfall the first drive of Swinging J and Lazy X cattle was back at the ranch, while a great drove of Circle C steers was shunted across the tip of Forest's property and driven down to Bud Hart's rolling acres. Night riders took up their lonely vigils, watching that none of the steers so far rounded up should wander back to the range.

Next day further inroads were made into the grazing flocks on the range and Clive sensed that a few more days of the same intensive effort would see all three ranches with their stock under fence, when the range would be deserted save for an occasional coyote, long-eared jack-rabbit or fleet pin-dog that might choose to scurry across the scenery.

Life at the Swinging J was now divided into two phases, one portion of the men toiling and playing at night, the other portion during the long, warm days. Unless the Swinging J and Lazy X cattle were driven to the fenced-in portion of the ranch it would be necessary to maintain a force of night riders and it would be necessary to observe this routine for whatever length of time they kept the stock off the range. If the time should come when they would be compelled to use the fenced-in acres, then the Lazy X cattle would have to go, for there was not enough grass under fence for both herds, although Forest's own stock could graze indefinitely behind the barbed wire.

A week later, when only a few cattle remained on the range, the midnight repose of the bunkhouse was disturbed by a clatter of hoofs in the yard and Clive tumbled out, rubbing his eyes, to ascertain who the rider might be. Men scrambled out with him, dressing hurriedly.

Sled Fogarty, a rider for the Circle C, was outside, sitting on a horse, and he hailed Clive as the Swinging J outfit exited from the bunkhouse in a mad rush to see who would be the first outside. He called:

“Hart sent me over to tell yuh that yuh could find out what all them cows was pulled off the range for, if yuh want to take a leetle *passear* over toward Saddleback Pass.”

“What’s up?” asked Clive.

“Well, you *hombres* yank on yore chaps and grab yore ponies. Foller me and yuh’ll see the grandest leetle bunch of woolies percolatin’ from the pass yuh ever laid yore two eyes on.”

“Sheep!” exclaimed Clive, incredulously.

“Yeh, sheep,” answered Sled. “They started comin’ from the pass over two hours ago and I reckon they’re still dribblin’ through. Lord knows how many they is, but by cripes, there must be a reg’lar army of ’em. They got shepherds what carry rifles, too, and they rides hosses,” he added.

“Jingle,” said Clive, “you go to the house and call Miss Forest. Tell ’er what’s up and ask her if she wants to come with us. We’re a-goin’ down and investigate these woolies. I reckon there’s no

law to keep 'em out of here; leastwise, not so long as they don't get on private property. They shore will make a hell of a place of the range in jig time, yuh betcha, and we ain't got quite all of them cows off 'n there yet, either."

By this time the bunkhouse had emptied and the men were saddling ponies. Clive led out Thunder while Ormsby saddled two horses, one for himself, the other for Forest. She appeared, wearing a trig divided skirt and high boots, and swung at once into the saddle, joining Clive and Sled.

"All ready, fellers," Clive cried, and led the way. The party left the ranch with a rush. Down the road they sped.

"I reckon they'll be drivin' them sheep along this-a-way purty soon, Miss Forest," Clive said to the girl, "and if they do they want to be dang' shore none of them woolies gets on our property. If they do, then they'll be trespassin' and we'll have a right to shoot the dirty critters."

"Hunh," exclaimed Sled. "If they was a-goin' to bring 'em up this road they'd be farther 'n this by now. Nope, they're a-shuntin' 'em off across old Bender's place, round the back way, and they'll cut across to the range by usin' a piece of the Diamond L, I reckon. They ain't a-comin' this-a-way, that's sartin."

They sped onward, passing the intersection of the Swinging J, Circle C and Bender's ranches. Down where the road stalked out of the high ground of the Saddleback, they came on the sheep, thou-

sands and thousands of them, piling pell-mell down the steep declivity, plaintive "ba-a-as" and clicking teeth keeping time to the sharp, metallic clatter of tiny hoofs on the hard surface of the ground. A cloud of dust hung in the air and the pungent, unforgettable smell of dirty wool assailed them.

Six men, each holding a rifle, sat in the road astride horses. They were shunting the animals off to the right, across Bender's ranch, and keeping them from plunging straight ahead down the road. The Swinging J riders advanced and joined the rifle-bearers. One of these turned toward Clive, a question on his lips, rifle held significantly in the hollow of his arm.

"Well?" he ejaculated.

"I reckon I am," said Clive. "Them yore sheep?"

"Who wants to know?" came the insolent rejoinder.

Clive's eyes narrowed and he rode a step closer to the other, who immediately swung up his rifle and bared his teeth in a meaning grimace.

"Yo're close enough, mister," he warned. "I can talk just as well if yuh don't crowd me. What do yuh want?"

"Damn yore gun and yore orders," said Clive, his voice warming and his blood rising. "I asked yuh if these was yore sheep."

"Oh," said the other, his voice still insolent. "I reckon I didn't understand yuh the first time. Nope, they ain't mine."

"The owner here?" Clive persisted.

"I can't say."

"Who's in charge, then?" Clive was fighting to hold his temper.

"I reckon Cougar Evans and Coldwater Sharp are bossin' this herd, Mister. Do yuh want to talk with 'em?"

Clive started. Cougar and Coldwater were two professional gunmen who sold their services to the highest bidder. They had once ranged the Rio Pecos country in Texas until the Rangers had finally camped on their trail and driven them out. They were scoundrels without conscience and it was hard to tell what they might do once they got started. The other noticed Clive's quick start.

"Heard of 'em, have yuh? Well, then yuh won't be startin' something yuh can't finish, mebbe."

"Yeh, I've heard of 'em," Clive answered, choosing his words carefully, "and I can tell yuh right now, Mister, that yo're a-workin' for a rattlesnake and a buzzard. They're two of the onriest, onreliable critters the Lord ever let breathe, and yuh can tell 'em I said so if yuh want."

"Not wishin' to see you absorb any lead sort of helpless like," sarcastically rejoined the herder, "I'll not tell 'em. It wouldn't be healthy for yuh if the Cougar and Coldwater started on yore trail."

Two-Gun Farrell, who had been listening quietly, spoke up:

"Then I'll give yuh a message for 'em, *hombre*;

you tell them damn' pole-cats that yo're a-workin' for that any time they want to start anythin' they better recall a leetle epysode that happened 'bout two year ago in Los Pinos, over on the Rio Grande; you tell 'em to remember the geezer that chased 'em both to the woods hell-bent, and after yuh tell 'em that just add Two-Gun Farrell sent the word and is on the job here; say they better watch that they keep their ropes from draggin', too. Think yuh can remember to tell 'em all that?"

The other's face, clear and sharp in the brilliant moonlight, whitened visibly. There was a different tone to his voice and a different air to his words when he answered Two-Gun.

"So you are Two-Gun Farrell? Well, I don't know as we expected to find you here, but at that yuh can deliver yore own message to Cougar and Coldwater. I'm not interested whatever. Me, I'm herdin' sheep, and I don't want you fellers to get any other impression about me. *Sabe?*"

"Oh, hell, Two-Gun; he's just like all other sheep herders — he's got water in his craw. He was purty big till he found out he was buckin' Two-Gun Farrell, then all the wind went out of his sails." Clive turned disgustedly to the herder once more.

"Where are Evans and Coldwater?"

"I can't say, cowboy, but far as yo're concerned I wouldn't advise yuh to go huntin' them, unless yo're peaceably inclined. It might not be good for yore health."

Clive's exasperation temporarily got the better of him. He leaned in his saddle and extended his long, muscular arm toward the other, snapping his fingers beneath the man's nose with a pop like the crack of a whip.

"Listen to me, yuh dodderin' doodle-bug; don't yuh worry none on account of muh health. I'm feelin' fine and I aim to keep right on feelin' that-a-way. That's the second time yuh hinted that some-thin' might impair muh health and I want to tell yuh right now that if anybody in yore bunch of mavericks thinks he can injure or change muh present state of well-bein' yuh can tell 'im to come-a-runnin', that's all."

While they talked a seemingly never ending stream of dirty white had been erupting from the pass and spewing out across Bender's ranch. Clive saw that the wire fence had been taken down for a distance of perhaps three hundred yards. He sensed, thereat, that this was all part of a pre-conceived plan and that old Bender was mixed up in it from the start. He turned to Honey Malloy and Shad Stevens.

"You fellers ride out to where the herds is and tell the boys these sheep is a-comin' and that if any of 'em so much as steps a foot on our ranch or nibbles a single Swingin' J blade of grass, to shoot it and do it damn' *pronto*," he ordered.

A herder who had listened silently to the discourse up to this time chimed in.

"Say, Mister, I don't know yuh nor nothin'

about yuh, but we're goin' to take these sheep onto open range down here in the valley, I'm told, and it won't be good for anybody that tries to shoot any of our stock. I ain't aimin' to start any trouble, but a friendly warnin' in advance, mebbe, will save a lot of future trouble."

Clive turned toward the speaker, noting that his rifle was thrust in a boot attached to his saddle and that he carried a revolver slung at either hip, their hand-grips bared for quick use. His hands were smooth and white in the moonlight; his fingers long and supple looking. Without doubt he was a gunman, a two-gunman and one who was here to ply his profession at the behest of those who had sent in the sheep. Clive's hand lowered until it swung over the butt of his .45 and he spoke with a razor-edged voice when he answered:

"If any warnin's is needed 'round here, Mister Shepherder, I'll give 'em, not you. Now, what I said about shootin' them woolies goes as she lays and if a damn' dirty one of 'em sets a foot on Swingin' J ground, it gets killed instanter. If yuh don't like muh words, reach for yore guns."

The other laughed insolently, his eyes cold and steady.

"Bozo," he said evenly, "if I ever goes for muh guns, yuh want to go for the tall uncut as fast as the Lord'll let yuh. I ain't never dragged muh guns yet and left anybody to tell about it afterward, 'cept muhse'f."

“You tell ’im, Streak,” said another herder, ranging to one side.

“I ain’t a-worryin’ none,” said Clive coolly, his eyes wary of the other’s hands.

The gunman laughed softly.

“Yuh do seem purty cool,” he admitted, “but I reckon yo’re a wind-bag that talks a lot and don’t say much; and as for that friend of yores, Mister Two-Gun Farrell, tell him any time he wants to pull them fancy little playthings he’s a-wearin’, I’m waitin’ to oblige.”

He said it purposely for Two-Gun to hear and the latter, turning his head slightly, saw that the herder’s hands hovered near his guns. Two-Gun’s face was unperturbed, but his hands moved suddenly. No one saw how or when, but they moved, and twin reports split the air and two tiny flashes of light gleamed pale and cold in the flood of the golden moon.

Streak’s hat lifted from his head and settled in the road, two holes in the crown. Streak himself looked into the muzzles of Two-Gun’s six-shooters.

He thrust his own half-drawn weapons back into their holsters, a sneer on his lips. He looked at Two-Gun coolly, without hint of fear.

“You win, Farrell,” he said shortly, “this time. Next time, I’ll be watchin’ yuh.”

Thus, he passed over the incident, implying he had not been looking when Two-Gun drew. But Clive and a few others knew better; knew that

Streak's eyes had been on Farrell every split second and that it was Two-Gun's superhuman speed that had been too much for the man. Farrell laughed, a slow, derisive outburst that brought a flush to Streak's face.

CHAPTER X

THE LINE RIDERS

FOREST took a hand in the proceedings.

“Gentlemen, I think it is hardly necessary for you to quarrel before you really have anything to quarrel about. Mr. Farrell, please don’t anger the man further. Clive, can’t we avoid trouble for the present?”

Two-Gun bowed silently, but kept wary eyes on the man called Streak. Clive ranged his horse near Forest’s. No further controversy ensued and for an hour they sat quietly, watching the sheep belch out of the pass and “ba-a-a” their way across the Bender line and onto his acres. Before the last animal had left the pass the first salmon-pink sliver of dawn had stabbed the sky high over the mountains toward the east and day was coming on apace.

Behind the last of the sheep were more riders, a dozen or more, each with a rifle. They rode stolidly and silently, eyes on the sheep and paying no attention to what went on around them. The last dirty white animal left the pass and turned onto the Bender ranch and the six who had closed the road against them turned and followed. Clive saw several of Bender’s riders approach, bearing wire and posts. They were going to repair the fence.

“We may as well *vamoose*,” he told the others.

“Nothin’ we can do here. All them woolies is in the valley now and I reckon the first of ’em is well across the Diamond L and headed for the open range by this time. Seems to me our troubles is goin’ to shift back to that range. Hell’s bells, I wish somebody had taken over all that ground and made a ranch or two ranches out of it.”

As they passed the Circle C on their road back to the Swinging J, Sled Fogarty turned aside.

“Hey, Tex,” he called, “it ain’t none of my horn in, but if yuh find yorese’f needin’ another man or two, I’d plumb be admirin’ to ride for yore outfit.”

“Thanks, Sled; I’ll let yuh know,” said Clive, riding thoughtfully ahead.

Back at the ranch, Monte McCourt declared:

“Well, yuh buckaroos, this means a line-ridin’ job from now on, and while I reckon that’s just as easy as ridin’ herd, it means we got to have more help from the Lazy X. Frog, you scoot over and tell old Simmons how things are a-stackin’ up, and tell him I want at least six more men down this-a-way.”

Spud Garrett, who had been night riding, came in, the others of his shift with him. Shad had apprised them of the coming of the sheep, but they reported the animals had not yet reached the range. Most of the riders were for going forth at once, meeting sheep and herders and shooting it out with the riflemen. But Clive set his foot on that idea.

“We ain’t doin’ no shootin’ ’thout we have to,” he said. “Them sheep has a legal right on the

range, even if their moral right is a damn' skinny one. We can only get busy if they happen to wander onto our property. You fellers go git yore breakfasts and turn in, 'cause there's goin' to be line-ridin' from now on, and yuh won't get a chance to set out there and sing to them cows no more. The rest of us is goin' out today and finish bringin' our stock onto the ranch."

By the time Clive and his party reached the range the sheep had arrived. In great, billowing clouds they spread across all the free grass-land on both sides of Cougar Creek, from Bender's and the Diamond L, north to the Box O fences.

Two-Gun Farrell spurred among the sheep with reckless abandon, caring not a whit that his horse's hoofs played havoc in the ranks of the wooly animals. He was bitter against all sheep and especially bitter against the three head men who were bossing these—Cougar Evans, Coldwater Sharp and the man called Streak. Two-Gun, in a word, was spoiling for trouble and went out of his way as much as he could in order to start something.

But the sheepmen for the time being seemed to be operating under peace orders. None swallowed Two-Gun's bait, and when an occasional wooly bleated out its life beneath the horse the fiery Two-Gun rode, the shepherds said nothing, merely watching silently and waiting. Toward evening the last of the cattle were sorted from among the sheep and the drive was sent across to Swinging J property.

That night there was a fresh division of forces. Simmons not only had heeded Monte's request for six additional men, but had sent ten, and Frog, who fetched them, addressed McCourt in a voice that all could hear:

"And Simmons says to do as yuh dang' please, Monte, about runnin' his end of things and backin' up any play Tex makes. He says he's gittin' 'bout as tired as the next one of all this damn' shindig, and that he opines it might as well end in a grand jamboree as not, if them dawgs of sheepmen start anythin'."

Whereupon Monte chuckled.

"Well, we shore ain't goin' to carry no bunches of roses out there to them *hombres*," he said. "If they want to have a leetle fannin' bee with six-guns, we'll shore be on the job to accommodate 'em."

"We got eight miles of line to ride," Clive declared. "Monte, you split yore men in two squads; I'm a-doin' the same with mine, and the first galoot that spots a wooly over our line has orders to let 'im have it dead center. If any of them shepherds try to start anythin' as a result, I guess yuh all know what yo're to do, only, for cripe's sake, watch out for them rifles."

With the addition of the Lazy X hands, Clive now had under his command a total of forty-five hard-riding souls, every man equal to any occasion that might arise. Since the night trick had become a necessity, Clive apportioned off twenty men, under Shad Stevens, and gave them orders to patrol

the entire eight miles of unfenced land that separated Forest's ranch from the open range. Under this arrangement each man would have a little less than a half-mile of line to guard, and Clive felt this would be adequate protection.

Monte appointed Sleepy as the nominal night head of his share of the night force, to act under Shad. Later, Clive and Monte rode out along the line and watched the riders take their appointed stations, but before they had gone their various ways, Clive said:

"If anything goes wrong, pass the word by relays. Chick, yo're goin' the farthest out. If yuh need help, or yuh got anything important on yore mind, shoot yore six-gun three times quick. Next man hears it and repeats the performance and next man the same. *Sabe?* In less 'n a minute word can reach us at the bunkhouse that-a-way. Now, cowboys, do yore damnedest."

The nearest sheep were not more than a quarter-mile distant and, knowing their penchant to wander while they grazed, Clive knew it would require alert eyes and constant vigilance on the part of his own men and the sheep herders, too, if the animals were held from Swinging J property. But what puzzled him greatly was the ultimate objective of bringing the sheep into the valley.

There were fully twenty thousand of them and a great body of sheep such as that would make short shrift of the range grass, after which they would require new feeding grounds. Aside from this

range there were no other grounds in the valley open for this purpose, and only in the distant mountains, where the vegetation was scarce, but sufficient to sustain the sheep as they passed through, could feed be found when the range was clipped bare and the grass trampled deep under the dirt.

By travelling fast and grazing as they moved, the sheep could maintain themselves indefinitely through the mountains, but it would be fatal to them to be caught for any length of time here in the valley with the range no longer offering them substance wherewith to feed.

Clive mentioned his thoughts to the others, but none was any nearer an explanation than Clive himself. As nearly as any one arrived at a conclusion was Blaze Ormsby, who declared:

“Perhaps our friends the ranchers brought the sheep in, Clive. If so, they plan merely to clean up the range and when that is done, they probably will order the woolies returned whence they came. Somehow, though, that isn’t exactly logical, for they would be doing themselves more actual harm than they could possibly do to us; so there must be something else behind the move.”

“That’s what I think, but dang muh hide if I can place muh finger on what’s wrong,” Clive answered.

Next morning when the night riders came in from the posts they had vacated in favor of the day line riders, Shad reported that things had been quiet. And the day proved equally so. The second day and night also were peaceful, but on the third

night, around two o'clock in the morning, the drumming of hoofs entering the ranch yard roused the bunkhouse and the men tumbled out to greet Chick Purdy, who entered with blood streaming from his left wrist.

"A rifle got me, I reckon," he said briefly. "I was ridin' quiet like and not thinkin' much 'bout anythin' when I heard a rifle shot and felt muh arm go dead, like I'd been kicked by a mule. I knowed right away I'd be'n shot, but it didn't seem serious enough to call you fellers out, so I told Shad about it and rode on in. Shad said he was a-goin' to plow down on that sheep camp and that if he found out that there was a dirty rifle-barrel in the place, he was a-goin' to let daylight through the *hombre* that owned it."

Clive climbed into his clothes rapidly, Two-Gun doing likewise. Blaze was attending Chick's arm, which had been furrowed by a bullet, and said the wound was nothing to worry about.

"Mebbe it ain't," said Clive, "but them *hombres* wasn't shootin' at Chick's arm, I reckon. They was aimin' for his haid and just nacherally couldn't shoot straight by moonlight. I'm a-goin' out and join Shad and Two-Gun's a-goin' with me. If Shad's found a rifle that's dirty, I reckon somebody's due to get his conch busted wide open in pretty quick time."

With Two-Gun at his side, he spurred off in the night, lit by a brilliant moon, and almost as light as day. They found the line deserted and four

miles from the bunkhouse saw sheep drifting across Swinging J grass. Clive looked at them grimly.

“I reckon I orta brought some of the boys, after all,” he opined. “Well, we can’t change our plans now. Come on, Two-Gun, I reckon the sheep camp’s over this-a-way somewhere.”

For an hour they rode along. It was nearly four o’clock by Clive’s watch and already the sky was getting light in the east. Plowing recklessly among the sheep, Two-Gun taking special pains to rout the animals with his horse’s hoofs, they finally rode up to the sheep camp, a cluster of dirty tents beside an irrigation ditch. They found Shad and the eighteen punchers under him carrying on a heated discussion with a short, slender man with grizzled hair and a wrinkled visage.

Shad called a welcome to Clive.

“Come here, Tex, and talk to this buzzard. He’s be’n entertainin’ me for a hour, but I reckon I can’t make ’im understand plain American langwidge. You try it, and see if yuh can do any better. He says he’s Joe Moore, in charge of these sheep; I insists he’s Joe Moore, a dang’ pole-cat, but he won’t get riled enough to start somethin’. Hell, shepherders ain’t got no guts a-tall.” Shad spat disgustedly.

“Yuh find that gun, Shad?” Clive asked, riding close.

“Say, yuh might as well hunt for the devil’s left eyebrow in a huckleberry bush as to try to find that gun around here. First place, they say all

their guns is dirty and, second place, they won't let me see any of 'em."

Then Clive noticed a line of men standing silently back among the tents, rifles in hand. In their forefront were Streak and two other men Clive recognized instantly. There were Coldwater Sharp and Cougar Evans. The three gunmen stood together. Clive saw Two-Gun's hands twitch as he caught sight of the trio.

"What yuh got to say, Moore?" Clive queried.

"Not a damn' thing, Mister," the sheepman answered. "As I be'n a-tellin' this rider of yours for the last hour, I don't know anythin'. He said he wanted to see our guns, and I accommodated him by tellin' the boys to step outside and show 'em to him. He didn't seem to want to see 'em that way, though. Well, that's the only way any of you beefies 'll ever get a chance to look at our weepins, so you might as well pull your freight now."

"Do yuh know one of muh men was shot in the arm with a rifle?" asked Clive.

"So your man, there, said," Moore answered calmly, biting off a chew of black plug.

"Well, *hombre*, we're here to find out who fired that shot." Clive dismounted as he spoke and walked close to where Moore was standing. He noticed a shifting of rifle barrels back among the tents, but ignored it.

"Help yourself to findin' out whatever you want to know, beefy," said Moore. "I ain't stoppin'

you. I didn't do no shootin', I know that much, and furthermore, I didn't hear anybody say they done any shootin', either, and that's that."

Clive leaned forward.

"Listen to me warble, shepherd," he rasped. "I reckon about the lowest thing the Lord ever let walk in this yere valley was a sheep herder, and if yuh don't like muh sayin' so, yuh know what yuh can do about it. Now, one of yore men or you, mebbe, shot one of muh men. I'm a-goin' to find out who done it and make the damn' skunk eat dirt. If I don't find out now, I will later, *Sabe?*"

The other's eyes gleamed viciously in the rapidly growing light of the new-born day and he chewed rapidly on his quid of plug.

"I don't like your words, Mister Beef Eater, and I ain't got no call to stand here and listen to 'em, either. Now, this is open range and I reckon you're legally entitled to stay out here as long as you like, but don't pull any more of that kind of talk, or I'll just nacherally let my boys claw you wide open."

Clive spat derisively, thrusting his sombrero high on his head and dropping his arms until his right hand swung near his .45. With his left hand he reached out, quickly, decisively, and between his thumb and the second joint of his first finger he caught Moore's nose, giving a mighty, twisting tug. There was a howl of pain and a roar of rage from Moore and the sheepman literally burrowed his face into the dirt as he went down. He rose, claw-

ing at his bleeding proboscis. Behind him, Clive knew his own men were sitting rigidly, awaiting any orders he might give that would send them against the herders.

Moore reached his feet, fuming and spouting curses. Small he was, but game and blinded by rage. He aimed a tremendous blow at Clive and the latter, rather ashamed now that he had used physical violence against a man only half his own size, grabbed the other's hand even as it hurtled through the air. He held it in a grip of steel, talking quietly:

“So, now, shepherd; don't yuh go figgerin' on whippin' a man, or I'll turn yuh over muh knee and give yuh a dang' good spankin', so help me. Now, yuh leetle toad, I pulled yore nose 'cause yuh got fresh with yore betters, and I'll lam yuh with a piece of *palo verde* if yuh don't keep quiet.”

But Moore was past all reason and his curses blasted forth in a sulphurous stream. As Clive released his hand, the sheepman drew back for another blow, then Clive gathered the irate man in his arms. Fifty feet distant ran the range irrigation ditch. There was little water in it, but a goodly quantity of mud. Clive carried Moore to the piled-up bank-wall, held him poised an instant, then chucked him, head first, into the dark, sticky muck.

“Now, shepherd,” he said, as Moore, clawing mud and gasping for breath, crawled from the mire, “that orta cool yuh off. If it didn't, why I

reckon I'll have to give yuh that spankin' I promised yuh awhile ago."

The keen, vicious crack of a rifle, sounding from a ridge to the right, interrupted him. The angry "wham-m-m-m" of a bullet sang in his ears. Shad's hat lifted and sailed twenty feet distant, landing in the dirt and Shad, with a curse, threw himself bodily from his saddle.

All turned in the direction of the shot. A rolling ridge lay in that part of the range and from the top of this the bullet had come. No one was in sight.

Moore's triumphant voice called their attention back to him.

"Hands up, you damn' beefies. Stick 'em higher'n a kite or out go your lights. We got you covered and we'll shoot hell out of the first man that makes a move for his gun."

The Swinging J and Lazy X punchers turned back and saw the line of rifles, level and menacing, backed by eyes that glared angrily along the barrels. Cougar, Coldwater and Streak, revolvers dangling openly in their hands, stood advanced a little, ready for action. Rapidly Clive counted the opposing forces. There were sixteen, and thirteen of the men carried rifles. They were trapped neatly and there was nothing to do but take their medicine. Moore went on:

"Now, I want to serve a warnin'" to you birds. Get to hell away from here and don't you never come back. From now on we post sentries and

the first man that comes this way that ain't peaceably inclined will get shot before he knows what it's all about. As for you," he glared at Clive, "I'm goin' to get you if it's the last thing I ever do. There ain't no man pulls my nose and throws me in a ditch and gets away with it for long. First time I meet you on the open range and you ain't got a lot of your men with you at the time, you and me is goin' to shoot it out. That's my first, second and final notice to that effect. Now, get out, before I tell my men to cut loose."

Clive did the only sensible thing there was to do under the circumstances; he waved his hand toward the others and personally led the retreat, not heeding the ravings of Two-Gun Farrell and Shad Stevens, who wanted to stand their ground and shoot it out with the herders and gunmen.

"Yuh dang' idjuts," Clive snorted as they crossed back over the Swinging J line, "them buzzards has got rifles and every man's got twice as many shots as ary one of us. What's the matter with yuh, anyhow? Now, you fellers keep yore shirts on. We got to get some rifles, too, and we want to get 'em quick."

Sleepy spoke up:

"There's a lot of rifles at the Lazy X, and I reckon old Simmons'll let yuh use 'em. I'll ride over after a while and see about 'em. What say?"

"Go to it," McCourt agreed, and Clive nodded, adding:

"Seems to me I saw a couple in Miss Forest's

house, too. We only need enough to do some long distance talkin' to them shepherds, I reckon."

"Hell, look at them woolies scatterin' across our grass," swore Shad. "Here's where I gets busy."

But Clive forbade any wholesale slaughter of the sheep, ordering, instead, that they be driven back to the range.

"It's all right to shoot one or two of them woolies when they cross our line," he said, "but they ain't no use killin' 'em wholesale. 'Tain't their fault, anyways, and I reckon the fellers that own 'em is countin' on us killin' off a bunch. Send 'em back over the line, then keep 'em out."

With the sheep once more cleared from the ranch Clive called a council of war on the spot, and declared:

"This thing is goin' to be plumb hell, boys. I see where them fellers is goin' to lay off at a distance and take pot shots at us with them rifles and they ain't goin' to try to keep the sheep off our ranch. I reckon I see their game now; they figger on the woolies workin' this way and gettin' here in such numbers we can't handle 'em very well, after which they'll eat our grass all off and force us to sell off our stock. We orta have put a fence around the whole shebang, but that would cost a pile of dough, and Miss Forest can't afford it just now. Looks to me like this is goin' to settle itself in a reg'lar old-fashioned range war between cowmen and sheepmen."

He saw heads nod approval, and went on:

“This bein’ the case, we got to adopt the old range tactics, but we’ll improve on ’em. We’ll dig some rifle pits and string some sections of wire out here. From this minnit on, every man that hears a bullet sing his way has orders to shoot hell out of the man that starts the trouble, if he can see him.”

When Clive and Two-Gun, together with the night riders, reached the bunkhouse and apprised the others of what had happened, they were for making a raid on the sheep camp at once, but Clive cautioned them and urged peace for the time being, repeating the harangue he had given the riders out on the range.

CHAPTER XI

THE RAID

WHEN Sleepy returned from the Lazy X in the afternoon he not only brought a dozen rifles, but also had three riders with him. Old Simmons, apprised of the previous night's events, had stripped his ranch to a minimum of men and ordered the remainder to the Swinging J to aid Clive and Forest, adding that if Clive thought it best, the Lazy X steers should be shunted aside and left to shift for themselves until Simmons could find a place to care for them.

"Simmons don't need to worry none about his cows," said Clive. "We ain't overburdened as yet with our own stock and I reckon what he's payin' Miss Forest to run his stock here is a-helpin' her considerable in a financial way. Besides, if his cows wasn't here, I reckon he wouldn't feel called on to keep his men here, neither, and just now we need them the worst kind of way."

At intervals along the eight-mile stretch of Swinging J property that was still minus a fence, Clive had short sections of barbed-wire strung, figuring these would cut down materially the amount of territory his line riders would have to keep constant vigil over. He would have strung more wire, but did not want to create a further

drain on Forest's finances by ordering it in from Sunset.

For several days there was peace, then signs broke out afresh that the war was not ended by any means. Twice in one night Swinging J riders heard bullets sing by their ears, and, judging by the consistency with which sheep managed to find their way onto the ranch it was evident that the herders were deliberately forcing the animals in that direction.

Day and night, now, when riders went forth they carried rifles in saddle boots and cartridges in saddle pockets, supplementing the side arms all the men wore as a part of their daily garb.

A short time later, between midnight and dawn, when the bunkhouse was wrapped in peaceful repose, three quick shots, sounding nearby, roused Clive and his comrades and they piled out pell-mell. As rapidly as possible they dressed and scurried across the ranch. Jingle Jones was the first rider they met. It was his shots they had heard.

"What's up, Jingle?" Clive called as he came within speaking distance.

"I don't know, Tex; I heard Chick Purdy shoot and I just let go as per orders," came Jingle's reply.

"Well, come a-runnin', old timer," Clive said, spurring by rapidly. "We'll find out what's wrong in a jiffy, I reckon."

Chick Purdy was in the same fix as Jingle had been. He had heard Hokum Smith fire his revolver

and had done likewise as per the arrangements they had made. Halfway across the ranch they found Hokum, sprawled in the grass, writhing in pain. Near by lay his horse, shot through the head, Clive dropped from his saddle and knelt at Hokum's side.

"Where'd they get yuh, Hokum?" he asked, anxiously.

"Didn't get me a-tall," the fallen man replied. "They shot muh hoss and when he dropped I sorta got my foot tangled in the stirrup and the dang' hoss fell on muh laig. I reckon it's busted. Just happened the hoss wasn't killed outright and when it started to struggle I was able to pull muhse'f loose, and here I am. I fired off muh six-gun 'cause I didn't want to lay here till mornin'."

Clive straightened and looked off across the range to where the dirty tents of the sheep camp were visible, a mile distant, bathed in the glory of the brilliant, low-hanging Arizona moon. The stars were unusually bright, even for Arizona. It was one of those delicious nights when, as any Arizonian will vouch for, a man might read a newspaper by starlight alone. Clive had no difficulty distinguishing the tents.

"One of yuh fellers help Hokum on a hoss and get him back to the ranch, where Blaze can fix him up. Two-Gun, grab a rifle, for you and me is goin' up that ridge and see what we can see."

Two-Gun took a rifle that Reb Sefton handed to him and joined Clive, who was already carrying

Faro Latimer's rifle. They left their horses standing, crawled under the barbed wire that had been strung at this point, and started stealthily for the ridge that had already been a bitter experience for them. The billowing waves of sheep parted as they advanced, then closed in behind. They were man-broken and paid little attention to the pair who walked among them.

Reaching the ridge, Clive and Two-Gun laid down and looked carefully into the enemy camp. The only sign of life that was visible was a solitary figure that strode slowly about, rifle across shoulder, as though doing guard duty. Clive said to Two-Gun:

"Think yuh can knock off that buzzard's hat? I know damn' well I can, but I reckon yo're better with a gun than me."

"Not with a rifle, I ain't, Tex," Two-Gun replied. "If I draw down on that feller I'll like as not scatter his brains all over them sheep. Yuh better do the shootin' if yuh don't want him killed plumb dead."

Clive sighted carefully and his finger tightened on the trigger. As the keen, whip-like report echoed across the range the hat on the man's head bobbed and streaked through the air. He let out a yell and dashed for cover. Clive calmly sent a half-dozen shots through the tent tops, then led the way back to the ranch. He chuckled.

"Mebbe them bozos won't be so free with their lead if we pass it back to 'em occasional like."

It seemed that Clive had gauged the situation truly, for a week went by without further manifestation from the other side. But a tenseness in the air suggested that things were approaching a fresh outbreak, and Clive never relaxed his vigilance for even a day. Therefore, he was worried, but not greatly surprised a few mornings later when Jingle and Chick came in alone. They had not seen the others, they said, but as things seemed quiet on the range, they had not waited for them.

When the others did not appear by the time breakfast was finished, Clive decided it was high time to seek them and, with his riders falling in with him, he urged Thunder at top speed along the line. Five miles out they came upon great, moving waves of sheep, thousands and thousands of them, all grazing calmly on Swinging J grass. No herders were in sight, nor were any of Clive's night riders visible. Plunging through the sheep, not caring how many they trampled, they hurried on, reaching in due course the fence of the Diamond L. There, bound with their own lariats, were their comrades, lying helpless and breathing venomous curses into the still air.

When their bonds were loosed, they stood up and rubbed the circulation back into their numbed arms and legs, the while Shad Stevens talked:

"It was this-a-way, Clive; I was ridin' as usual when somebody rose up out of the grass, covered me with a rifle and told me to get off muh hoss, *pronto!* There wasn't anything for it but to do

what I was told, then two more *hombres* come up and I was tied up like a damn' chicken with muh own rope. They yanked me over yere and I found these fellers already fixed for the night. I'll tell a man we had a right pleasant time a-layin' here and seein' who could out-cuss the rest of the bunch."

The tales of all were similar; all had been surprised, tied up and dragged to the Diamond L fence and left to be found by whoever might come seeking them. It was evident that the thing had been carefully conceived and carried out, and it had been so successful that by now five or six thousand sheep were eating the life out of Forest's grassy acres. Clive swore mightily.

"Well, it's a-goin' to be one damn' big job to get them sheep offa here and after we do, we ain't goin' to be safe ag'in' more of these kind of surprise parties, either. We got to strike back at them fellers sudden like, and hard and plenty all to once. Lemme think."

"Think, hell," snorted Shad. "Yuh be'n doin' too damn' much thinkin' and what has it got us? I know it got me a dang' fine tyin' up for one thing, and it got some of the other boys bullets where they didn't want 'em. Me, I say it's time for yuh to quit yore dang' thinkin' and start some action."

"Ezackly," said Clive. "Action is what I'm thinkin' about, now for cripe's sake shut up a minnit, and leave them sheep go for the time bein'. I got a idee and after I elucidate, we'll get

them woolies off. If muh scheme works, we won't be troubled with 'em much longer, either."

He turned to Two-Gun and Bull Ellerby.

"Do yuh reckon we'd find all them shepherds at their camp now? I mean all of 'em, too; not just part of 'em."

"They shore orta be in this time of day," rejoined Bull. "They'd nacherally be a-thinkin' we was busy gettin' these woolies outa here, and they wouldn't be a-worryin' about us for the time bein'. What's on yore mind?"

"I was just a-wonderin' if we could round them skunks up and keep 'em under cover and quiet like until say tomorra night," Clive told him.

"Now yo're shoutin'," cried Shad. "They didn't take none of our guns and they didn't bother our hosses. We're most of us here. Let's go, cowboy."

"All right," acquiesced Clive, "but listen. Everybody get the idee, now. I want every last one of them herders caught; every man, onderstand? We can't afford to have a single one get away and spread word of what I'm a-fixin' to do. We got to circle that camp and take it from all sides at once. If they show fight, then dang it, we got to shoot it out with them, that's all. Remember, no man is to get away. Ready?"

They left their horses at the line and advanced on foot. Signs of life were plentiful at the camp and, looking down at it from the vantage point on the ridge, Clive, for an instant, doubted whether

they would be able to surprise the place. Blaze Ormsby made a suggestion:

“They are bound to see us coming, Clive, so we may as well make the best of it. I’ll take some of the boys and circle to the right. Let Two-Gun take a few more and move off to the left. When we meet, we will come this way, closing in on them. Meantime, you and the remainder of the boys stay up here until you see a signal from us, then bring them forward on the run.”

And it was so agreed. It took time and care to surround the camp, for the circle necessarily had to be a large one and when it was at last completed there were wide gaps between the men. As they closed up, these gaps, of course, decreased.

An hour later Clive, watching intently, saw a hat stuck on the end of a rifle barrel, being held in the air and waved. Immediately he rose and told the others to follow. They had barely got underway when somebody at the camp let out a startled yell. Instantly the occupants of the dirty canvas came tumbling out, guns in hand, peering toward Clive and his men, unaware as yet of those who were approaching from the other three sides.

“Don’t shoot unless they do,” Clive warned, “but if they do, I reckon we’ll let ’em have it. Aim low, ’cause we don’t want to hit anybody over there with Blaze or Two-Gun.”

Just then the sheepmen discovered the lines that were closing in elsewhere about them and, dropping to the ground, they brought their rifles into

play. A veritable fusillade sounded, but the cowmen had dropped, too, and the bullets sang overhead without doing damage. Clive let out a yell:

“If you fellers give in yuh won’t get hurted none whatever, but if yuh try to shoot this thing to a finish, then I reckon yuh’ll get hell good and plenty.”

“What do you want?” a voice cried. Clive recognized the nasal twang of old Joe Moore.

“We want you fellers to throw down yore guns,” he answered. “If yuh’ll do that we won’t hurt yuh none, as I said. If yuh don’t, then yuh got to take the consequences.”

“We’ll have the law on you for this,” squealed Moore.

“Help yorese’f,” Clive told him, “but if yuh don’t have no more success with it than our owner did yuh’ll shore be in hard luck. Just now, howsumever, yuh’ll do what I suggests or we’ll just nacherally pulverize yuh.”

“All right. You got us cornered, and you’re two to our one. We quit.” Moore said it venomously.

A half hour later the sheepmen were tied securely with lariats and their guns had been piled in a neat stack inside one of the tents, the cartridges first having been ejected from their magazines, however. Two-Gun said to Clive:

“Cougar, Coldwater and Streak ain’t here, Tex. I reckon we orta had them in this yere shindig.”

“If they’d be’n here you wouldn’t have taken us

so easy," rasped the grizzled Moore, belligerent as ever.

"Shut yore bazoo, yuh damn' pole-cat," growled Shad. "Yo're only gittin' what some of yore men pulled on us last night, and yuh orta be glad we don't take yuh out to a cottonwood and let six feet of Arizona air whistle under yore feet."

"Bah," said old Moore, spitting angrily.

"Shad," Clive ordered, "get them bozos together and you and Jingle and Reb herd 'em back to the ranch. If yuh don't want 'em to stink up the bunkhouse, yuh can lock 'em in the tool shed, but for cripe's sake, don't let none of 'em get away. Then you fellers stay there with Miss Forest. I reckon we'll be back with yuh afore long."

He watched as Shad, Jingle and Reb drove the sheepmen off, then led the way back to the horses. As they mounted they saw their three comrades, astride their own animals, hastening their prisoners forward with ungentle words and sundry threats. Then they left for the business of ridding the range of the sheep.

All day long they rode to and fro, urging and waving their arms, herding the sea of dirty white back off the Swinging J acres, out onto the open range, and over toward the Box O and the Diamond L. It was no easy task, and the brilliant stars were shining and the soft Arizona night was over the valley when at last they finished.

Serene in the knowledge that their enemies temporarily, at least, were checkmated they made

a hearty meal from the sheepmen's supplies, then found rest under the open skies, resting calmly and peacefully until the first streaks of dawn hitting his eyelids, roused Clive, who sat up and let out a yell.

Breakfast came from the sheepmen's stores, then the work of urging the sheep forward was taken up again.

"Keep 'em a-goin', boys," Clive said. "It's a hell of a note that them fellers didn't have no dawgs. It on'y goes to show, howsumever, that they didn't intend herdin' these sheep; shows they just intended that they'd devil the life out of us with 'em. Who ever heard tell of a sheep outfit that didn't have no shepherd dogs?" He spat disgustedly.

As the last of the sheep passed the cluster of tents, Clive walked rapidly to each dirty heap of canvas. Behind him little bursts of flame cropped up and licked greedily at the oiled cloth. Soon they flared into roaring infernos and in a trice the camp was a heap of smouldering supplies that smoked terrifically. The pungent tang of sizzling bacon was mingled with the acrid smell of burning coffee and pepper and a series of popping explosions denoted that the rifle ammunition was going up in smoke.

Leaving the ruins behind them they urged the sheep forward and when all were well against the intersection of the fences of the three ranches, the Box O, Crazy H and Diamond L, Clive, Two-Gun

and Blaze moved forward, wire clippers in their hands, and set to work.

Musical "pung-g-g-gs" followed the snapping of each wire. At the end of an hour they had opened great gaps in all three ranch fences and through these the sheep were pouring in a literal sea of tossing heads and clicking hoofs.

Clive, watching as the sheep poured through and among the cattle-studded reaches of the enemy ranches, chuckled happily.

"I reckon that's a-goin' to hold them fellers for a while, and I'd tell a man it's payin' 'em back in their own medicine, too."

Just then a shot sounded from back among the cattle and a bullet sang angrily past them. Blaze ducked and swore fervently.

"That son of a gun must have been drawing down on me," he exclaimed. "I'll bet my hat against a goat's chin-whiskers that bullet didn't miss me an inch."

Meantime, the sheep, attracted by the tall, rich grass inside the line fences, continued to pour through. It was apparent that the entire body of twenty or more thousand would eventually crowd through onto the ranches and desert the dryer, scantier grass of the range. Clive drew a deep breath.

"I reckon the feller that fired that shot will streak it back to his boss and pass the word about what's happened here. Well, it'll be three-four hours before anybody can arrive and by that time

it'll be too late to stop these sheep. My, but won't they have one sweet job gettin' rid of them woolies? They're all scattered in among the cows. It'll be a two-three day job, at least, to sort 'em out and shoo 'em back through these holes. 'Tain't like the sheep was all by their lonesome. Oh, mama, wait till they see what they're up ag'in." He laughed happily.

Back at the ranch they found Shad, Reb and Jingle had shut their prisoners in the tool shed and had maintained careful watch over them. Shad said the men had never ceased to curse, save only when they ate.

"But their cussin' shore was sweet music to me, cowboy," Shad grinned, "for that's just what we done dang' near a whole night out there ourselves."

Next morning, having heard nothing from the ranchers whose acres now held the sheep, they gave the prisoners hearty breakfasts and told them they might depart, provided they left the valley. This, all agreed to do.

"Where do yuh allow to go from yere, boys?" Clive asked, his face innocent. "Yore camp caught fire sorta accidental like when them woolies got tangled up in it and yore things was all burned, even yore rifles. I reckon yuh'll have to get new outfits afore yuh can do any work ag'in."

"Them woolies can go plumb to hell," snarled Moore, his wizened face a mask of hatred. "We ain't a-goin' to monkey no more with 'em. We know when we got enough and we made no bargains to come down in this valley and play dog

for nobody. We was to stick around them sheep and let 'em do as they damned pleased, savin' only that we was to help 'em get on the Swingin' J grass, and we was to throw an occasional shot and such-like your way if you got to snoopin' around too promiscuous. Well, we're a-goin' to get out right now and we're a-goin' to stay out."

"Well," grinned Clive, "I'm right sorry if we speeded up yore departure any, as the feller says, but *hasta luego, amigo mio*."

Moore's parting salute was a venomous curse and, "I ain't no friend of yours, not by a damn' sight, and you don't need to give me any soft Mex farewells, neither. You and your ranch and this whole valley can go plumb to hell."

Clive chuckled.

"And old Bob Henley can go to hell, too," continued Moore.

Clive started this time. Bob Henley! That would be some member of the firm of the Henley Cattle & Sales Co., without a doubt. So that was where the inspiration and the capital for the sheep idea came from!

He cried to the now departing Moore:

"Was it that Henley cattle buyin' firm in Chicawgo that hired yuh, Moore?"

"Yeh," the wizened villain hurled back, "and you can tell them to go to hell, too."

With a wide grin on his face and contentment in his heart, Clive watched the herders disappear in the direction of the road leading toward Saddleback Pass.

CHAPTER XII

AFTERMATH

NEITHER Clive nor any of the others expected that the raid on the sheep camp and the turning of the animals onto the ranches across Cougar Creek would go by without some effort being made in the nature of reprisals. But for three days there was peace and then the riders, ranging about the ranch, saw the billowing sea of dirty white once more spreading out across the open range land. Line riding had to be resumed, but it was now comparatively easy to keep the sheep on their own grounds, for there were no longer any herders to keep urging them over onto the Swinging J.

All wondered what had become of Cougar, Coldwater and Streak, but those who had known the two former in other times also knew that they probably were merely lying low for the time being, awaiting a favorable opportunity to strike and strike decisively. And this surmise, in the end, proved true.

Yank Davis, a puncher who rode for the Lazy X, was the first victim. He had been over to report to Simmons one day, according to a schedule that had been carried out all through the summer and autumn. He was returning from such a trip late in the afternoon when, at the ford across Cougar Creek, he had met Coldwater.

An altercation had followed and guns had been flashed. Naturally Yank got the worst of it. He came into the ranch yard of the Swinging J with his right arm broken between shoulder and elbow, a bullet in his right side and another in his leg. He was conscious two days, then sank into a coma that Blaze, despite all his efforts and skill, could not ward off. On the fifth day Yank died. They buried him under the towering cottonwood, beside the grave of Wag Deering. But before he had lapsed into his last stupor he had been able to tell how Coldwater accosted him and had gone for his gun. Yank, brave as they made them, and knowing he was hopelessly outclassed, had also reached for his, but too late. Coldwater's three smashing bullets had found their marks. The shot in the side, Ormsby said, had penetrated Yank's liver and caused death.

Two-Gun Farrell was like a man afire following this incident. His normally pale face was, if possible, whiter than ever and his eyes constantly held little shooting green flames that would not die down. They flared high whenever Coldwater's name was mentioned. Despite Clive's pleadings and even his downright commands, Two-Gun ranged far and wide, his silver-mounted guns shining in the sunlight, seeking trouble; courting a meeting with Coldwater or any one else who chose to draw and shoot it out.

After a week of this, when the soft, mild Arizona winter was coming on, Clive started to ride

with Two-Gun, fearing he would be waylaid and overwhelmed with numbers and shot down in cold blood. So it was that on a cool December day, when the orange trees were showing signs of the rich crops they would yield the following March and April, that Two-Gun had his desires fulfilled.

He, Clive and Faro Latimer had been over to the Lazy X for a chin-chin with old Simmons. They were returning along the highway where it crossed the Box O when five riders met them in the road. Coldwater was among them and Clem Jacobs also was there, having completely recovered from his terrific wounds of the previous spring in the Swinging J ranchyard. Two-Gun saw Coldwater and the green flames in his eyes flared at their highest. He made a little clucking sound with his mouth and Clive, looking intently at him, saw his face was as set and as white as a block of marble.

Coldwater gazed insolently at the trio, and Two-Gun returned his stare with interest. For the riders to pass it was necessary for one or both parties to pull to the side of the road. This Clive and Faro did, but Two-Gun allowed his horse to remain where it was. As for the Box O riders and Coldwater Sharp, they had spread the entire width of the highway; none of them pulled aside. Obviously they intended riding the Swinging J riders from the road and down into the little irrigation ditch that paralleled it.

Clem Jacobs, his eyes frosty, eyed Clive. He felt secure in the preponderance of numbers that

lay with his side; he felt especially secure in the knowledge that Coldwater was with him, for Coldwater was a gunman extraordinary and in addition to that, a noted trick and fancy shot artist.

“Get to hell off of the road, Morgan,” Jacobs rasped harshly, “or we’ll run over yuh, yuh damn’ piebald bozo.”

“If yo’re a-figgerin’ on puttin’ us off ’n the road, Jacobs, yo’re welcome to start tryin’ any time yuh feel like it,” Clive said coolly, his eyes glinting. Faro Latimer was still ranged beside him, so that the trio spread in a thin line half way across the road.

“Yuh heard ’em, cowboys,” Jacobs said over his shoulder to his own followers. “Are we goin’ to let ’em deny us the road?”

Coldwater’s hands were hovering above his guns, fingers twitching. Two-Gun Farrell sat easily, hands swinging loosely, eyes alert and fairly scintillating their green fires.

“Come on, men,” yelled Jacobs. “Let’s wipe out this bunch of toads right now.” With the words he went for his gun.

Coldwater had been watching Two-Gun and now, at Jacobs’ words, he reached for his own six-shooters.

A blur of smoke wafted across the road and men fell from horses, while the riderless beasts drummed off in terror. Two-Gun, watching Coldwater, had seen the latter start to draw, and Two-Gun, trusting Clive and Faro to take care of the

others, moved his own hands. His guns exploded as a unit and twin holes, three inches apart, appeared like magic one above Coldwater's either eye. Coldwater's revolvers, barely half raised, sent their messengers of death into the hard-packed dirt of the road, while the man himself was dead before he started to pitch from the saddle.

Two-Gun, flipping his weapons, sent two more shots crashing, then felt Faro slump heavily against him. He reached out an arm and steadied his comrade and heard Clive yell:

"That's all, Two-Gun. Yuh got Coldwater and that geezer with the pock-marked face. I accounted for Jacobs and I reckon Faro killed the skunk that shot 'im. The other feller is pullin' leather hell-bent down the road."

Two-Gun thrust his weapons in their holsters and turned to look at Faro. Blood poured over his face and his eyes were closed. His sombrero was gone. Anxiously, Two-Gun ran an exploring finger across a gash in Faro's scalp, then swore delightedly:

"Creased 'im, that's all. Hell, yuh can't kill good old Faro nohow. They split his scalp and let out a lot of blood, but I betcha he's all right come tomorra."

Clive dropped from his saddle and examined the damage they had inflicted on their foes. Coldwater and Clem Jacobs were dead, but the other two were breathing. Clive, with long years of range experience behind him, had seen many

wounds. He saw now that with proper care the two would survive.

“We’ll put ’em on the hoss that Coldwater rode, which was the only one that didn’t stampede, and when we passes the Box O trail we’ll head ’em in that-a-way and let the hosses take ’em to the ranch house. We can’t let ’em lay here helpless like.”

Two-Gun, now that he had avenged Yank, was happy and his dourness of the last several days fell from him. He held Faro while Clive fastened the wounded men to the horse and led the way down the road. He had already bandaged Faro’s head with what materials he had at hand — a silk neckerchief and a strip of his own under-shirt — and now that worthy opened his eyes, to wonder what had happened.

“I shore thought that was the end,” he said finally. “I saw that *hombre’s* gun go bust right in muh face, just after I pulled the trigger of muh own six-gun. That’s the last thing I recalls. Did I git him?”

“He’s there on that hoss, shot through the neck,” Two-Gun told him. “I reckon he won’t die, but he shore will have trouble eatin’ for some time to come.”

Faro straightened in his saddle, feeling life pulse back through his veins rapidly. Save for a slight dizziness he proclaimed himself as well as ever. It was well that this was true, for when they passed the Box O trail and turned the laden

horse through the gate, heading it toward the ranch house, a fusillade of shots rattled from back among the orange trees and bullets whistled about their ears.

Faro was now in the lead and his horse took the fence on the opposite side of the road at a bound, landing cleanly on the other side, and bounding off across the grass. Clive touched Thunder's ribs and the noble black cleared the wire with even greater ease than had Faro's animal. Another fusillade sounded and Two-Gun's horse went plunging into the wire just as it was leaving the ground to make the leap. Two-Gun shot across its head, landing over the fence. Clive reined in and turned back. He saw Two-Gun rise and run toward him.

"Come on, Two-Gun," he cried. "Climb on Thunder. He'll carry us both and still out-distance anything they've got on the Box O."

Their flight was hastened by more shots and the heavy lead slugs from several rifles whistled about them. A man on horseback, especially if he is riding furiously, is an extremely difficult target to hit. Probably this is why none of the Box O bullets took effect. At any rate, they rounded a drove of steers, clipped the top strands of a wire fence and clattered into the highway without further incident. When they crossed the ford at Cougar Creek, Two-Gun said:

"Here's where Coldwater did for Yank. I wish to hell I'd met Coldwater here. Well, Yank can

rest easy, for Coldwater ain't goin' to bother no more honest men."

Back at the ranch Ormsby greeted Faro with a frown:

"A sixteenth of an inch lower, Faro, and you would be playing a harp. Keep quiet a few days and don't over-exert yourself and start the blood again and you will be all right."

Forest received news of the encounter with her usual distressed air. Her tender heart would never cease grieving at bloodshed, but she had gone too far now to draw back and while sorrowful, nevertheless was calm about it.

That night Clive and Forest sat in the living room of the ranch house discussing the situation in the Cottonwood Valley, and Forest made a suggestion that had been in her mind for weeks.

"Clive, if the Henley Cattle & Sales Co. is back of all this, why can we not start a direct action against them? It seems to me that so long as they are permitted to continue the hiring of men to persecute us, we'll never be rid of this warfare. Surely, there is some way to reach them directly."

"Yuh shore said somethin', Miss Forest, and I've thought of that; but so far the only way I've seen to hit at them fellers is to strike back in their own fashion, and strike twice to their once. I don't reckon we're anythin' behind the game so far, leastwise, not since we started fightin' 'em."

"But our present methods are too brutal, Clive. You know that I never would have countenanced

the burning of Mr. Horner's buildings had I known what you planned; nor would I have permitted Two-Gun to go riding about the valley the way he did if I had been given an inkling that he was deliberately trying to provoke a clash with Cold-water. It is all very well to say that the enemy men who are dead deserved to die, and that Mr. Horner was only the victim of a just retribution, but just think of the name you are making for me while you are doing all these things." She spoke earnestly and a little sadly.

Clive chuckled boldly, not at all in sympathy with her mood.

"Any time yuh don't like yore name, Miss Forest, yuh can shore change it mighty quick, I reckon," he said, daringly.

She looked at him, a little puzzled, a little confused.

"I don't think I quite understand you," she said slowly.

Clive thereupon was abashed, but he was not the man to start a thing and not complete it, so he continued:

"I was just a-thinkin' that any time yuh got tired callin' yorese'f name of Glade, yuh might change it to Morgan." His eyes now met hers fairly.

If he had expected her to be taken aback, he was mistaken. It was not the first time that words of this import had fallen on her pink little ears, and now she returned Clive's gaze without waver-

ing. If anything, his remark lifted her out of her despondency and roused the other side of her feminine nature. A half smile stole quickly over her face.

“Clive Morgan, is that a proposal?” she asked, and he was certain there was a joyous lilt to her voice.

This time Clive was routed. Never much for women, he did not know how to take them, and now that she had turned the situation squarely back upon him, he fell down woefully.

“Well, yuh can call it that if yuh want to, I reckon,” he managed to mumble, “though I guess mebbe I wasn’t just meanin’ it daid earnest like——”

He realized that he was making things worse for himself and stopped in confusion, his cheeks stained crimson beneath their tan. The girl’s merry laugh dinned in his ears.

“He proposes and hasn’t the nerve to back it up,” she said softly. “My, what a bold, bold man he is. One would never think he could face six-guns and sheep herders and such when he is so fearful of a puny, helpless girl. However, I shall seriously consider his question and if I decide that he actually proposed, I shall let him have my answer later.”

Baffled by her laughter and somewhat aloof way of addressing him, Clive rose and stumbled from the room. On the veranda he paused and kicked himself viciously.

“Clive Morgan, yuh plumb damn’ fool,” he growled to himself, “ain’t yuh got no sense a-tall? Next time yuh try to propose to that gal, damn yuh, *do* it, and don’t just go lally-gaggin’ along like a school kid with a mash on his young teacher. Oh, hell!”

He pulled his sombrero savagely over his head and stalked to the bunkhouse. He did not know, of course, that soft eyes, watching him from behind white lace curtains, followed his progress; nor did he know that a girl’s heart was beating just a little faster, and that tears were very near to welling down her cheeks.

Back in the bunkhouse Clive said to Ormsby:

“Say, Blaze, you bein’ the only one among us that a man might call real eddycated like, I want yore advice on somethin’.”

“What is it, Clive? Are you in love, or sick at your stomach? You look just now as though either might be ailing you. I’ve always found that bicarbonate of soda is good for a man in either case, too.”

Clive flushed guiltily.

“Don’t start none of that, now, Blaze, or you and me’ll mix it right here and now. I want yuh to tell me if yuh think it would be worth while to go to Chicawgo and see them Henley fellers about this here range war. Think we could go back there and throw a scare into them buzzards sufficient to make ’em call off their dogs here in the valley?”

Ormsby immediately turned serious and dropped beside Clive on a bunk.

“The only way to reach the Henley people as a firm, Clive, is to go to law,” he said. “I don’t imagine there is even any way you can do that, either, for things are too complicated here. As I understand the situation, the Henley concern actually owns these ranches, but operates them through dummy owners who in reality are only managers and carry out the Henley policies. Deeds and other records in the courthouse at Sunset fail to show any connection between these ranches and any of the Henley concern, so we’d have a fine time proving anything in court against them.”

He paused as Clive thought this over, then continued:

“And as for the ranchers here in the valley, it would be rather useless for us to proceed against them. We have done them more damage than they have inflicted on us, and if we went after them in the courts, charging them with murder and arson, they would file counter charges of the same thing against us; if by any chance we won our case against them, it would be against them as individuals, and not against the Henley company. In other words, if the Henley firm does own these ranches and we won a court suit against these alleged owners, all the Henley people would do would be remove the men here and place new owner-managers in charge. In that event we’d be no further than we are now. The best thing we

can do, in my opinion, is to continue as we are until we can get definite proof against the Henley Cattle & Sales Co. as a firm, and then act."

Clive gazed at Ormsby, a rapt expression on his face. He drew a deep breath.

"By cripes, Blaze," he said, "if I could talk like that I'd give a million dollars, if I had a million dollars."

Blaze laughed and Clive continued:

"Now, I want yuh to do me a favor. I want yuh to go to Miss Forest and talk to her just like yuh talked to me about this thing. She seems to have a idee that we ought to get in the courts *pronto* like, and I reckon I ain't got the proper lingo to tell her that our way is the better one."

"Anything you say, Clive," Ormsby agreed, "I'll even propose to her for you, if you'll just say the word."

He ducked Clive's swinging fist and retired amid a gale of laughter that swept through the bunkhouse at the latter's expense.

"I reckon yuh dang' doodle-bugs think that was funny," Clive said wrathfully, "and yuh can every last mother's son of yuh go plumb to the devil and pitch his tent for 'im."

After listening to Ormsby's views of the situation, Forest next morning expressed herself as being satisfied to wait, in the hope that something definite would ultimately be uncovered that would pin the guilt of the valley warfare on the Chicago

concern, and thus the matter was allowed to rest for the time being.

Day followed day in rapid succession, but peace hovered over the range. Since the deaths of Coldwater and Clem Jacobs there had been no further clashes and soon the sheep began to disappear from the range, a few at a time. They would have starved if left there longer, for they had eaten the range grass down to the dirt. Now that the animals had to be cared for, the men of the Diamond L, M-Bar-T, Crazy H, Box O and the Dollar M made no bones about dividing them up and taking them onto their pastures until such time as they could be sent out of the valley.

On the day this occurred the Swinging J riders, Forest with them, sat at the lower end of the Circle C and watched the woolies disappear into Saddleback Pass. Clive laughed happily.

“Another one of their plans gone plumb wrong,” he chortled. “I reckon it cost them Henley people a dang’ big pile of money to run them woolies in here and out ag’in, and it didn’t get ’em anything after all. The range won’t be no good ag’in till next spring, and that means all them ranches’ll have more cows under fence than they can handle properly. I hope the onmannerly skunks goes busted; that’s me.”

With the going of the sheep the valley peace continued until after New Year’s day, then a new menace brooded on the silent air.

CHAPTER XIII

FOREST DISAPPEARS

EVER since his talk with Ormsby, Clive had been obsessed with one idea — to get some sort of evidence that could be used to convict the Henley Cattle & Sales Co. as being guilty of sponsoring and inspiring the outrages that had set the valley afire with discord and strife. Thoroughly convinced that the big commission house, with its huge capital and powerful influence, was behind all the trouble, he had resolved that by hook or crook, he would uncover something he could pin on them — something that would be definite enough and damaging enough to win a court case.

How to obtain such evidence was a problem that threatened to overwhelm him in the solving. From what Sleepy and others had told him he knew that everyone in the valley, excepting only those who actually knew, believed the ostensible owners of these vast ranches were exactly what they purported to be, and they scouted any suggestion that the Chicago commission house was behind all the trouble. Clive himself sometimes felt doubts, too, for try as he would he could not light on a definite motive for the Henley virulency in conducting the warfare.

Although the sheep were now gone, the Swinging J riders continued to guard the lines, for Forest's cattle had to be kept on her own broad acres where

The grass was thick and rich. Out on the range the grass had only begun to get a fresh start from the devastation wrought by the sheep and Simmons, who had ridden over from the Lazy X, decided to maintain his arrangement with Forest for the care of his stock, too.

During the long, peaceful days that now became a part of the valley life, Clive scoured the valley from end to end, hoping always that he might by some unforeseen stroke of good luck, run across the evidence he was seeking. He met riders from many of the other outfits on occasions, but aside from a few hot verbal clashes nothing untoward had occurred.

Forest left her semi-seclusion and joined Clive frequently in long rides about the ranch, and even through the valley, and there were occasions now when she took long rides alone. At first he protested against this, but finding it futile desisted. And so came a day when Clive was off examining some water holes, that Forest emerged from the ranch house, asked Pink Sellers to saddle her sorrel mare, and galloped away across the range. Pink gave the incident little attention and as Forest disappeared around the corral he went into the bunkhouse and busied himself with a game of solitaire.

It was not until the evening meal, when Clive noticed that Forest was not in her accustomed place at the head of the table, that Pink again thought of the girl's going. He told Clive of the incident and the latter, alarmed, sent Charley Long scurrying off

to her room, to learn if she had returned. Pink ran to the corral to ascertain if the sorrel mare was inside and both he and the Chinaman returned at the same time with negative reports.

This was the latest Forest had ever remained out on her rides and Clive was genuinely alarmed. He looked at his heavy, open-faced silver watch, then glanced at the sun, still an hour above the western range of the Mogollons, and shook his head.

“Well,” he opined, “mebbe she’s just a-ridin’ somewhere’s and’ll be back *pronto*, but I’m sort of worried like. If she ain’t back in a hour, we’re a-goin’ to start after her, cowboys.”

“Yeh,” said Shad Stevens, “she may’ve rode further’n she intended, and just ain’t got back yet. No use worryin’ till we got to, I reckon.”

Two-Gun Farrell’s eyes were shooting their little green flames and his pale face had gone dead white. Clive, looking at him, knew that Two-Gun was on a thin edge, waiting impatiently for the hour to pass; knew, too, that if the girl had not returned within that time, Farrell would be the first to spin the cylinders of his revolvers and take the trail.

The hour passed on wings of lead and as the last second ticked off Clive standing on the roof of the bunkhouse, gazed out across the range, all red and amber and gold in the light of the setting sun. He could see for miles across the undulating acres, but not a shadow of life crossed his vision save where the cattle grazed quietly.

He slid from the roof, landed lightly on the balls of his feet and straightened, tightening his belt. The day riders had come in from the line and the night riders were getting ready to start out. Clive looked over the assembled punchers, noting that all were watching him anxiously. He turned to Monte and gave a quick order:

“Monte, let yore night men ride alone tonight, and do double distance. I want all the boys that can be spared to come with me. There’s something up, and I’m a-goin’ to locate it. ’Pears to me like somethin’s happened to Miss Forest and I reckon if anythin’ has I’m just nacherally goin’ to ride through this yere valley with a fine-tooth comb till I locate her. If anybody’s hurt her, God help ’em, for there’ll be a lynchin’.”

Two-Gun Farrell set his hat more firmly on his head and turned toward the corral. Clive followed, crying across his shoulder:

“Come on, cowboys; get yore broncs and let’s get a-goin’.”

Monte McCourt and the men he was not sending out for the night line riding, followed. Monte himself, took up another notch in his belt and made sure that plenty of cartridges were handy in his gun-belt.

Ten minutes later the party clattered away from the corral and sped across the range, moving toward the ford across Cougar Creek. It was in this direction, Pink Sellers said, that Forest had gone.

In a short time the sun left them and the soft

Arizona night came on, but a night that was light and faëry. Brilliant, low-hanging stars of startling luster popped into the cerulean blue and lighted their way; the moon came up out of the east and lent its golden splendor to the occasion, casting a glow over the countryside that made even the shadows of the tuft grass visible.

“I shore am glad there’s a full moon,” said Clive, “for we can even see pony tracks if we have to look for ’em, now.”

Swiftly they urged their horses along, Clive setting a stiff pace with Thunder. They watched the way closely for signs that might guide them on Forest’s trail, but found nothing that would help them. At the ford, however, they came upon evidence a-plenty.

The sorrel mare, a bullet in its brain, lay under the willow clump beside the road, saddled and bridled, just as it had fallen. The road showed signs of excited tramping of many hoofs and an occasional mark left by a high-heeled boot was visible. Clive dismounted and dropped on his hands and knees, crawling about. After five minutes he rose and said:

“They got her, all right. I don’t know who, though. It happened early, I reckon; probably as soon as she struck the ford. I be’n huntin’ to see if I could find which way the dirty skunks went after takin’ her, and near as I can figger it out, they cut up long Cougar Creek, through these willers. Leastwise, all these tracks leave the road about fifty

feet back, and I follered 'em through the soft dirt that breaks all along yere. We might as well start up the Cougar, too. Keep yore eyes peeled, for we got to look for signs from now on."

Now that his worst fears were confirmed as realities, now that he knew Forest had met with untoward adventure, if not actual foul play, Clive's face grew tense and gray and little lines set at the corners of his mouth. His riders grew silent and Two-Gun's eyes were literally green pools of flame. Quietly, but with a deadly precision, they headed their ponies upstream.

The shadows were thick among the willow trunks and frequently Clive or Two-Gun swung from the saddle and peered intently at the ground. Each time there followed the order to keep going. After a time, Blaze Ormsby pulled up suddenly and called in a low tone:

"Just a minute, Clive; I've found something."

He reached out a hand toward a drooping willow branch and drew it back, holding something in it. He rode up to Clive and held it out.

"If I am not mistaken, Clive," he said gravely, "this is a piece of the scarlet ribbon Miss Forest wore in a bow on her shirt front, just where she turned the collar in."

Clive and Two-Gun examined the bit of silk. Both knew Blaze was probably right in his surmise. Either the girl had intentionally left this as a marker or her neck ribbon had caught on the projecting willow branch as she was carried past it.

Clive carefully placed the tell-tale bit of silk in the breast pocket of his shirt.

Now positive of their direction and satisfied they were on the trail of the missing girl, they rode forward at accelerated pace, Clive, Two-Gun and Ormsby leading, with Monte, Shad, Spud Garrett and Bull Ellerby close behind. The others followed as closely as they could.

“We’re a-goin’ to be plumb across the Box O in a minnit or two,” opined Bull, “and a-headin’ across the Crazy H. I wonder where they took that gal?”

“We’ll know afore we turn back,” Clive promised grimly. Two-Gun nodded in corroboration.

Two-Gun was now riding slightly in advance. Ever since Ormsby had discovered the bit of flaming ribbon, Farrell had been scanning the ground and the willows on either side of them closely. Now, of a sudden, he pulled in and dropped from his saddle, stooping. When he straightened up, he held another bit of the ribbon, and passed it along for inspection.

“Bless her game little heart,” exclaimed Ormsby. “She’s intentionally leaving markers for us — blazing the trail, as it were. Brave, thoughtful girl; didn’t lose her head and would not permit the seriousness of her plight to frighten her into entire submission. She must have watched cleverly for opportunities to leave these bits of ribbon behind her.”

In the next hour they found three more pieces

of the scarlet silk and, after a time, they came upon a piece of white, evidently torn from her handkerchief.

Then they lost the trail. It was Two-Gun, his green-filmed eyes constantly seeking, who picked it up again, fifty yards back, where it turned abruptly into the stream. The opposite bank gave no indication that the horses had emerged there and after a consultation it was decided the pursued had continued up the stream, keeping to the water to hide their horses' tracks, for the creek was only a shallow brook this far up the valley.

With riders on either bank watching for the trail to emerge, they continued up the creek. The signs from the girl were no longer found and shortly after midnight, having traversed the entire width of the Box O, and a portion of the Crazy H, they found themselves staring at a sixty-foot waterfall that tumbled out of the mountains at a point where Cougar Creek began its winding course through the valley.

Baffled, they discussed the situation hurriedly. A score of guesses were offered as to why they had lost the trail, the most plausible being that they had overlooked it, despite the brilliance of the moon and the softer glow of the stars. In the end, it seemed the only thing to do was to go back and seek once more where the trail left the creek, so they turned downstream, eyes more alert than ever.

Eventually they came to where the bit of white

had been found and the trail turned into the water. But not once had they found a sign that it had left the creek.

“It does beat hell,” exclaimed Honey Malloy, “where they coulda gone to. There ain’t a sign of ’em between here and that waterfall, and I don’t reckon there’s anything could go up that catytract; not even a salmon, which same I’ve seen jump a eighteen-foot fall; yes, seen ’em with muh own eyes.”

“We ain’t a-disputin’ about the damn’ salmon,” rasped Clive. “What we want to do is find where them damn’ buzzards has took Forest.”

He was wild with grief and worry, realizing for the first time how great was the all-pervading love he bore for the girl. His heart was like lead and his brain was afire. Only Ormsby surmised his true condition and he laid a quick, sympathetic hand on Clive’s arm.

“They won’t kill her, old timer,” he said gently. “I rather imagine their game is to endeavor to make her agree to sell out, or something like that. Or, perhaps they will hold her as sort of hostage to compel us to get out. But, really, I don’t think we need fear for her physical well-being.”

Clive was grateful for the words and the cheerful hope they expressed, but his worries and grief would not ease. He looked at his riders, noting that all awaited his lead. Swiftly, he resolved on the only course left, and said:

“Just on a chance that they went that-a-way,

Shad and Bull and Monte and all you Lazy X men ride downstream on the other side. The rest of us'll take this side. It might be them buzzards turned downstream 'stead of up, and come this far to throw us off the trail."

And so the search was resumed. In the fullness of time the ford was reached once more. Forest's dead mare still lay under the willow clump, and Clive made another search of the vicinity. But the best he could learn was that the riders had turned from the road fifty feet from the stream, thence ridden directly up the creek, in the direction they had just come from.

Two-Gun spurred close to Clive, his green eyes somber and fretful.

"We can't call things quits here, Tex; I got a idee we might pick up something if we ride downstream from here. Me, I'm a-goin' that-a-way, too. Leave the forces divided as they are, and let's go, cowboy."

Clive gave the order and the search started, but not a man among them save, perhaps, Two-Gun, felt anything would come of the ride in this direction. All save Farrell felt that the solution to the mystery of Forest's disappearance lay upstream, toward the waterfall. But they went at their task grimly and with an earnestness that spoke volumes. Left hands held reins lightly, while right hands never swayed far from ugly-looking gun-butts.

It was Two-Gun who made the discovery. Rid-

ing easily, eyes now on the ground, now on the willow branches, he suddenly threw himself from the saddle and picked up a tiny piece of scarlet silk, holding it aloft.

“I reckon I had the right idee, Clive,” he called softly. “She’s a-goin’ this-a-way, all right. I reckon she used that piece of white back there ’stead of red ribbon to try and tell us somethin’ had happened there, and we was all too damn’ dumb to onderstand. Here’s her red ribbon ag’in. I reckon that proves we’re a-goin’ in the right direction once more.”

“But where’s the trail?” asked Spud Garrett.

“I reckon it’s in the water, Spud,” Two-Gun answered gravely. “Yuh can ride this dang’ Cougar Creek from one end of the valley to t’other, I reckon, it’s so shaller. Look-a here, and yuh’ll see the gal used several hair-pins to make this hefty enough to fly through the air. I reckon she just nacherally throwed it ashore when she passed here. Come on, let’s speed up.”

After a time they reached the line of the Swing-ing J, where the creek crossed it. Clive cursed bitterly.

“They actually took her right back across her own ranch. Hell, but they got nerve. Well, I reckon that settles where she is, then. They either got her at Bender’s or she’s be’n switched over to the Diamond L. Ain’t no other ranches down this-a-way ’cept the Circle C, and Bud Hart ain’t in with this valley bunch none whatever.”

They followed the stream across the entire width of the Swinging J and then, a half mile after they had started over Bender's ranch they found where the trail left the water. But a new problem presented itself. The trail split, then split again and again. Hoof prints led off toward Bender's; others pointed straight down the stream; some led toward the Swinging J and still others turned in the direction of the Diamond L.

Once again it was the girl, aided by Two-Gun's acumen, that was responsible for a clue. A tiny bit of white lay on the ground, along the trail that started toward Bender's. Two-Gun picked it up, handed it to Clive, and declared:

"See that? 'Member back up the creek when we found the other white one? It meant there was a change in the trail, that they wasn't a-goin' in the direction we figgered a-tall. Well, I take it she left this white one here to mean the same thing, by cripes."

Clive's face lighted swiftly.

"I betcha yo're right, Two-Gun," he exclaimed, "and that bein' the case we was all a-figgerin' she was a-bein' took to Bender's place, which proba'ly ain't the case a-tall. Well, we'll foller these tracks to the Diamond L and see what happens. C'mon." He was off like a streak, the others following close behind him.

It seemed that Two-Gun was right in his surmise for they had gone only a short distance when they found another bit of flaming silk. A little song

sprung up in Clive's heart, a song of mad themes. One had to do with hate and lust and the desire for battle; then there was another that had to do with a thirst for vengeance; a third, and last, had to do with a great and passionate and all-consuming love he bore the girl.

It was barely dawn when they approached the Diamond L. They had found three more bits of the girl's neck ribbon, then there had been no more. The trail was plain now and either Forest had decided to take no further chances in dropping the path-markers, or her captors had increased their vigilance and made it impossible.

All were showing signs of the terrific strain they had labored under. When, as the sun peeped over the distant Mogollons, and they drew up in plain sight of the Diamond L ranch house, Clive cried to his men:

"I reckon we'll find Forest in there, boys." His voice was level and hard. "I reckon, too, it's up to us to get her away from 'em. Mebbe they figger we won't find their trail, and mebbe they don't. Leastwise, I sorta surmise there is apt to be a fight when we ride up and asks 'em for the girl. If there's anybody in this bunch that don't want to go through with this to a finish, I want to know it now, for I'm a-goin' after them fellers hell-bent; if they show fight I'm a-goin' to blister 'em proper, and I don't want any half-hearted backin' up. I want every one of yuh that's with me to sling yore guns as fast as they come at yuh, and

put so much lead in 'em that they'll sink right into the yearth from the weight of it."

"Ride 'em, cowboy," Pink Sellers shouted. "We're all with yuh to the last dang' flea on old Bull Ellerby's haid."

"I ain't got no fleas, yuh onery skunk," rasped Bull. "Go on, Tex; start the fireworks whenever yuh damn' please."

The silence of death hovered over the Diamond L ranch house as Clive and his party drummed into the yard. It was as though the occupants had not yet risen to greet the new-born day. The house was closed up tightly and the shades were drawn inside the windows.

Clive let out a hail. Almost instantly there came proof that there was life inside, for a voice cried:

"You fellers get out of here. If yuh come to raid this place, yo're a-goin' to get hurt. I got plenty of guns and men in here and yo're shore goin' to eat some lead if yuh try any stunts here like yuh pulled on old Horner's barn."

"You send out that gal right away, and in consideration of same I'll agree yuh won't get hurt none, now," said Clive. "If we have to come and take her out-a there, I reckon yo're a-goin' to be plumb downright sorry."

"What gal yuh talkin' about?" the voice queried.

"Yuh know damn' well I mean Miss Glade of the Swingin' J," Clive said firmly.

“I ain’t seen her, never did see her and what’s more I don’t want to see her,” the voice came back.

“Perhaps the man is speaking the truth, Clive,” said Blaze. “It is best that we make certain, I think.”

“Truth, hell,” exclaimed Clive. “What’s he got the place all shut up for that-a-way if he’s tellin’ the truth? Answer me that question, will yuh?”

“I imagine we can learn easily whether he is telling things with a straight tongue,” said the cool-brained Ormsby. “Let’s go to the corral and see if we can find any horses there that have water marks or mud in their hair. If we do, then it is pretty conclusive evidence that the man inside is a liar, I would say.”

In the corral they found a half-dozen horses, all bearing unmistakable signs of having recently been in the water. They were dry, but mud still clung to legs and also spotted sides and bellies of the animals. Just above where the stirrups would reach there was a water-line and the hair was matted and stiff from that point down to the animals’ hoofs. Either the riders had forgotten to rub the horses down, or had not thought they were leaving telltale evidence behind.

“I would say, after calm consideration, those signs tell us all that we need to know,” said Ormsby grimly, following Clive back toward the ranch house.

“Hello, inside,” Clive yelled.

“What the hell do yuh want now?” came the questioning reply.

“We got positive evidence Miss Glade’s in yore house, and we’re a-goin’ to take her out of there if we have to tear down every damn’ board yuh got.”

The spang of a six-gun answered them. The bullet struck Pink Sellers’ horse in the nose, just as the animal threw up its head in an effort to dislodge a fly. The act probably saved Pink from getting the slug in his chest. As the horse dropped, Pink landed on his feet, gun in hand, letting it spout a hail of lead toward an upstairs window whence the first shot had come.

“Hunt cover,” Clive cried, and led a dash around the bunkhouse. As they rounded it a hail of bullets splattered against the boards and dug up the earth, but the only casualty was a gash on the rump of the horse Bull was riding. Back of the bunkhouse they dismounted and tethered their horses.

CHAPTER XIV

THE FIGHT AT THE RANCH

DAY had broken across the mountains and the hot Arizona sun poured its brilliant rays over the scene. Hurriedly Clive called a council of war.

“There ain’t no use in us wastin’ bullets in them walls,” he told them. “We got to devise some scheme to get them fellers out of there and to get ourselves inside. Anybody got a suggestion?”

It seemed that everybody had. Chief among the ideas set forth was a plan for all to storm the house and crash their way inside, routing the occupants at the points of revolvers. But this did not meet with Clive’s approval; he did not want to lose any of his comrades if he could avoid it.

“No, I don’t reckon we want to do that,” he said finally. “Hell, I wish we could set fire to the damn’ place. That shore would send ’em sky-hootin’ out of there like a bunch of dawgs with tin cans tied to their tails. Wonder if we could? They’d have to get out and I reckon they’d bring Forest with ’em. Nobody but a dirty Injun would think of leavin’ a gal behind to burn; leastwise that’s how I feel about it.”

“Your suggestion of fire is a little cold-blooded, Clive,” Ormsby said. “Yet, I think it is scientifically the best plan. I don’t imagine there is a

man in the entire valley who would think for an instant of permitting a helpless girl to burn to death, even were he evil-minded enough to wish to do so. Killing a woman would be far more serious for them than shooting a few of us punchers; therefore, I vote in favor of firing the house and taking a chance on getting Miss Forest safely out of whatever follows."

"But how in hell are we goin' to get close enough to set fire to the damn' place?" rasped Pink, fuming over the loss of his horse and already seeing in his mind's eye the Diamond L animal that he would pick out to replace it.

"We're gathered here to thresh this out," Clive reminded him. "Now, all of yuh think yore damnedest and think quick. Me, I'm a-goin' to do some thinkin' muhse'f."

Two-Gun Farrell, gazing off toward the barn, suddenly had an inspiration and whispered to Shad. The latter nodded in violent approval and turned to Clive.

"Say, Tex," he said in a low voice, "Two-Gun's just had a idee and him and me's goin' to try it out. See that wagon over there by the barn? Well, him and me's goin' to fill it up with hay or straw or whatever we can find over that-a-way and push it up ag'in' that house. When we get the wagon bang up ag'in' the wall we'll set 'er afire and skedaddle hell-bent out of the way, and I don't know as there's any easier way of gettin' that pile of boards a-burnin'."

Ormsby thumped Two-Gun on the back, admiration glowing in his frank eyes.

“You’re a wizard, Two-Gun; a man after my own heart. You old son of a gun, you have been the king-pin of this party ever since we started to find Miss Forest and now you’ve capped the climax with a corking idea. I’m in favor of it on one condition — that I go along and help.”

“That shore is a fine idee,” said Clive, “and I reckon yuh’ll need some help to push that big, heavy wagon along. Blaze and me’ll both go with yuh, and dang muh hide if we don’t get that place to burnin’ in a jiffy.”

It was decided that Pink Sellers and Spud Garrett also would assist, then Clive addressed a parting word to the others, speaking directly to Bull Ellerby.

“Bull, you fellers get a line on some of them winders and blaze away. I don’t reckon they got Forest in the line of fire, but send yore first shots high, so that if she is in one of them rooms the bullets won’t hit her. After yuh locate where she is, or get no results, use yore own judgment, only, for cripe’s sake, don’t shoot unless yo’re sartin she ain’t in front of yore guns.”

Bull opened the ball by emptying his gun through one of the downstairs windows. At the first jingling crash of broken glass a veritable fusillade broke out from the house and bullets spattered against the bunkhouse walls like hail on a stubble field.

“ I reckon that waked 'em up,” chuckled Bull, delighted with the result.

Cautiously Clive, Two-Gun, Blaze and the others crept off. Between the bunkhouse and the stately row of cottonwoods that paralleled the ranch yard was a vacant space, fifty feet wide. To gain the trees and thus make the barn under their cover this space had to be crossed, and every foot of it in the vicinity of the bunkhouse was commanded by the guns inside the Diamond L ranch house. Shad peered across the intervening width and declared:

“ I reckon there ain't anything better to do than blaze away, so here goes.” Before Clive could stop him the valiant Stevens had dashed out across the open space and scudded under the over-reaching limbs of the giant cottonwoods. He reached these before those in the house, surprised by his daring, could turn their guns on him. From his vantage point he called:

“ Don't you fellers all run over in a bunch. Scatter and come fast. I reckon yuh'll make it; only, be careful, 'cause I 'spect they'll be a-watchin' for yuh now.”

“ Yuh think we're plumb damn' fools?” snorted Spud Garrett. “ I reckon we wasn't borned yesterday. Yuh want to see how I'm a-comin' over there? Well, here's how.”

On the instant he gave a prodigious leap, turned a hand-spring, flopped on the ground, rolled over and over, then rose, head down, knees pumping swiftly. In a trice he made the cottonwoods. A

score of bullets kicked up the dirt where he had crossed.

“That was one they wasn’t ’spectin’,” chortled Spud. “Ain’t none of ’em ever had no practice a-shootin’ at anythin’ travellin’ like that, I reckon. Thought I was a side-winder, more’n likely. Well,” he called across to the others, “hop to it, you fellers, we’re a-waitin’.”

Two-Gun Farrell had watched silently while Shad and Spud made the cottonwoods, his eyes flaring greenly, admiringly. Now he turned to Clive.

“I reckon the next feller that crosses is due to get hit, Tex,” he said. “Them birds’ll be watchin’ close and prob’ly they’ve got their guns at a level to sweep the whole shebang. I reckon we got to figger another way to cross, ’less we want to take onnecessary chances of pickin’ up some lead.”

“I think yo’re right, Two-Gun. What yuh got on yore mind?”

“I was thinkin’ if we go straight down this road a-piece, keepin’ the bunkhouse atween us and their guns, we can get far enough out that we won’t be in much danger from their lead. Then we can cross and come down behind them cottonwoods.”

Without replying Clive turned and led the way, the others close behind him. A hundred yards back they made a sudden dash and were safely behind the outlying trees before the first shots of the besieged Diamond L outfit came toward them. Hastily, they joined Shad and Spud.

Keeping the trees between themselves and the

house they worked down toward the barn. At the same time Bull Ellerby directing the campaign from the bunkhouse, ordered a constant fire maintained against the beleaguered inmates of the ranch house. Once, when it seemed their ruse was not going to hold the attention of those within, the daring Bull, followed by Monte McCourt, Lonesome Hines, Jingle Jones and Mojave Evans, dashed from their shelter as though to storm the house.

They stopped short ten feet distant and scurried back behind the building, beating the Diamond L bullets by a hair. But the maneuver had gained what they sought. Those inside, fearful now that if they deserted their posts a raid would follow and result in their capture, kept constant vigil at the windows. A few, Bull surmised, had been sent to the other side of the house to keep a lookout on what Clive and his comrades were doing at the rear.

Wyoming Red Hargrave suddenly scrambled from his recumbent position behind Bull Ellerby and pulled himself through a bunkhouse window, disappearing inside. Silk Kingsbury, watching him, murmured:

“Now, what in hell is that dang’ bow-laiged hop-toad up to now?”

An instant later the grinning face of Wyoming was back at the window and he called:

“You fellers come in here, some of yuh. We can get to the other end of this shebang and rake the whole damn’ end of that house through these

winders. Yuh can't reach that part of the house from out there, but yuh shore can raise hell from in here. 'Bout five of yuh come a-runnin'."

Bull waved his hand and Lazy Turner, Piute Allen, Mojave, Brindle Thorp and Hokum Smith crawled within and joined Wyoming. A minute later a blast of firing inside the bunkhouse and startled yells from the ranch house apprised them that Wyoming had originated an idea well worthwhile.

A voice from the house let out a yell, then shouted:

"Hey, you fellers out there; get out and let us alone. We ain't got that dang' gal yo're a-talkin' about, and don't know nothin' about 'er. We're just nacherally goin' to chaw yuh up if yuh keep on shootin' at us."

"I reckon yo're a damn' liar," Bull's hoarse voice roared back, "and as far as the chawin's concerned just go ahaid and chaw away and be danged to yuh."

As though this were a signal for redoubled activities the firing from the house became intense. None of the Swinging J riders could put his head around the bunkhouse and keep it, and even those inside were forced to do their firing through the windows with extreme caution.

Meantime, down at the barn, Clive and his little force had jockeyed the wagon around and were piling it high with dry range grass, cut sometime previously for hay. Pitchforks were wielded with

feverish energy and finally Two-Gun, who had been setting the pace, said:

“ I reckon that’s all she’ll hold, Tex, and it seems to me we got enough grass on there to set fire to the whole dang’ valley. Turn them wheels and let’s get a-goin’.”

Shad and Spud grabbed the wagon tongue and began circling it around toward the house when Clive cautioned:

“ That ain’t no way to do, yuh pore idjuts. Who’s a-goin’ to walk in front and guide the damned thing? I don’t reckon any of us is. No, sir-ee, Bob. We’re a-goin’ to send that wagon along rear-end foremost and we’ll push from the back, guidin’ ’er from the back, too.”

Clive took the end of the tongue while the others got in close to the wagon and pushed mightily. Under their combined efforts it moved easily and began heading rapidly toward the house.

A shout and a burst of shots apprised them that their ruse had been discovered and soon bullets were spraying the wagon like hail, while wisps of hay, cut by the flying lead, soared from the piled up load and drifted gently to the ground. But the bulk of the wagon and its towering load protected those behind it and they pushed their burden along steadily.

“ The worst thing about this will be gettin’ away from the house after we set this wagon on fire,” opined Shad.

“ I rather imagine we shall do some tall and

fancy sidestepping if we dodge their bullets," agreed Ormsby.

Two-Gun Farrell said nothing, but his mighty muscles bunched as he heaved his share of the load along. Clive, guiding with the tongue, sensed they were close to the house, and called:

"A couple more heaves and we'll be plumb up ag'in 'er, boys. When she hits everybody strike matches and chuck 'em into that hay and as she starts to burn run like four kinds of hell."

"And in as many different directions," grunted Two-Gun, breaking his silence.

With a crash that jarred them the wagon collided with the house. Clive had already deserted the tongue and joined the others, since the end of the pole was exposed to gun fire and bullets had begun to patter around it. Now, huddled close to the shelter of the vehicle, all drew matches and almost as a unit struck them on the undersides of their chaps.

As each match flared its holder reached up and tossed it into the hay. In a trice the dry and seasoned range grass turned into a raging inferno of towering flames and heat.

"It's every man for himself, now," Clive cried, and he started on a zigzagging run toward the corner of the house that had not come under fire of the guns of the Swinging J. The others, forgetting their plan to scatter in different directions, followed him swiftly.

There is a destiny that guides the lives of all

who woo the goddess of adventure. This was demonstrated now. The end of the house they found, as they rounded it, to be blind, minus doors or windows. They were, therefore, as safe in its shelter as if they had been at home on the Swinging J and fast asleep in their bunks.

Bull Ellerby saw them and his heavy voice roared:

“We’ll send some lead that-a-way, Tex, and yuh can chase this-a-way while they’re a-duckin’ our bullets.”

They saw him turn as though passing an order, then a veritable sheet of flame burst from the bunkhouse and bullets sang like flies against the walls of the ranch building, through windows and doors and all around. Under cover of this fusillade Clive and his companions dashed on a crooked run toward Ellerby. So effective was the Swinging J covering fire that those within the house were unable to plant a telling shot; and the five made the bunkhouse unharmed.

By now a great pillar of smoke was rising from behind the house and they knew the hay had burned down and set fire to the building. The wagon, too, was ablaze, and it would be a matter of only a short time until the occupants of the doomed domicile would be forced to dash out. Eagerly they watched. Two-Gun cried suddenly:

“The rear — watch the rear.”

“What do yuh see?” asked Clive.

“Nothin’ yet, but them birds could go out that-

a-way and get plumb off from us, I reckon," Two-Gun answered.

On the instant Farrell dashed away. The firing from within the house had ceased as the flames became an angry menace. Clive sensed that efforts were being made to stifle the blaze and he knew that this would be impossible; he turned and followed Two-Gun, with Ormsby and Pink Sellers at his heels.

Gaining the cottonwoods, they scurried rapidly down toward the barn, pausing where they could obtain an unobstructed view of all the rear exits of the house. They saw men tumbling through two rear doors. The remainder of the Swinging J raiders now hastened up, guns ready for quick play.

Over past the barn a drumming of hoofs split the air. Clive wondered if someone were approaching and voiced the question aloud to Two-Gun. Farrell, listening an instant, responded:

"Nope, Tex, that's somebody ridin' away from here hell-bent. I reckon some of them birds got out, lit on their hosses and are a-foggin' off across there to find help or make their get-away."

He lifted his silver-mounted six-guns and sent a shower of bullets toward those who were exiting from the house. A shouted order from Clive brought the remaining guns of the Swinging J into action, then the Diamond L outfit gave in.

Eleven men, including ancient and grizzled Cief Pence, ostensible owner of the ranch, threw down

their guns and stood sullen and quiet the while Clive walked up to them.

The ranch house was doomed and burning fiercely. The heat was so intense they were forced to move back nearly to the barn, then Clive, addressing Pence, said:

“Where’s the gal, yuh damn’ old crow? Tell me quick, afore I kick the livin’ everlastin’ day-lights out of yuh.”

Old Pence mouthed venomously, his scrubby chin whiskers bobbing like blades of wheat in a wind storm.

“I told yuh we didn’t have no gal here, damn’ yuh. I reckon yo’re a-goin’ to pay a heap of money for burnin’ muh house, too. I’ll have the law on yuh for this if it’s the last thing I ever do.”

Clive, beside himself with worry and fear for the safety of Forest, shoved the old scoundrel aside and dashed for the blazing building, his voice lifted in a shout:

“Forest! Forest! Forest! Are you in there?”

Only the roar of the flames answered him. Two-Gun Farrell walked over to Pence and grasped him by the shoulders. His green-flaring eyes bored into the sullen countenance of the Diamond L man. He rasped:

“Tell me, Pence; is the gal in that house?”

Under the terrible menace in Two-Gun’s face, Pence quailed and his own countenance went white. He mumbled in a low voice:

“S’help me Godfrey, she ain’t in that house.

Yuh don't think I'd let anybody, even a dang' Piute Injun, stay in a house and be burned up, do yuh?"

Truth was in his voice and shown in his eyes. Two-Gun dropped his hands from Pence's shoulders and hurried to where Clive was still calling frantically and endeavoring to find a way to enter the holocaust.

"Don't, Tex," he said gently, grasping Clive by the arm. "I reckon yo're a-barkin' up the wrong tree, old timer. I'll stake muh life Miss Forest ain't in there. I just asked Pence, private-like, and he said she ain't. Don't ask me how I know, but I'm tellin' yuh he shore did speak the truth."

Clive turned grief-stricken eyes and a haggard face on Two-Gun. "Then, for God's sake, Two-Gun, tell me where she is?"

Two-Gun was in a quandary. Clive was on the verge of breaking down under the terrific strain he was enduring; not a physical breakdown, but a nervous reaction that might be worse. He thought swiftly, seeking for something he might say and turn Clive's thoughts off on a new angle.

Like a flash he recalled the drumming hoof-beats they had heard; swiftly he had an inspiration. He looked sharply at Clive:

"I reckon they had her here, old timer, but they got her away. Yuh remember them runnin' hosses we heard? Well, I betcha if we set out after 'em and ketch 'em we'll find yore gal, all top-side high and safe."

"Lord forgive me for tellin' any such damn' lie to Clive," he murmured to himself immediately after he saw the flare of hope that lighted Clive's eyes swiftly. "I had to do it, though, 'cause he was gettin' ready to crack under the strain. Anyhow, dang it, mebbe I might be right."

Gently he forced Clive back toward the others, talking to him soothingly, much as a mother might talk to her child. As they came back to where Shad, Bull and the rest were standing, Two-Gun saw Ormsby strike Pence a violent blow on the chin, then, as the old man fell prone, calmly extract a thick package of papers from his pocket and transfer it to his own. Two-Gun wondered at Ormsby's action, but held his tongue.

Ormsby gave Two-Gun a meaning look and Farrell immediately assumed charge of the situation.

"I reckon you Diamond L birds know we mean business by this time," he said. "Now, we're a-goin' to leave yuh here to do as yuh damn' please, but if yuh'll take my advice yuh'll get to hell out of the Cottonwood Valley and hunt jobs with honest men. I reckon old Pence, there, can do as he pleases about stayin' or leavin'." He turned to the Swinging J riders. "Boys, I reckon we're a-goin' to hit it off toward the hills. I heard hosses a-runnin' that-a-way and I wouldn't be su'prised if we found one of them geezers got away and has taken Miss Forest with him. Leastwise, we're a-goin' to find out."

Old Pence scrambled weakly to his feet and glared at Two-Gun.

“I hope to hell yuh ketch ’em, then. That’s Cougar Evans on one of them hosses and he’ll shore pulverize anybody that tries to take ’im.”

Evidently Pence had not missed the papers Ormsby had taken from his pocket, for he did not mention them. One of the Diamond L riders, however, quickly cried:

“When yuh had yore row with this bozo, Pence, and he socked yuh on the chin, I reckon he picked yore pockets while yuh was sorta knocked out like. I saw him grab some papers outa yore coat.”

Pence’s face whitened swiftly and a look of terror came into his eyes as his hand swiftly sought his pocket and came away empty. Pantingly he came to his knees, crawling like a dog to Ormsby’s feet. He turned his face upward, all his bravado and insolence gone. Only terror and supplication now flared from his eyes and he grasped Blaze about the knees, pleadingly.

“Mister, for Lord’s sake, don’t take them papers. Honest, they ain’t mine. My gosh, man, if yuh don’t gimme ’em back I’ll be killed; gimme ’em, Mister, and I’ll never say a word about yore burn-in’ muh house or a damn’ thing. Oh, for cripe’s sake, don’t take ’em from me.”

“If you were an honest man, or if I felt that you could be trusted I would gladly return them to you, Pence,” Ormsby said gravely, unmoved by the other’s plea. “But you have been stringing along with a band of crooks and I believe the papers contain information that is vital to us. I

will do this, however; seeing that I took them from you forcibly, I promise you that in case there is anything in them that might incriminate you personally, I shall see you are not molested."

For an instant Pence looked relieved, then he let out a yell:

"But Henley'll have me killed; he'll ——"

"Shut up, yuh damn' fool," rasped a burly Diamond L rider. "Yo're a-talkin' too much."

Pence dropped his head, his face twisted in a hopeless grimace.

"I reckon I am," he muttered, then fell to crying, like any woman might have done.

Two-Gun spoke up:

"Come on, we're a-goin' in the direction them hosses took."

Ormsby had an inspiration. He drew Pence aside where the others could not hear.

"Listen, Pence," he said softly, "I know that you are one of the Henley lieutenants here in the Cottonwood Valley and that you have been helping to carry out their law-breaking orders. I believe the letters I took from you contain evidence that will help us to smash them. Now, if you will answer me just one question, and answer truly, I promise you that you shall not be harmed in any way whatsoever, not even by the Henley crowd, or if you prefer, you may have ample time to get thoroughly clear of this whole country before I use the letters. What say?"

"What's yore question?" mumbled Pence, wet-

ting his parched lips with his tongue and cringing before the fire in Ormsby's eyes.

“Was Miss Glade with Cougar Evans when he ducked from the burning house and rode off toward the hills?”

Old Pence considered the question carefully, then said:

“I'm a-takin' yore word, Mister, about them letters and muh own welfare, and I'll answer yuh this once; she was with him, shore enough, with a gag over her mouth and her hands tied behind her. Now, let me go.”

CHAPTER XV

CLIVE TAKES THE TRAIL

ORMSBY turned from Pence and joined Clive on the instant.

“I guess our work lies ahead of us, old man, back among the mountains. Old Pence says Cougar Evans has Miss Forest and that he rode away with her gagged and bound. It's up to us to get her.”

A terrible look came into Clive's face at Ormsby's words. It was as though his features had become a marble mask, so set they were, and his eyes held a glare none ever had seen there before. Swiftly Ormsby reached out, caught his hand and dropped a light forefinger on his raging pulse.

Clive jerked his hand free, angrily.

“I ain't sick, Blaze,” he said thinly, “that is, I ain't sick of body. I reckon there's somethin' went wrong in muh brain, though; leastwise, I got a feelin' up there that I'm a-goin' to kill Cougar Evans.”

Two-Gun was already assembling the Swinging J riders and now he cried:

“I reckon we better get a-goin', boys, 'cause Cougar is gainin' on us every minnit we waste here.”

“ You fellers ain't goin' after Cougar, none of yuh!”

It was Clive's voice, sharp and clear, dominant to its last vibration. The others looked swiftly toward him. His face had not changed its expression, save that the look in his eyes had softened to one of calm determination. He went on:

“ I'm a-goin' after Cougar muhse'f; onderstand? Nobody's goin' but me. The rest of you fellers get back to the ranch and keep yore eyes on things. Don't expect me till yuh see me. I reckon I won't be back until I find Forest, and nobody knows where Cougar'll head with her.”

“ But, Clive ——” Ormsby began, then grew silent under a gesture from Clive.

“ There ain't a bit of use argyfyin', Blaze. I'm a-goin' alone. I reckon mebbe yuh don't onderstand how I feel about this, old timer.”

Ormsby's face softened and he dropped an affectionate hand on Clive's shoulder.

“ I reckon I do, old man, and it shall be as you say. We'll go back to the ranch and we'll be waiting for you to show up with Miss Forest. Got plenty of shells for your six-gun?”

Clive nodded, already turning toward the rear of the bunkhouse where Thunder waited patiently.

Two-Gun came up to him, holding out his silver-mounted guns, butts first.

“ Tex,” he said, “ ever since I had these weepins made to order there ain't never be'n nobody but me had a hand on 'em. They shoot straighter'n a

crow flies at matin' time, or a c'yote runs, boy. Take 'em with yuh. Yuh can't miss Cougar with 'em. Go on, Tex, take 'em." His voice was pleading.

But Clive shook his head, lifting from its holster his own heavy .45 and spinning the cylinder.

"Nope," he said, "I thank yuh, Two-Gun, but I'm used to this baby and she shore sends her message where I tell 'er to. Cripes, I'd like to have yuh along, you and Blaze, but somehow I feel I got to attend to this thing alone, now that I know where she's gone and that only Cougar's with 'er."

He swung into the saddle and turned Thunder's head toward Pence.

"Say, Pence," he said, his voice level and hard, "yuh got any idee where Cougar'll head with that girl?"

"I s'pose he'll find his way into the Brindle Canyon country, down toward Mex, but 'less'n he's a-pointin' toward Brindletown, I can't say as I know where he'll fetch up."

Brindle Canyon! To Clive it meant a vast region isolated from all the world by reason of its inaccessibility — a literal haunt of frontier desperadoes, gamblers and killers. He had never been there, nor nearer to it than he was now, but strange tales about the place had reached even over into Texas, and he had heard them during his days as a Ranger. He straightened in his saddle, drew his belt in a notch, then turned toward his riders.

"Well, I'm on muh way, boys. Take care of

the ranch. If I don't come back yuh'll know Forest ain't a-comin' back either, in which case look up her folks; but I reckon I'll get her, if I have to shoot it out with every damn' gunman in the Brindle Canyon country."

He touched his heel to Thunder's ribs and the stalwart black darted like a flash down the long row of cottonwoods, heading into the southeast, out and across the Diamond L. The others watched him out of sight, then all but six began the weary trek back toward the Swinging J. The six, a little sheepishly, but nevertheless determinedly, took the direction Clive had gone.

Brindle Canyon was somewhere off across the southeastern Mogollons. It was probably fifty miles from Cottonwood Valley and because of the terrific condition of the trails that led there, it was impossible to reach in a single day's ride. At the best Clive could not figure how either himself or Cougar Evans could find the heart of that vast region before noon of the following day, even though they were constantly in the saddle.

He dashed rapidly across the Diamond L and onto the Bender acres. He knew his course would also carry him over the Circle Dot and that immediately after leaving Bud Hart's domain he would strike into the mountains, where travelling would be slow and the footing frequently too treacherous for him to remain in the saddle. He loosened the reins and Thunder responded by bounding forward eagerly.

He saw no one during his rapid dash across the Bender ranch, but Sled Fogarty barred his progress with uplifted hand as he spurred onto the Circle Dot.

“I reckon yo’re a-chasin’ somebody, Morgan,” Sled said. “If so, I can give yuh a tip. I see some buzzard a-ridin’ like hell-bent into Trigger Gulch ’bout a hour ago when I was over that-a-way roundin’ up some strays. Looked to me like he had somebody with ’im, too. Leastwise, he was a-leadin’ a hoss, and I reckon a gal was on the other animal.”

So Cougar was only an hour ahead. Clive thanked Sled swiftly and sped onward, across the Circle Dot.

Trigger Gulch, he had heard, was the easiest trail toward the Brindle Canyon country. If Cougar was going up the Gulch, then there was no doubt as to his ultimate destination. As he spurred ahead, Clive recalled vividly the many tales he had heard of the Brindle region; stories of a nest of outlaws who made the place their home; had, in fact, established a colony there with a saloon, a store and their private dwellings. But it was as much as a man’s life was worth to approach it, unless he were known to at least three of the denizens there.

Cougar, then, must have an acquaintance with the rustlers and killers who infested the country. Perhaps it was his intention to take Forest there and then hold her for ransom, a ransom that easily could mean loss of the Swinging J. Perhaps his

intentions toward her were even worse; the thought caused bitterness to swell in Clive's heart and, despite the rapid pace at which Thunder covered the ground, he felt he was being carried forward literally at a snail's pace. But he was too wise in horse lore and range lore to urge the noble black beyond his present efforts.

Vaguely he thought of the riders he had left behind, wondering if it would not have been better, after all, if he had brought them with him. If his journey ended in Brindle Canyon or Brindletown itself, then he would need help, and need it greatly. No man could stand alone against the hellions of that black hole and, sensing that this was true, his versatile mind turned from plans of violence with which it had been filled, to scheming strategies that he could use in getting Forest out of Cougar's grasp.

If he could overtake Evans, then all would be well. Clive's breath made a little whistling noise as he exhaled it on this thought. But Cougar had a start of an hour or more. It had been fully that length of time since Sled Fogarty had first spied Cougar and then, in turn, had met Clive. That meant that while the Swinging J man had another half-hour of riding before he entered Trigger Gulch Cougar was already in the confines of that narrow, jagged gash in the mountains, spurring toward the dividing summit, over which he would dash down toward the Brindle Canyon country.

Clive was wise in the ways of the range and

the mountains that hemmed it in. He knew, for instance, that Cougar, unless he were a fool, would be suspecting and expecting immediate pursuit; knew that Cougar, by the same token, would press forward without pause, killing the horses if need be to gain the infernal region he was heading toward. And, too, he knew that Cougar would be apt to blind his trail in order that pursuit might be misled and, finally, he knew that for the time being Forest would be safe, because Cougar would not dare to halt now to threaten or molest her.

But there was something that Clive did not know and that was the fact that stringing out behind him, far to the rear, but coming on easily, were Two-Gun Farrell, Blaze Ormsby, Spud Garrett, Wyoming Red Hargrave, Bull Ellerby and Shad Stevens, the six who had failed to accompany the others on the trek back to the Swinging J.

They had decided that Clive should not make his way into the Brindle Canyon region alone; that it was foolhardy for him to try it and that he should have help within immediate reach. But they knew he would be hurt and wrathful if he learned of their coming, so they were content to remain behind, out of earshot and eyesight, following his trail by picking up the signs he left as he travelled.

Thunder, spurning the ground, tore up great jagged patches of sand and stone-grit with his hoofs and Clive smoked innumerable cigarettes. Between the tracks of Thunder and Clive's burned

cigarette stubs the trail was plain and there could be no losing it.

Entering Trigger Gulch Clive let Thunder have his head and despite the steep trail and the treacherous footing, the tireless black swept onward at amazing speed. Ten miles up the jagged defile Clive saw something white lying in the sand-covered trail and swooped in his saddle, never slackening speed, and picked it up.

It was a twisted piece of white cloth that evidently had once formed a portion of a table cover and from its size and the manner in which it had been folded, it had been used as a bandage or as a bond; noting the wrinkled end, which told all too plainly that knots had been tied there, Clive arrived at once at the conclusion that this had been Forest's gag. Now that Cougar had her out of earshot and probably believed that pursuit was either far behind or had not yet started, the villain evidently had at least been merciful enough to free her of this humiliating appendage.

Clive dropped the cloth in the trail, forgetting it almost instantly, but it served as a marker for Two-Gun and Blaze, telling them, as it did, that Clive and his quarry were still pushing onward, directly ahead.

By nightfall Clive had reached the summit southeast of Trigger Gulch and was gazing off across a vast, mysterious region of shadows and lights, of painted peaks and jagged canyons — the entrance to Brindle Canyon itself. High up where

he was it still was light enough, and would be all the short Arizona night, but down below, where the trail pointed, it was too shadow-shrouded for anything to be distinguishable from that distance; however, he sensed that somewhere ahead, perhaps not more than two or three miles distant, were Cougar and Forest.

He was now thirty miles from Cottonwood Valley and from now on the trail would be at times virtually impassable. Much of his way he would make on foot, if accounts reaching his ears in the past were true, for it was said that there were places where no horse could go without constant danger of a slip that would send both animal and rider into oblivion; places, too, where the way was so steep that a horse could travel it only by virtue of a strong hand leading and coaxing it on. Gently, he touched the black's side and Thunder started easily down from the summit, heading into the shadows of the mysterious region below.

Constantly he watched ahead, hoping against hope that Cougar would stop for the night; hoping he would catch a glimpse of his quarry's campfire blazing upward through the blackness. But he saw nothing other than the brilliant moon shooting up out of the east and the low-hanging, white-hearted stars popping into being; doggedly, unmindful of his intense weariness, forgetful of hunger or thirst, he forged ahead.

In two hours he stopped at a tiny stream, brimming with icy water from the eternal snow-clad

peaks far away, and it was only when Thunder buried his nose in the cooling waters that Clive realized he himself was parched. Hating even to spare this small fraction of time, he swung from the saddle and dropped on his stomach, a scant yard upstream from the black, and filled himself. It came to him that he might be long in the saddle, so he took the canteen that all riders of the Arizona ranges carry at their saddles, emptied its lukewarm contents and refilled it with the sparkling, ice-cold waters of the stream. Thunder raised his head, his velvety muzzle dripping, and champed his jaws lightly on the bit. Clive swung into the saddle and they crossed the stream.

He had been gone from the spot not quite an hour when six riders, their jaws set and their faces tired looking, reached the stream.

The going became hard. The trail suddenly ended in almost a blank wall and up this Clive scrambled, gently talking to Thunder, coaxing him soothingly to the task of following. The willing black slid and pawed and dug his hoofs into the steep ascent, finally reaching the crest. Here, the trail was no better. If anything, it was more treacherous. In the gloom of the semi-night, the way seemed to lead directly along a narrow ridge top. It was not more than a foot wide, with great, yawning chasms whose depths disappeared in darkness, on either side. Clive remained on foot, holding Thunder's reins. For an hour they travelled in this manner, then the ridge broadened to the semb-

lance of a roadway, and the going again became fair.

Clive found himself wondering how Cougar had managed to force Forest across this dangerous portion of the trail; his blood turned icy when he visioned her, still bound to the horse she was riding, exposed to this terrific ordeal, unable to help herself, or to protect herself if the horse slipped. It was another incident in his score against Cougar Evans. Grimly, he rode onward.

All through the night, stumbling, sliding, fighting his way, he travelled, sometimes in the saddle, other times leading the black, but always going forward. Once or twice he believed he heard the sound of horses ahead, and on these occasions he strove desperately to hasten his progress, but always he had been unable to run down his quarry.

Day dawned in the canyons and with the first clearing away of the mists of night Clive looked about him. He was deep in the fastness of the illimitable mountains; towering peaks stalked upward toward the heavens on all sides while the trail he was following clung precariously to a steep, jagged mountain side. The ground had a peculiar brindle color, even the stones and the gigantic boulders displaying the same hue. He was, then, in Brindle Canyon, and the end of his journey, consequently, could not be much longer delayed.

The trail was leading downward, still clinging to the side of the canyon. To his left was a yawning chasm, fully two thousand feet deep. Across

from him was a wall of brindle rock and stone, almost perpendicular in his ascent toward the cerulean blue of the morning sky; it was the opposite side of the canyon. He wondered when he would catch sight of the outlaw nest he had heard about, and he speculated as to whether there actually was such a place. Somehow, he was inclined to doubt it, yet unless Cougar knew that food, water and shelter lay somewhere ahead in this vast, little known, impenetrable region, he hardly would have headed this way with a girl on his hands.

Suddenly he heard a roar above him and a great cataclysmic rumble of sound, climaxed by the shrill scream of a girl, and her voice shouting:

“Clive! Clive! Watch out!”

Instinctively he pulled hard on the reins, throwing Thunder back on his haunches. At the same time he lifted his face straight up the jagged, sloping wall that reared, impossible of ascent, above him.

A boulder was crashing downward, bounding high and ricocheting violently; in its wake came a cloud of lesser stones and dust. The murderous ensemble passed him, leaving him untouched. He had failed by a good forty feet to ride into its path.

But he had heard Forest's voice and thrilled to the very core he searched the rim of the wall above him. It was a good thousand feet to the top of that towering rampart. Through the tomb-like silence that followed the passage of the miniature avalanche, Clive heard a shout.

“Here I am, Morgan; come and get me,” said a taunting voice.

To his right, and apparently on a trail far above him he now distinguished two figures — Cougar Evans and Forest Glade. Evans was waving a mocking hand at him.

“I misjudged, or that rock would’ve got yuh, Morgan,” Cougar said, his voice carrying distinctly, for all the great height from which it came. “Yuh missed fire on the trail, I see; I figgered yuh would. When yuh come across that narrer ridge way back there near the crick, yuh orta turned sharp to yore right ’stead of crossin’ that razor-back of rock. That’s where I give yuh the slip. Yuh didn’t know I was watchin’ yuh back there, did yuh? I might’ve shot yuh, but I was afeared of the light and didn’t want to take no chances on missin’. Now, yuh can’t get up here and I reckon I’ll be in Brindletown afore yuh get steered right ag’in. If yo’re a-figgerin’ on comin’ there yuh better say yore prayers, cowboy, ’cause yuh’ll never leave it alive.”

Temporarily, Clive ignored Cougar. He lifted his voice in an anxious shout.

“Forest, dear, are yuh hurt?”

“I am safe so far, Clive,” her voice, clear and soft came back to him, “but, oh boy, if you love me, save me.”

“I’ll get yuh away from that dog if I have to tear Brindletown apart board by board,” he vowed, thrilled at her words, conscious of his great love

for her and aware in an all-pervading flash that she loved him.

“Yeh, Clive, dear,” mimicked Cougar, sarcastically, “I reckon if there’s any tearin’ apart to be did, it’ll be you what gets tored.”

“Cougar,” cried Clive, desperately, “if you will tell me how to get to yuh I will give yuh my word that I’ll not try to stop yuh from gettin’ away, if yuh will also free Forest.”

“Go to hell, Morgan; I reckon this gal’s worth a ranch and a pot of money to me and there’s a sweet bunch of hell-benders over in Brindletown that’ll help me to collect, too. Well, I’m shore sorry to have to leave yuh sudden like, but we got to be goin’. S’long.” He waved a flippant hand in a gesture meant to be sardonic and, with Forest beside him, disappeared.

Clive knew that had there been any manner in which he could have made the ascent of the canyon wall and gained the trail above, Cougar would never have spoken to him; unfamiliar as he was with the country, he felt a wave of despair rise in his heart. Somehow, he felt that he would save no time by riding back to the narrow ridge and taking the trail Cougar had followed from that point. He decided to ride ahead, trusting and praying that he would find some other way of reaching the higher ground.

Then it occurred to him that Brindletown without doubt would be somewhere around a valley in these mountains, near where there would be found

a supply of water. That being the case, the trail Cougar was following ought, in the very nature of things, to lead downward soon, for the outlaws' settlement must now be drawing very near. Hope flamed again in his heart as he rode onward.

The sun stood fairly overhead when the trail suddenly turned sharply to the right and stalked almost straight up the mountain side. Once more he was forced to alight and lead Thunder, aware of how futile it was to speculate on what the trails would do in this unknown, mysterious region. It was a half-hour before he was successful in getting himself and his mount to the crest of the summit that had blocked his way.

Once here outraged nature began to assert itself. Two nights and almost as many days in the saddle without food were beginning to tell on him. Despite himself he was forced to drop to the trail and rest. He swallowed great gulps of water from the canteen, then filled his high-crowned sombrero with the remainder and gave it to Thunder. In an hour he rose and swung into the saddle, somewhat rested, but fighting desperately against the sleep call that tugged at his eyelids.

At two o'clock he rounded a jutting spire in the trail and drew rein. A deep, broad valley opened before him, into which the trail seemed to lead. Thousands of cattle and a few sheep dotted the green-clad acres thus spread out before him, but there was, apparently, no house or other sign of life.

Puzzled, he glanced about him in all directions and then, far up the side of the mountain, five miles distant across the valley, he saw a cluster of 'dobe huts and a scattering of tents, the whole surrounded by a stockade. The place was built on an inshoot-ing bench in the mountain side and to reach it, it was necessary to follow a tortuous trail that led upward from the valley. The place was a veritable Gibraltar. Clive sensed instantly what it was.

"Brindletown," he said to himself, "and all hell couldn't get into it, I reckon."

A cluster of chokecherries beckoned to him and he rode among them, pulling off handfuls of the tart, puckery fruit and munching greedily. His thoughts, made thrice alert because of his nervous tension and loss of sleep, worked rapidly.

"There ain't a damn' bit of use tryin' to get into that place from the bottom, 'specially in daylight. Seems to me the sensible thing to do is wait till it's dark, then work round and above it and see if there's any trail from that direction. They won't hurt Forest yet, I reckon, 'cause if Cougar's a-figgerin' on gettin' ransom for her, he'll shore be a-wantin' to take good care of her for the time bein'. Well, Thunder," he said aloud, "I reckon you and me might as well get some rest while we can, 'cause it 'pears to me we're a-goin' to be two busy *hombres* come night time ag'in."

He dropped the saddle and bridle from the black and making a pillow of the equipage threw him-

self beneath the chokecherries and closed his eyes.

It was there, two hours later, that six tired-eyed, face-strained riders found him and without waking him turned loose their own mounts and lay down beside him.

CHAPTER XVI

BRINDLETOWN

A SHUDDERING, ululating wail shattered the silence of the valley and Clive sat up with a start, staring about him dumbly until memory returned like a flash to sear him with renewed anxiety. A white, glittering moon was almost directly overhead and with a reproachful groan he looked at his watch. It pointed to one o'clock — and he had slept since the middle of the afternoon!

“Dang' muh onery, no-account, lazy hide,” he rasped savagely as he gained his feet. “Here I be'n a-sleepin' like a no good yaller dog while Forest's in danger. If that c'yote hadn't 'a' let out that blast I reckon I'd be'n a-sleepin' still —”

His voice died as his eyes, now fully awake and alert to the scenes about him, fell on a number of horses that were grazing calmly beneath the chokecherries, near the spot where Thunder was nibbling daintily. Then for the first time he became aware of the slumbering forms sprawled at random points beneath the trees. Grimly he stared at them, dark anger contracting his brow; but for only a minute was this the case, then his face softened and a luminous light came into his eyes.

“Good old Blaze and Two-Gun; they just nacherally was afraid I'd get chawed up and they

struck out to see me safe through whatever fracas I was headin' into, and here I was a-aimin' to get riled up about it. Dang yore hide, Clive Morgan, yuh orta get down on yore hunkers and pass out thanks that yuh got such friends. Hell, I'm glad they're here."

He called softly to the sleeping men and with prodigious yawns and stretches they came to their feet. All save Two-Gun and Blaze were shame-faced at first, but Clive speedily made them aware of how welcome they were.

"By cripes, I'm so hongry I could just nacherally chaw the tail off 'n a mad he-wolf," plaintively wailed Wyoming Red, pressing a mournful hand over the general region of his stomach.

"Hunh, I'm hongrier 'n that," avowed Spud. "Me, I could eat the cherries right off 'n my grandmaw's old straw bonnet this very minute."

"I wish to criminy I'd be'n borned a hoss," lamented Shad. "Lookut them danged animiles here, would yuh? Munchin' away on that short grass and feelin' proud as a buzzard amongst a flock of chicken hawks. Them hosses can always find somethin' to eat. By cripes, we got to get somethin' purty soon or I'm goin' down in that valley, shoot me a steer and have muhse'f a steak if I'm hung for a cow thief the next minute."

"And I'll go with yuh and help yuh eat the steak," said Bull.

"I reckon we'll all be goin' down there in a jiffy," said Clive. "I don't know whether you

fellers seed it or not, but I sized up that there Brindletown from here and to reach her we got to cross this valley and get up that mounting over yonder. There ain't no such thing as gettin' in the place, either, 'less 'n yuh got a army or a ton of dynamite with yuh. I guess we got to do some figgerin', fellers, if we do Forest any good. From what I be'n able to see, it 'pears to me our best bet lays above that place, on the rim of the overhangin' wall."

"We speculated on that very thing when we had our first glimpse of the place ourselves, Clive," Ormsby replied. "Two-Gun thinks that if we make the heights back of the town we may be able to find a way down into it, though it probably will be dangerous. But, at least, we may be able to see what is going on in there from such a high point of vantage. Meantime, I'm as hungry as all these others combined, and I'm going to rustle myself some grub. Tell you what, there are sheep down in that valley, so let's go down and have mutton for dinner."

"And let them bozos in Brindletown see our fire and know there's a gang of us on their trail?" Clive wanted to know.

"Aw, shucks, Tex; we can shield our fire, all right. Me, I'm hongrier than I ever thought a man could be and live, and while I'm dead ag'in woolies and mutton, right now I could eat a pickled rattlesnake and wash it down with cyanide," said Shad.

Two hours later, in a tiny gully that stalked back into the mountain, they dined on mutton, tender, but ungarnished and unseasoned; to their ravenous appetites it was food fit for kings. The meal ended and their stomachs stilled of their erstwhile clamorings, the towering mountain that held Brindletown and the outlaws' nest itself did not look half so formidable or awesome as it had two hours earlier.

They crossed the valley with caution and for the first time since he had come to Arizona Clive was bitter against the brilliant, low-hanging moon. He was fearful that it would reveal the seven to watchful eyes in Brindletown and because of this they were unusually careful in making their way through the five-mile width of the lush-grass to the foot of the mountain on the other side. Once there, however, they believed they had been unobserved, though they could not, of course, be certain. Looking up at the formidable heights, Blaze Ormsby said softly:

“Great things are doing through the world this night, methinks. ’Twas on a night like this, mayhap, that Wolfe scaled the heights of Quebec, and surely ’twas a night like this when Leander swam the Hellespont. Can we, then, fail in conquering this mount of Brindletown and rescuing fair Forest, when all history furnishes us with examples of what other valiant knights have done?”

“Good Godfrey, Tex; Blaze has gone loco,” whispered Shad.

Two-Gun Farrell dropped lightly from his horse.

"I reckon there never was a hoss that could climb up there and me, I'm a-goin' to let mine stay here and graze his dang' fool head off. We'll have to climb that jasper on foot, that's all."

The others realized the truth of Two-Gun's assertion and stripped their horses before staking them out with lariats. Clive and Two-Gun led the way up the side of the mountain.

"We got to get off 'n this trail and dodge Brindletown on the way up, and she shore is goin' to be hell when we hit them straight up and down places 'way up there in the air," he said.

For an hour they toiled upward, struggling often to maintain footing, but eventually they found themselves on a level with Brindletown, and somewhat to the right of the place. But the hardest part of their task now confronted them.

The mountain at this point became almost a sheer wall, marred and scarred in a thousand and one places by the action of wind and weather. It was to these myriads of tiny crevices that they owed their eventual success, for by using these gashes for foot and hand holds and by taking frequent rests, they finally pulled themselves over the rim of the wall and threw themselves down, gasping. Life came back to their worn and strained bodies slowly and it was some little time before they felt fit to set out and conquer whatever might lie ahead.

Dawn was streaking the eastern skies before they recovered their wind. They crept along the rim of

the towering hanging wall until they judged they were fairly above Brindletown, then Clive stuck his head over the edge. The others joined him.

Brindletown lay a thousand feet below them. It consisted of a dozen 'dobe huts, four or five tents and a half-'dobe, half-tent structure larger than any of the other buildings. Judging by its location and its evident importance to the place, it was a sort of general headquarters for the gang that infested the nest. A purling spring gushed from a clump of small trees at one end of the place. Rumor had said the rustlers had a saloon and general store, but this evidently was not true.

Around the buildings on three sides was a 'dobe wall, formed in the nature of a stockade. The fourth side of the place was protected by the wall of the mountain. Quickly, every man of the Swinging J outfit realized that the only way they possibly could get into Brindletown would be by using a thousand-foot rope. That, obviously was not to be thought of.

As they watched they saw signs of life beginning to stir below. Figures emerged from the huts and converged on the large central structure. They saw a man mount the wall and apparently gaze off toward the valley, as though he were using a field glass.

It seemed evident that Cougar had arrived, else this sentinel was merely performing a daily function necessary to the safety of the denizens of the outlaws' nest. Other figures appeared and moved

toward the large structure. After a time it seemed the entire populace must by now have converged there.

“Well, we’re here, and by cripes I can’t see what good it’s a-goin’ to do us. If I was a ant or a buzzard I reckon I could get into that damn’ place, but bein’ a two-laiged hooman I don’t reckon I can get any closer ’n I am right this minute.”

It was Shad, and he spoke lugubriously.

“Two-Gun,” Ormsby murmured, “what do you suppose would happen if I were to empty my six-gun down into Brindletown?”

“Nothin’ much, I don’t reckon,” Farrell responded. “The man don’t live that could shoot worth a damn’ aimin’ a thousand feet downward, and yore six-gun wouldn’t do no damage, ’less it was by accident. I reckon mebbe we could pester hell out of ’em and like as not make ’em keep under cover, but that wouldn’t do us no good nor get us no results. Nope, we got to figger out somethin’ besides six-guns from where we’re a-settin’.”

Clive looked around toward them, a flash in his steady eyes.

“Then, Two-Gun, what do yuh s’pose would happen if I was to heave a boulder down there?”

Two-Gun thwacked his thigh with a heavy palm and came the nearest to chortling any there had ever heard him.

“Yuh got a idee now that beats everything else all holler,” he cried. “That shore is the ticket,

but for cripe's sake, we want to be shore we ain't a-heavin' no rocks at the house where Miss Forest is bein' cooped up."

"I don't reckon she's in that big one," said Clive thoughtfully, "and I betcha I can take a fifty-pound rock and peg that place plumb center, first try."

"Then do it, damn it, and don't talk no more about it," said Spud, his fiery, pugnacious nature yearning for action and chafing at their delay. "If yuh don't, by cripes I will."

Ormsby raised a hand.

"Wait," he said. "I think we shall learn right now where Miss Forest is sheltered."

They looked downward, following a finger he was now pointing, and they saw Forest led from a hut at the extreme lower end of Brindletown, and into the larger structure. Clive turned to the others.

"I reckon we ain't a-goin' to get anywhere onless we start somethin', and while they got Forest in there let's figger this thing out. First, I'm askin' you *hombres* a question. S'posin' I'd heave a dozen of these rocks down there and stampede that crowd. What'd happen?"

"Any damn' fool can answer that, cowboy," grinned Spud, "and this 'n 'll do it. Them fellers would skedaddle hell-bent down that trail and into the valley if their houses started tumblin' around 'em."

"Ezackly," said Clive, "and while they was

a-runnin' we'd be a-settin' up here like a bunch of old women at a quiltin' bee, and them jaspers 'd get clean away."

Spud gave a start and Ormsby nodded, following Clive's thought closely. The ex-Ranger resumed:

"All of which means we got to get some system to this. Now, here's my idee. I figger one man can roll so many of them boulders down into Brindletown that he can drive out their whole damn' gang. I don't reckon there is more'n twenty or mebbe twenty-five. Well, that's more'n we can mebbe tackle successful like, but rather'n have their town all smashed up they might be willin' to trade Forest, or let her meander down that mounting by her lonesome, where we could pick her up. But anyhow, regardless of that, I reckon while one of us rolls boulders the other six can work down where we can pot-shot that trail sort of easy like and make life a reg'lar little hell for them birds when they come pilin' out that gate in the 'dobe wall."

"I figgers yo're the brains of this crowd after all, Tex," opined Two-Gun.

"Don't shoot them compliments too quick, Two-Gun. S'posin' they start hurtin' Forest to get even with us? Then what?"

"That is a contingency we must take care of when it arrives, Clive," broke in Blaze. "Right now, the thing to do is start the ball rolling. Just as soon as they take Miss Forest back to her hut,

as they no doubt will, we can act. Now let me amplify your plan.”

“If that means yo’re a-goin’ to help it like, shoot,” responded Clive.

Ormsby smiled.

“Designate one of us to remain here. The rest will work downward to points of vantage along the trail and when they are set and ready, the one who remains here will start to roll the boulders. If it happens that they all crowd into the building holding Forest in the knowledge that we will not harm her, the only thing left for us to do is besiege them. We are out, they are in. We can live indefinitely off the cattle and sheep in the valley. Sooner or later the inmates of Brindletown will be starved into giving up. If, as we suspect, they start down the mountain toward safety, every mother’s son of us must get *two* men, and get them *pronto!* That will cut them down nearer to our own strength if it comes to a shoot-out.”

“Who’s a-goin’ to stay here and chuck them stones?” asked Shad.

“You are,” said Clive promptly.

“Like hell, I am,” rasped Shad. “I’m a-goin’ down there where I can sling lead. I ain’t no shucks at throwin’ stones, anyhow. Why, muh old pap told me once that I couldn’t hit a barrel if I was inside and had both ends and the bunghole closed tight.”

“I reckon yo’re a-figgerin’ mebbe I’ll do the

honors with them rocks,” sarcastically cut in Spud Garrett. “Well, I ain’t, and that’s that. I’m a-goin’ down where there’s a chance to see some action, that’s me.”

“Well, none of yuh need try wishin’ the damn’ job on me,” said Wyoming Red.

“Only one way to settle it, boys,” said Blaze Ormsby. He picked up a handful of splintered shale from the ground and carefully selected seven pieces, which he placed in his towering-crowned sombrero and held above his head.

“There are seven small stones in my hat,” he said. “One has a tiny white streak through it. The remainder are the same brindle colored stuff that you see throughout this whole region. We shall all draw and the man who picks out the stone with the white streak stays here and rolls the boulders. That fair?”

“I reckon she be,” opined Spud, and he drew the first stone.

“Yipee-e-e-e,” he cried. “She’s brindle as hell; ain’t a white spot on ’er.”

Two-Gun, Clive and Wyoming Red each drew brindle stones, then Bull Ellerby drew forth the one with the white streak. He cast it aside with a curse, then looked about him.

“Well, I’m ’lected, I reckon, but afore the rest of yuh buzzards go down there for the soft end of this game, yuh got to help me roll my ammynition into place.”

In twenty minutes they had five score boulders,

varying in weight from fifty to two hundred pounds, perched along the rim of the wall at points of vantage from where, following a heave, they would hurtle downward on their missions of destruction.

“Now,” said Clive, flinging the moisture from his brow with a calloused forefinger, “yuh’ll be able to see us most of the time and after we get set yuh can start yore ball a-rollin’ whenever yuh dang’ please. Only, be careful that yuh don’t get one of them stones on that hut where Forest is, or near her in case they bring her out and make a run for it.”

Bull flexed the muscles in his powerful arms and turned to look over the rim, gauging the distance.

“Yuh can trust me, I reckon,” he said, and Clive was satisfied.

As the others made their way down the wall, Bull sought a club to use as a lever and finally tore one from the butt of a dead *palo verde*. With this in hand and his primeval ammunition ready, he resumed his watchful waiting. In an hour he saw two men lead Forest from the central building and take her back to her hut.

Far below, and toward his left, he made out scattered dots that crouched behind jagged outcroppings in the wall. He sensed that the six from the Swinging J were in their places. He walked to a two-hundred-pound boulder and thrust his club under it, lifting gently. Carefully he gauged the amount of force he wished to put behind it, then heaved mightily.

Like a meteor the heavy boulder hurtled downward, touching no portion of the wall as it dropped. But Bull had not given it quite the start he had intended and it fell a little short of the large structure, which was his mark. With a roaring crash that reached to his eager ears, the stone dropped squarely in the thoroughfare that spanned the outlaws' nest.

Hardly had it struck before another and lighter boulder was on its way. Bull had seen the other was falling short and now, seizing a fifty-pound rock in his brawny arms he lifted it high above his head and cast it straight out from him, watching with fascinated eyes as it dropped.

Fairly and squarely on the very edge of the roof it struck, crashing into the central building as though the structure had been built of paper. It hurtled among the ranks of the startled occupants, who were tumbling outside as the result of the first dinning crash in the street. Ruin and death followed, for the boulder crushed the life out of three outlaws, maimed two others and completely demolished the front of the house.

Close behind followed another light stone, sent forth with all the strength of Bull Ellerby's mighty arms. It crashed through in the wake of its predecessor and two more men fell victims. Then the outlaws scattered, the sounds of their startled yells and cries reaching clearly to the canyon rim.

Warm with his efforts and his blood tingling with the success of his work, Bull now began to heave

stones with methodical precision, choosing targets in all directions, careful only that no stone fell near the hut wherein Forest was confined.

The outlaws made a pell-mell dash for the gate and crashed through, storming out onto the trail, where they paused and looked upward. Bull tried with a twenty-pound stone to reach them, but his effort succeeded only in making a gap in the 'dobe wall. Seeing this, the outlaws now stood their ground, convinced that he was powerless to hurt them further.

Arms were lifted and pointed; Bull could tell the men below were discussing him, no doubt taking him for Clive, and already planning how best to storm the canyon wall and either drive him off or kill him. He chuckled at what evidently was their surprise over the method of attack, over this disillusionment that came with the ending of their dream of security in Brindletown. Calmly, Bull heaved another stone. He saw it strike the hut next to the one that quartered Forest. It crashed through the roof in a cloud of dust and a din of noise.

Suddenly two figures ran into the roadway. Bull recognized them instantly, and thrilled. It was Forest and a man was dragging her toward the 'dobe wall; Cougar Evans, it was, and Bull cursed him heartily, albeit fruitlessly. He held his fire temporarily, unwilling to risk Forest's life among the debris that flew in all directions when a stone crashed, but as Cougar and Forest made the gate, Bull, who now had the range of all the houses

below, hurled a boulder onto the hut that had held the girl, watched it demolish it, then paused to see what was coming next.

He saw several men leave the trail and start for the wall, as though preparing to storm up the treacherous place and attack him. He wondered what Clive and the others were doing, and why they had not gone into action. He was answered almost on the instant.

A rattling volley of shots and slumping figures among the outlaws carried to him an unmistakable message that the fight was on. The outlaws, surprised for a second time in a comparatively short time, stood temporarily at a loss. Then as another blast from the Swinging J riders cut down their ranks they opened a furious fusillade on the boulders that sheltered Clive and the others.

Bull could see Cougar Evans, still clinging to Forest, hastening down the trail into the valley; he was aware, of course, that none of the riders from the Cottonwood Valley would fire where he might hurt the girl.

"Hell's bells," grated Bull. "After all our work is that damn' c'yote a-goin' to get away with her ag'in?"

It seemed so, for while the fight in the trail continued to wax hot Cougar and Forest kept on downward toward the valley. The girl was resisting, but her captor was literally dragging her along.

From their shelter behind the rocks the Swinging J men were playing havoc in the ranks of the outlaws and the latter, sensing that while they had the

benefit of numbers their plights were hopeless under the circumstances, beat a hasty retreat back inside the 'dobe walls. Bull, watching, prepared to rout them out again with more boulders.

As he straightened up, a rock in his powerful hands, he saw a form streak down the trail in the wake of Cougar and Forest; saw the figure leaping recklessly ahead, covering ground with an abandon that was marvellous in view of the fact that a slip or a mis-step at high speed would precipitate him into a chasm and land him at the bottom, a thousand feet below, with a shattered body. Bull recognized the leaping, running form.

"That's Tex," he told himself. "He's a-goin' after Cougar, and I bet a dollar ag'in a horned toad's toe-nails he gets him this time." He let his boulder fly.

He heard three quick shots and realized it was a signal. Looking downward he could make out someone motioning and watching closely he saw he was being beckoned below. Thankfully, he seized one more boulder, hurled it and watched it scatter the outlaws at the gate, then calmly set about tilting as many stones over the rim at one time as he could.

The effect was startling. Like an avalanche they roared downward, carrying part of the wall with them. Grimly he set about the task of joining those below. When he reached them Two-Gun said: "Tex is streakin' it for Cougar and the gal. We're a-goin' to get our hosses and try to pick 'em up."

CHAPTER XVII

“DRAW, DAMN YUH!”

CLIVE followed Cougar Evans down the hill without thought for the menacing bullets that streamed after him from the outlaws who were crouching behind the shattered 'dobe wall. He gave no heed to the treacherous footing of the trail. Evans had only a short start and he was handicapped by reason of Forest resisting him all she could. Clive was positive that the time had finally come when he and Cougar would have it out and the thought fired his blood as nothing else had ever done, save only Forest's words back in the mountains — “Oh boy, if you love me, save me!”

The memory of her plea was engraved on his brain ineradicably, and the words echoed now in his ears as he plunged downward in the wake of his quarry. His only worry was that Cougar, seeing he was going to be overtaken, would do some harm to Forest. But this he must chance.

Ahead of him, only a short distance, he glimpsed the pair, Evans still running swiftly and jerking the girl along cruelly; in this manner he overcame her efforts to resist him. But Clive knew he was gaining, and gaining rapidly. As nearly as he could judge, he would catch them just about where

the trail came out into the valley and left the mountain. He increased his efforts.

Once Cougar looked back; he saw that Clive was catching up with him. Immediately he strove to increase his own pace. Rapidly the bottom of the mountain drew near and in another five minutes Clive would surely be on his prey. Cougar, looking back a second time, seemed suddenly to realize this and then he took what was, to his distorted mind, the only way out.

He raised his arm, clenched his fist and deliberately struck the girl on the point of her jaw, felling her and knocking her completely unconscious. Thus freed of his hampering burden he bounded ahead and at doubly-increased speed, sure that the girl's plight would halt his vengeful pursuer and give him ample time in which to escape.

Clive reached Forest's side and with a little moan of anguish gathered her in his arms. Her face was white and a blue lump was swelling rapidly where the fist of Cougar had landed. Her eyes were closed and she was breathing feebly. Frantically he worked with her, calling to her in endearing terms, straining her against his tumultously beating heart.

And thus they were when the others reached them. Ormsby calmly thrust Clive aside while he bent over Forest. Quickly he examined her.

“The damn' brute knocked her cold,” he said, after a moment. “He did it scientifically, too; struck her squarely where the carotid comes over

the ridge of the jaw, jolting the blood into her brain and producing unconsciousness. But, save for a sore face, it will not hurt her. Here, Clive, place her feet a little uphill and her head somewhat downhill. So; now leave her there. She'll be around fit as a fiddle in a jiffy."

His hand was holding hers and his forefinger was touching her pulse as he spoke. He smiled up into Clive's anxious eyes.

"Don't worry, Clive, old man," he said softly. "She isn't hurt; on my word."

"Then I'm a-goin' to get Evans," and Clive rose to his feet, grim resolve in every line of his features. "Take care of her, Blaze, and don't let her out of yore sight. Make it straight for the ranch. I reckon I'll breeze in that-a-way later; but just now, I've got somethin' to attend to and I'm a-follerin' Cougar if I have to cross every damn' hill in these parts and chase him clean down into Mex. S'long."

And he was off like a shot. Evans, he knew, had gained a respite by reason of striking and knocking out Forest, and by this time he probably had saddled a horse and was streaking away, none could say where. Clive strove to calm his racing thoughts and stopped deliberately in the trail the while he looked about him. Then he saw a movement below him, and to his left. It was Evans, on a horse, and heading south.

Far off the mountains rose up like a wall on all sides, save for a single gash almost fairly in the

middle of the valley's end. It was apparent that Cougar was heading for this. Clive immediately laid out his course in his mind, and hurried onward. He hastened to where Thunder, rested and contented, was grazing calmly. Three minutes later Clive was storming off in the path of Cougar, Thunder straining as he had never strained before.

And now began a chase that was destined to live in the annals of the historic West for years; for Cougar had taken for his mount a stolen animal that had won fame far and near for endurance and speed, and try as he would Clive did not seem to be able to close the gap between them. Three miles apart they swept gustily into the mountains and stormed up toward the pass that opened through to the south. All day long they rode, on and on, through the pass and down the southern side of the slope.

Night came on and found them still riding, little change in the distance that separated them. At midnight Clive saw the lights of a tiny mining camp. He paused briefly before the open door of a saloon and hailed a miner who stood outside.

“Did yuh see a *hombre* foggin' through here lately, old timer, like he was tryin' to beat all hell a-gettin' somewheres?”

“I reckon I did,” came the answer. “He must 've planned on goin' some distance, too, 'cause he stopped long enough at the Chink's place to grab a piece of beef and some bread. Yuh after 'im?”

Instead of answering, Clive waved a friendly,

thankful hand and touched his heels to Thunder's ribs. At dawn he followed Cougar's own lead and bought food at a restaurant in still another mining camp, then after watering Thunder lightly, urged the noble animal ahead.

"I reckon if we don't come in sight of him by noon, old hoss, I'll stop long enough for yuh to get some eats and take a breathin' spell, but by cripes, he can't keep a-goin' forever on that hoss of his 'thout restin' him, neither, and yuh ain't never seen one yet that could beat yuh at the long distance game, have yuh?" He rubbed the black's neck with an affectionate, soothing hand.

At ten o'clock he was out of the southern slope of the mountains and crossing a cattle ranch. At the ranch house he found a large, blooded horse, head drooping, quivering, almost dead on his feet.

"I just got that hoss traded me for a piece of crow-bait that a geezer said he wanted; feller that come in a-ridin' hell bent," a grizzled foreman told Clive. "Now, I reckon yo're a-chasin' him."

"Which way 'd he go?" Clive asked.

"He was headin' south of here. Like as not yuh'll run onto him in Sigsbee, 'bout forty mile from here. I don't reckon that hoss I traded him will carry him any further 'n that."

Clive rested Thunder at the ranch until three in the afternoon. Five hours he allowed the black, and five only, then he was in the saddle again. The splendid animal, despite the terrific race he had made the previous day and night, seemed to

have recovered fully, and at nightfall Clive rode into Sigsbee.

He found Cougar had arrived only three hours earlier and had lost a precious hour finding another horse. Finally, he had been able to pick up one and, with a two-hour lead, was off once more, still heading south.

“He’s makin’ for Mexico, shore as hell,” Clive rasped in his parched throat. “Well, I’ll get him if I have to foller him clear down to Panykaw.”

At nightfall, two days later, Clive rode into a nondescript little town that set squarely on the international boundary. He had traced Cougar without once having missed the trail, and so far Evans had used five different horses. Thunder was now showing the strain of the race. His ribs stood out under a coat that had been a soft, velvety black, but which was now a gray mud formed from a mixture of lathery sweat and dust. His proud head drooped, but his great, valiant heart still was willing and had Clive urged, Thunder would have continued to carry on until he dropped in his tracks.

Clive was anxious now about Thunder’s welfare and was considering seriously leaving the horse in this place, while he either bought or hired another animal with which to continue the race. But he was saved the trouble.

A wizened man with shrivelled countenance and barren pate watched him ride up to the tie-rack in front of a building labelled International Saloon.

As Clive dismounted this man chuckled and advanced.

“I’ll bet a dollar I can tell what you are doing here, Mister,” he said. “You are after a fellow who rode in here about two hours ago. Aren’t you, now?”

Immediately Clive grasped him, recognizing his type; an Eastener, down on his luck and degenerated into a typical saloon rat. His was a familiar figure in the border cities and towns.

“There’s a double-eagle in it for yuh if yuh tell me where to find that feller,” he said.

The other looked crestfallen.

“He is in town, Mister, but I don’t know where. This is Golfornia, you know, and half of it is in Mexico. Likely as not, he is on the other side now, for no one has heard of him leaving here. At that, I don’t imagine he could. You see, his horse was all in; could hardly stand up, and there aren’t any for sale in this man’s town. Those who have horses here hang onto them in case they have to depart rather suddenly. Say, this is a bad town, Mister.”

Impatiently, Clive thrust a gold piece in the other’s hand.

“What do yuh mean it’s bad?” he asked.

“Why, just what I said. Spook Spencer, Digger Wade, Three-Finger Smith and a lot more gunmen run this place and there’s a shooting here at least twice a week. If the bird you are after is a friend of the fellows I just named, I give you my

word you would better watch yourself, or you will be bumped off *pronto*.”

The man hurried away and Clive whistled softly. The men the old fellow had named were well known all over the West as gunmen and desperadoes who stopped at nothing to gain their ends. If Cougar Evans was a friend of such men, then Clive had his task cut out for him — a task that would be well nigh impossible of fulfilling.

It looked as though there were friendships here, else why had Cougar ridden this far? Unless he felt he could safely make a stand here, why had he chosen Golfornia as his goal? Clive scouted the theory that Cougar could not obtain a horse and had halted involuntarily. It was not plausible.

Cougar, Clive realized fully, was afraid of the Swinging J foreman. He had proved this by his mad flight. Possibly memories of what had happened to Coldwater, Clem Jacobs and others of the Cottonwood Valley rustlers had inspired this fear, but at any rate it was genuine. Therefore, unless Cougar felt that he was safe here from Clive’s vengeance, he assuredly would have continued on into Mexico and made good his escape into the vast, mysterious reaches of the land below the Rio Grande.

Clive turned Thunder’s head and swung lightly into the saddle.

“I reckon I’m in for it, old hoss,” he told the intelligent animal. “Cougar just nacherally yanked me into a damn’ trap here, it seems, and

it begins to look as if I might have to shoot muh way out. But that ain't a-going to keep me from makin' yuh comfortable, old timer. I'm a-goin' to find yuh a place and arrange for yore board and room, and yo're a-goin' to stay right here until yo're damn' good and rested or I've cashed in muh chips. Yuh got to fill up them holler places in yore ribs, hoss, and if we gets out of this thing together, yuh can bet yore old chin-whiskers I'll never treat yuh this-a-way ag'in."

An hour later he left the livery stable, having seen Thunder thoroughly rubbed down, fed, bedded and given water. He walked cautiously along the single street of the place, through the middle of which ran the international line. A man might stand in Mexico, shoot him down in the United States, and get away before the combined town authorities could act; but that was a chance he felt he had to take.

He wondered where Cougar was keeping himself, and when he reached the first saloon on the American side of the line he looked cautiously within. Cougar was not there; neither were any of the gunmen Clive had been warned against, for the Swinging J rider would have recognized all of them from former experiences he had had with them while still a Texas Ranger. Up the entire length of the American side he worked a careful way, sheltered by the gloom, but in none of the half-dozen saloons he visited did he find trace of Cougar.

Crossing the street to the Mexican side at the upper end of the thoroughfare he started back along the line of straggling buildings. It seemed the life and ribaldry of the place were on the side where flew a ragged flag denoting the land was ruled by Emperor Porfirio Diaz. He felt that here, if at all, he would find his man. And he did.

In the Golfornia Emporium he saw Cougar. Three men were with him, drinking and laughing. But Evans was not laughing. He looked worn and haggard, strained and tired. His companions Clive recognized instantly. They were Three-Finger Smith, Digger Wade and Spook Spencer. Three-Finger was a notorious Texas gunman, Spook had killed a half-dozen men and Digger was an outlaw who had plied his craft successfully in both the territories of Arizona and New Mexico.

Clive drew his .45 and spun the cylinder. It worked smoothly, and the heavy hand-grip fitted his palm perfectly. He dropped the gun back in its holster, drew his belt a notch tighter and squared his shoulders. He hooked his right thumb in his belt, letting his left hand hang low and wide and at his side. He thrust open the swinging, shoulder-high door, and stepped inside.

Three-Finger Smith saw him immediately, but stood quietly, watching. He said something in a low voice to Cougar and the latter whirled swiftly. His face went the color of marble as his eyes met Clive's. Swiftly Spook Spencer and Digger Wade

dropped in beside him, while Three-Finger maintained his original position.

“Yo’re here, are ye?” rasped Cougar, his eyes flaring with hate and a sudden lust to kill. He seemed to take courage in the proximity of the three gunmen.

“Yes, Evans, I’m here,” said Clive, his voice level and cold. “I reckon yuh got some of yore friends with yuh, but that don’t make no difference between me and you. I said I’d get yuh and I’m here to keep muh word.”

Calmly he gazed over the quartet, then his jaw squared and his eyes gleaming, he cried:

“Draw, damn yuh!”

Spook Spencer was the first to move and his white, womanly hand flashed for his gun. Clive had watched coolly, fully aware that he faced not Evans’ gun alone, but four of the fastest six-shooters in the West. He had a feeling that he was about to die, yet he was not sorry. He was dying in a great and wonderful cause. He was dying because he was avenging the woman he loved, the woman Evans had kidnaped, brutally dragged through the tortures of hell, then had deliberately struck in the face with his fist. He saw Spencer move and sensed that Cougar and Digger Wade also were going into action.

Clive’s hand dropped and he used an old-time gunman’s trick that only Two-Gun Farrell knew he was aware of. His six-gun never left its holster. Instead, the butt of his gun was forced downward

and the barrel automatically forced upward. His holster had no bottom and the naked end of the barrel had paralleled his thigh. Now as the holster tilted and the barrel came up the muzzle roared and after that it kept roaring.

Spook's gun never got quite half-way up. It was, in fact, barely out of its holster when Clive's bullet struck him. Throwing up his hands, Spook fell forward on his face. His fall saved Clive's life, for his body lurched against Digger Wade as the latter fired and the bullet meant for Clive went through the hat of Three-Finger Smith, disconcerting the latter, who also was going now for his gun.

And thus does fate work in the cause of the just. Clive's first shot killed one enemy and for an instant rendered two others helpless, therefore he had only to beat Cougar to keep his vow.

Cougar, seeing Clive's hand drop, had gone for his gun and now it was out and spouting. It sounded twice and at each crashing report Clive's solidly-planted body shook; then a tiny hole seemed to leap as though from a magician's wand and grow squarely between Cougar's eyes. Evans dropped, sprawling his length across Spencer.

Clive's third bullet struck Digger Wade in the shoulder and the latter spun heavily, sitting down and dropping his gun, the while he mouthed venomous curses. Then Three-Finger Smith fired and Clive's knees buckled under him. He was dropping, but even as he fell his gun left its holster,

now clear for all to see, and snapped upward. It roared once, twice, and Three-Finger fell, shot once in the heart and once where his eyebrows parted.

The whole affair had taken less than three seconds. Clive hit the floor gently and his shoulders sagged against the wall. Wearily he looked about him, suddenly feeling old and tired, noting the startled awe with which those who were assembled there gazed at him from their points of safety about the room. A voice suddenly yelled:

“If anybody shoots at that bozo ag’in, he settles with me, and it’s Big Tim Riley as says it.”

Clive saw a giant of a man stride out from behind the bar, gun in either hand, and advance. As he passed the fallen quartet on the floor he spurned Three-Finger with his foot, then took his stand squarely in front of Clive, looking down at him.

“I don’t know who yuh be, Mister, but any *hombre* that can shoot hell out of Cougar Evans, Three-Finger Smith and Spook Spencer and put Digger Wade on the sick list all at one settin’ is shore a man after my own heart, and I’m backin’ yore play as she lays, regardless of what she’s all about.”

“Then I reckon yuh better see how bad I’m busted up,” Clive said with a wan smile, feeling suddenly weak.

Then he was aware of another figure beside him — the wizened little man who had talked with

him when he had first ridden into Golfornia. The man's fingers were running beneath his shirt with a touch somehow suggestive of the physician.

“I used to be a doctor,” he said in a low voice. “That was before booze and women got me. Let me see your hurts.”

Swiftly he ripped open Clive's shirt, baring his white, muscular shoulders; revealing to the on-lookers where three bullets had struck him. One had caught him in the left arm, plowing through the bunched biceps; another had struck him in the shoulder, too high to be dangerous, but one of them, probably the last, threatened to have dangerous consequences. It had plowed into Clive's neck and had left a jagged, gaping wound, a little to the right of the wind-pipe, and barely missing the carotid.

In a little while the wizened man stood up. He took swift command of the situation.

“Your arm won't bother you much, and that wound in your shoulder isn't at all dangerous, but that shot in the neck means you must go to bed and stay there. It's bad, cowboy, and I'm not over sanguine about it. Think you can —” His voice died out for he saw Clive's eyes close and his face go white. Instantly the little man became all action. He turned to Big Tim Riley.

“I heard you say you were backing this man's play, Tim,” he cried. “If that is so, get some one to help me put this fellow to bed; have others fetch plenty of water — hot and cold, and I'll need clean

bandage cloths. Tell someone to run to my tent and get a little black satchel they'll find under my bed. Haven't used anything out of it for years, but I've got to do my best or this man 'll die. Hustle, now, or he'll cash in right here."

Big Tim caught the little man's spirit and his great, bellowing voice roared through the room, sending men scurrying in a half-dozen directions. He bent over to assist in picking Clive from the floor, then felt fiery hands seize him and literally hurl him aside, while two men fell on their knees beside Clive and exclaimed with hot voices.

One gazed at the fallen Swinging J foreman with tiny green lights flaring in his eyes. The other was calm of face and manner; handsome, with black, crisp hair and smooth hands. He was going at Clive's wounds much the same as the little man had done, except that his touch seemed more skillful, more sure, and his manner more confident. Big Tim looked down at them, a hot question on his lips.

"What the hell are yuh fellers doin' to that gent?" His voice menaced and his ham-like hands were swaying near his guns. The man with the greenish eyes looked up, his gaze fairly burning into the big man.

"I reckon we're a-goin' to take care of this feller," he answered in a metallic voice, "and after we get him fixed up proper like we're a-goin' to find the dirty skunks that shot him and I reckon we'll find 'em if we have to clean out this man's

town from end to end and sideways, that's us.”

“There ain't nobody for yuh to clean out, Mister,” said Big Tim, relief in his voice that Clive was with friends. “That feller, him, he just nacherally killed Cougar Evans, Three-Finger Smith and Spook Spencer, and he put Digger Wade plumb on the hospital list. Shucks, that feller's hell-fer-breakfast with a six-gun and I don't reckon he needs no help 'cept to get hisself fixed up, and Doc Wattles is 'tendin' to that.”

The other stood up.

“Yuh can tell Doc Wattles we got a reg'lar doctor here now. That's Blaze Ormsby here, and he's a A 1 doc, too, but I reckon yore doc can help him some. Me, I'm Two-Gun Farrell and from right now through all the rest of the way, this here feller's fight is mine and I'm here to finish any leetle thing he may have left unfinished.”

“I've heard of yuh,” nodded Riley. “Yuh used to be a Ranger over Texas way. Well, I'm this gent's friend, too, and yuh can bet yore uncle's pants there ain't no fight left here ag'in yore pard. Here comes that geezer with Doc Wattles' satchel.”

Ormsby seized on the little man's bag of surgical instruments with avid hands and supervised the removal of Clive to a room on the second floor of the Emporium. Already the bodies of the dead men had been carried out, while Wattles, now that Ormsby had assumed charge of Clive's case, had turned his attention to Digger Wade.

And so, an hour later, Clive regained conscious-

ness and gazed into the anxious eyes of Two-Gun Farrell and the smiling, hopeful face of Blaze Ormsby; not far behind them stood Big Tim Riley, apparently as anxious as either Blaze or Two-Gun.

Clive tried to speak, and even as he sensed that he could not, Blaze laid a warning finger on his lips and said in a low, soothing voice:

“No talking, Clive. You are wounded rather seriously and you must lie quietly and easily. You aren't going to cash in, old timer, though for a time I was doubtful of the outcome, but you are going to be penned up here for some little spell. I think that in, say, a month, we will get you back to the Swinging J; it may be a little sooner, or possibly a little later. Right now, you are to lie there and keep quiet. Now, see if you can sleep.”

CHAPTER XVIII

THE RUSTLERS DEPART

CLIVE'S wounds were more serious than Blaze had hinted and for a week he tossed in the throes of delirium, then his splendid body threw off the death shadows that had hovered about it, and he began to mend. At the end of the third week Blaze declared him entirely out of danger and said that another two weeks in bed would find him with sufficient strength regained to make the return trip to the Swinging J, whereupon Clive fought to return at once.

Blaze was adamant, and Clive, after futile protest, made the most of things. At the end of a month Ormsby announced that Wattles could drop in daily and take care of Clive, and that Two-Gun could stay with him to guard and care for him.

"What are yuh plannin' to do, Blaze?" asked Clive.

"I want to scout around a little," Ormsby answered. "You remember, of course, the scrap at the Diamond L, and that Pence and I had an argument which resulted in me knocking him down? I did that for a reason, Clive. I imagined that if those valley ranchers had any papers about them at any time, Pence ought to have some on him after the fire, unless he had chosen to let them burn

when his house went up in smoke. On the theory that if there were any papers, they would be valuable enough in his eyes to save from the flames, I plugged him on the chin. I got what I wanted, too; a package of letters and papers, all having to do with the Henley people, and relating to what has been going on in the Cottonwood Valley."

"I recollect yuh gettin' 'em. Did yuh l'arn much from 'em besides what yuh just told me?"

"I surely did, and when you are able to hit the trail again, I believe we shall be able to rid Miss Forest of her enemies at a single stroke."

"Tell me what yo're a-drivin' at," begged Clive, his eyes alight with interest; but Ormsby shook his head determinedly.

"Not yet; you would only lie here and worry, and fume to be up and doing, and I can't allow that. I promise you that in two weeks from today you and Two-Gun may take the trail for home, provided you ride in easy stages and take at least a week or ten days for the trip. When you arrive I shall try to have things so arranged that you may then take up the trail once more and wind this business up to the satisfaction of all of us."

"Hell, Blaze, it's tough to be laid up like this, but I reckon yo're right. You fellers shore have backed up muh play in one-two style, too. Say, I nearly forgot; how did you and Two-Gun get here so dang' quick after I was plugged that last time by Three-Finger?"

"We started almost immediately behind you,

Clive. Had our horses been the equal of Thunder, we'd have arrived almost when you did. Had we been only a half-hour earlier on the scene, you would never have faced those four gunmen all by your lonesome, either."

"I'd tell a man he wouldn't 've," rasped Two-Gun.

"How's Digger Wade?" Clive asked, thinking for the first time of his only surviving attacker.

"Dead. He recovered from the rather light wound you inflicted, but was stabbed by a Mexican during a card game in which all hands were cheating to beat hell. He is lying alongside Cougar, Three-Finger and Spook in Boot Hill, on the Mexican side of the line."

"I reckon the time's a-goin' to pass mighty slow until I get back to the Swingin' J," Clive said, resignedly. "Well, so be it; two weeks from today, yuh old horned toad, I'm a-startin'."

"Agreed," Ormsby nodded. "Two-Gun, you be sure that it is two weeks, and not two days, won't you?"

"I'll 'tend to it, Blaze," Farrell promised, and Ormsby was satisfied.

Three hours later he rode out of Golfornia, heading northwest, and one day, more than a week later, he emerged from a verdant little canyon, down which a tributary to Cougar Creek purled, and out onto the broad, fertile reaches of the Box O. He dropped from his horse in front of the Swinging J bunkhouse a little before sunset.

Forest, who had seen him ride into the yard, was the first to reach his side, and Blaze, anticipating the eager questions that were on her lips, smiled his slow grin and drawled:

“Mr. Clive Morgan will be with you shortly, Miss Forest. He is recovering from the effects of a little affair he had with four men in a town down on the border. Two-Gun is with him, and you need have no worries for him now. I made certain he was well and regaining his strength rapidly before I left. Now, let your mind be at peace.”

But she was not satisfied with this and bit by bit she drew from him the details of Clive's clash with Cougar, Spook, Three-Finger and Digger Wade; she cried softly when Blaze described how he and Two-Gun had found Clive, sagged against a wall, gun in hand, unconscious, but still smiling into the face of any who might possibly be enemies, but whom he could not see; she thrilled at her lover's gallantry and her heart gave a glad throb of anticipation when Ormsby said positively that Clive would come riding into the ranch yard as fit as ever, and that his arrival would not now be long delayed.

Then he left her, turning into the bunkhouse where the others, already aware of his arrival, greeted him with joyous acclaim. He repeated for their benefit the story of Clive's encounter with Cougar and his friends, then got down to the business that was absorbing his mind.

“You fellows are going to take a ride with me

in the morning," he said. "We are going over to that valley below the outlaws' nest at Brindletown."

"What's up, Blaze?" asked Bull Ellerby. "Yuh figgerin' on havin' me heave some more boulders down on them bozos? I reckon yuh better not; it's some other geezer's turn this time, by cripes."

"I don't think there will be any stone throwing, Bull. I surmise, though, that we may see some action. I believe we shall find some of Miss Forest's cattle over there and also that we may run into some of the choicest and hardest employees of the Henley Cattle & Sales Co."

"Say, yuh dang' old long-horn, what are yuh drivin' at?" queried Spud Garrett. "Yuh mean to say yuh got some real, honest to gosh information on that layout over there and this fixin' here in the Cottonwood Valley?"

Ormsby nodded.

"I believe I have," he answered slowly. "At least, from the information I have gathered from those papers and letters I swiped from old Pence, that valley below Brindletown is a huge dumping ground for a bunch of cattle rustlers who have been operating all through this part of the state, and even across the line into New Mexico."

"Elucidate, Blaze," urged Shad Stevens. Ormsby dropped on a bunk, rolled a brown-paper cigarette, and went on:

"I learned that the Henley Cattle & Sales Co.

is a stock concern. That is, it was financed on other people's money through the sale of common and preferred stocks. In selling these securities the Henley promoters went on record with the state government and with the people who bought their stock to the effect that they owned every last foot of ground in this valley, save only the open range; furthermore, they gave a list of the ranches here that they were supposed to own, control or carry options on. Among these were listed the Swinging J, the Lazy X and the Circle Dot."

"Yuh shore sound interestin'," said Piute Allen.

"Now by making those claims the Henley people used fraudulent means to dispose of their stock and laid themselves open to prison terms. Realizing this, and desiring to make good on their pre-stock campaign claims, they decided to acquire the ranches they did not already control, and they have been using every terrifying means in their power toward this end. Miss Forest was hardest hit, because she was a woman, and I believe they would have succeeded in chasing her out of here if Clive had not been bitten by the wanderlust bug and drifted over this way. But there is still more.

"The Henley crowd only just recently have announced that they have disposed of the Lazy X, Swinging J and Circle Dot ranches for cash considerations, giving as the reason for the sales that none of the three was needed or was a dividend payer. Of course, it is now put up to these crooked manipulators to show an accounting of the

money received from these mythical sales, and that means the cash must actually be in the treasury when the auditors look things over. Now, how have they gone about getting this money? Here's how:

“For the last two years, or ever since they found they could not buy the ranches of Hart, Simmons and Miss Forest, they have had a band of rustlers working far and near around Brindletown. The cattle this gang has stolen have been fattened in the valley over there and, in due time, shipped to the Henley people by devious routes. The sales, on paper, were made to a J. V. Sellers and the cattle were shipped to him, of course. But the letters show that Sellers was none other than Robert Frobisher Henley, president, treasurer and general manager of the Henley Cattle & Sales Co. Of course, the money received from the sale in the Chicago market of these stolen steers has been, and will continue to be used to make up the deficit Henley has succeeded in creating in the company's cash account.

“It is a simple scheme; isn't it? But it is the simple things that fool the suckers and defraud the public. No one, of course, ever thought to come out here and investigate before buying the stock, and the Henley crowd probably never suffered a single pang of anxiety on that score. They had a rattling good agent on this end to handle their dirty affairs, too. I believe you have all seen him here.”

“Who is the skunk?” asked Pink Sellers.

“The fellow they call Streak,” Blaze answered. “You recall that he came in with Cougar, Coldwater and the sheep through Saddleback Pass?”

“Well, humped-back horned toads, what are we a-goin’ to do about it?” The speaker was Piute Allen. Blaze looked at him thoughtfully and after a puff or two at his cigarette, he flipped it through the open window and answered:

“Plenty, if we desire. One of the letters to Pence contained instructions for him to pass on to Streak. It was to the effect that a thousand steers in the valley below Brindletown were ready for shipment and that they were to be taken out the northern pass, into New Mexico, and driven up toward the Santa Fe Railroad. There were special instructions that all Swinging J stock on hand were to be the first ones sent out. I don’t believe Pence had time to see Streak, so those steers probably are in the valley this very minute.”

“Then we want to get busy and hustle ’em out of there,” said Pink. “But we got to remember that damn’ nest on the mounting, where all them roosters is hangin’ out. I reckon they’ll start things a-humpin’ when they see us percolate over that-a-way for them cows.”

“I’m not so sure of trouble over there,” said Blaze. “Those fellows probably will not be expecting us; likely they are busy repairing their roost, or building another in a spot not so susceptible to boulders from above. We must go easy, of

course, cut out what Swinging J steers we may find and bring them through in as many drives as may be necessary."

"I reckon us Lazy X fellers will ride with yuh, Ormsby," said Monte McCourt. "I wouldn't be su'prised if they's a lot of our cows over that-away. Yuh know we lost a hell of a lot of 'em in the last year."

"You fellows will ride with us, sure, Monte," Blaze answered. "Now, everybody get ready to start first thing in the morning. Six of us will remain here with Miss Forest; so that's settled."

They left in the cool of the early dawn and to the surprise of those who had been over the trail with Ormsby on the night they had followed Clive and fought it out with the rustlers at Brindletown, he turned off across the Box O ranch shortly after fording Cougar Creek, and turned up the verdant little canyon with the purling stream and the rank growth of grass and scrub willow.

"This ain't the way, Blaze," said Spud.

"This is the real way, Spud. We'll be in that valley before night and we'll miss that rough mountain country; this is the way they have been driving the cattle. I discovered it from what the letters I took from Pence contained, and when I rode back from Golfornia I cut into the valley under Brindletown and came back into the Cottonwood this way. It is easy going all the way."

His words proved true, for the sun had barely touched the western rim of the mountains when they

rode into the southern end of the beautiful, fertile valley that stretched five miles wide and twenty miles long between the peaks that formed the Brindle Canyon country.

They camped out under the stars, careful that their fires were shielded from Brindletown when they cooked their evening meal, and with the first hint of dawn they were in their saddles and out in the valley, moving in scattered formation.

“If we stay scattered, perhaps if any one in Brindletown spots us he will mistake us for cattle,” said Blaze.

“Like hell he will,” snorted Spud. “Don’t yuh remember one of them geezers had field glasses? Reckon we’ll look like steers to the bozo that uses them to take a peek at us?”

The first cattle they rode among bore brands that were strange to most of them, but one or two looked familiar. Spud Garrett swore that he recognized at least one mark as belonging to a huge ranch that sprawled just north of Benson, while another brand, according to Monte McCourt, belonged to another great ranch that was immediately west of Benson.

At noon, in the upper reaches of the valley, they came on that which they had come to seek, for they rode among a herd of fat, sleek steers, all of which bore either a Swinging J or a Lazy X brand.

“I reckon that settles things, Blaze,” said Shad Stevens, looking across the tossing horns and waving tails. “We got enough evidence here to string

up every geezer in Brindletown. Looks like old Simmons'll save a lot of his stock, too. What'll we do now? Drive 'em home?"

The sharp "ping-g-g" of a rifle answered him and his hat flew from his head. Like one man the combined outfits left their saddles and sprawled in the lush grass, where they raised on their hands and looked off across the valley to where a score of riders came plunging toward them, armed heavily.

"Looks like we're in for a fight, boys," said Ormsby. "We are as many as they, so lie low and wait until they get close, then cut loose and make every shot tell."

But Blaze was wrong. The riders suddenly veered off to the right and stormed away up the valley, heading toward the northern pass, five miles ahead. Blaze watched them tearing along, then rose and ran toward his horse.

"Come on, fellows," he cried. "I guess this is the end of those birds. They are pulling their freight as fast as the Lord'll let them. Maybe we can speed their going if we hustle."

He led the way and his comrades thundered after him at breakneck speed. But their best efforts resulted in them only being in sight of the outlaws when the latter entered the northern pass and plunged ahead. One man, a tall, thin rider on a roan mare, paused long enough to wave a derisive hand, then he, too, disappeared into the pass.

"I knowed they had a field glass," rasped Spud.

“They seen us all right, and they either smelled a rat or they got plumb skeered. Hell of a note to do us out of a leetle shindig.”

“I’m satisfied as it is,” said Ormsby. “We’ve had enough strife. I imagine those fellows will scoot through New Mexico, head south and eventually wind up below the Rio Grande. That fellow who waved was Slim Sam Tarbush; used to be a rustler on the Rio Pecos until the Rangers chased him out. Well, that’s over, so let’s get our steers started back toward the ranch.”

One week later they drove four hundred Swinging J and nearly three hundred Lazy X steers out of the little canyon and across the Box O, heading them toward Forest’s ranch. As they passed within easy sight of the Box O ranch house, Ormsby, Spud and Shad, struck by the changed appearance of the place, rode up to the structure and looked it over.

The Box O ranch house was deserted of life!

“Looks like old Horner took a hint from somewhere and skedaddled,” opined Shad. “Well, good riddance, says I.”

“We’ll shore have a hatful of news to spiel to Tex when he shows up,” grinned Spud. “Boy, the old ball cert’inly has be’n a-rollin’ since he gave ’er that first heave, I’d tell a man.”

By nightfall they had what was left of Forest’s steers, together with the Lazy X stock back on the Swinging J acres, and, this accomplished, rode into the ranch yard, dropping wearily from their broncs.

And there, ten days later, came Clive; a little pale from his long confinement, but apparently as fit as ever.

Forest had been expecting him for days and now, as Two-Gun and the former Ranger dropped from their mounts, she ran toward Clive unashamed, arms outstretched, and was clasped to his hungry, yearning heart in a straining embrace. When their lips parted she drew back a little and held his face between her hands. He saw there were tears in her eyes and could have wept at the sight.

“Dear, dear, Clive,” she whispered brokenly. “My great, gallant boy; how nearly you came to dying just because you thought it your duty to avenge an insult and an outrage to me. Boy, boy, never endanger your life that way again. I can’t stand it. Oh, your poor neck; that scar will always be there, won’t it? But I’ll love you all the more for it, dear. It will seem like a badge of honor that you are wearing because of me, and I shall never, never, so long as I live, forget how you came to get it.”

“Don’t talk that-a-way, girlie,” he said huskily. “Yuh’ll have me a-blubberin’ in a minute, too. Shucks, that scar ain’t nothin’, and I wasn’t hurted bad. Ask Blaze if I was.”

“Blaze has already told me, you great fibber, and I know that you came near to dying in that little border town. Now, you must come to the house and take one of the big rooms upstairs that I have ready for you, and make it your home; you

must rest there and regain your strength, dear."

He shook his head and kissed her once more.

"I reckon I'll stay in the bunkhouse, sweetheart," he told her. "I ain't done anything any of them boys wouldn't a-done, and muh place is out here among 'em. I reckon we'll all be happier that-a-way, and I guess yuh onderstand what I'm a-drivin' at."

She nodded.

"Very well, then; but promise me this: Never again will you take such chances with your life."

He grinned and then, aware for the first time that the smiling riders of the Swinging J and Lazy X were grouped about them, he let his arms fall from about her slender form and said:

"I reckon I don't never take no onnecessary chances, girlie, but I can't promise yuh that if some *hombre* takes it into his haid to go a-gunnin' for me that I won't pr'tect muhse'f."

And with that she was satisfied.

The evening meal was a wonderful affair. Clive, happy in the knowledge of the girl's love for him and she happy because of his safe return to her, were the merriest of the gathering. When the last coffee cup was empty and the last cigarette rolled and lighted, discussion of the business that was to come was started.

Ormsby apprised Clive of the contents of the letters and papers, reading them aloud, in fact, for all to hear; and he told of what they had found in the valley below Brindletown, and of the flight of

the rustlers. Blaze had examined Clive's heart and had given his scars a careful going over. He was certain that in a week Clive would have his old healthy body tone back and be fit as ever for whatever might eventuate in the future.

After much talk it was finally decided that the following week or as soon thereafter as possible, Clive and Forest should go to Chicago, beard the head of the Henley Cattle & Sales Co. in his den, and force a showdown in this range war.

With this plan adopted, Clive, Forest and Blaze spent a long hour talking over the plan of action that would be followed after arrival in the eastern city, and what the demands on the Henley Company should be. When they finally parted company for the night a careful program had been mapped out and Blaze was certain that the outcome would satisfy Forest in every particular. Clive and the girl looked forward to the journey with unconcealed joy.

"I never be'n east of Red River, Wyomin'," said Clive, "and I reckon Forest'll have to steer me around when we hit Chicawgo. They say it's a mite bigger'n Butte and El Paso."

When the day came that Clive and Forest were to begin their trip Two-Gun Farrell and Blaze agreed to ride with them to Sunset, where they would catch their train and Ormsby, as though the thought had just occurred to him, said:

"You can't go back there with that six-gun hanging on your hip, Clive. That sort of thing

doesn't go in Chicago. A policeman would get real saucy with you the first thing."

Clive dropped his hand to his .45 and looked at Blaze.

"Then, I reckon I'll fix muhse'f a shoulder holster and shove muh gun under muh arm, for Chicawgo or no Chicawgo, where I go muh gun goes, too."

CHAPTER XIX

THE END OF THE TRAIL

THE girl in the outside office of the Henley Cattle & Sales Co. looked up at the tall, tanned figure that entered and her eyes lighted with interest. The light died, however, as her gaze fell on the beautiful, slender vision that stood beside the tall man. She became businesslike.

“Did you wish to see some one?”

“I reckon I’m a-lookin’ for Mr. Robert Frobisher Henley.”

“Your name, please?” The girl was writing on a card.

“Name of Morgan, ma’am; Clive Morgan.”

“Spell the first name, please.”

“C-l-i-v-e, Clive.”

“Why do you pronounce it ‘Cleeve’?” She looked at him archly, invitation in her eyes.

“I reckon the way I pr’nonce muh name ain’t got anything to do with what I’m here for, if yuh’ll pardon me, ma’am. Now, c’n I see Mr. Henley?”

“What is the nature of the business you wish to see him about, Mr. Morgan?” There was chill hostility in the girl’s voice. She had not liked Clive’s brusque refusal to be flirtatious.

“I’ll tell that to Mr. Henley, ma’am,” he answered.

“Mr. Henley sees no one until he knows whether it is going to be worth his time, sir.”

“Is them the orders he gives yuh, Miss?” Clive’s eyes were steady and his voice was level, but the girl at his side, holding his arm lightly, felt his muscles tense a little.

“They are; now, to expedite matters, please answer my question.”

“Say, ma’am, you just sashay in to that boss of yore’n and tell him there’s a man, name of Morgan, and a gal here to see him on something that happens to be dang’ important to him and his’n, and let me know what he says. What say?”

“Very well.”

The girl rose and walked toward a door at the rear of the room. She paused long enough to say over her shoulder:

“I can tell you now what his answer will be, but I shall do as you request.”

She returned in two minutes.

“Mr. Henley is too busy to see you, Mr. Morgan. He said that if you would drop in this afternoon, about four o’clock, he would see you then.”

Clive looked at her silently, his lips compressing in a straight line. Then he tossed his hat onto a nearby chair and took a step toward the door, through which the girl had carried his message.

“I reckon I better tell him muhse’f that I’m here to see him, that muh name is Morgan and that I got business with him,” he said. The girl looked at him with alarm in her eyes.

“Don’t force your way in there, sir. Please don’t. He is angry just now and there is a man in there with him that I suspect of being a western bad man. At least, I know he carries a gun. If you enter, perhaps they will do you harm.”

His lips loosened a little and the shadow of a smile played across them. With a swift gesture he unbuttoned his coat and shifted a swelling bulge that showed beneath his left arm.

“I ain’t afraid, none whatever,” he said grimly, and took another step toward the door. The girl with him said anxiously:

“Perhaps the young lady is right, Clive. Can’t we wait?”

Clive turned to her.

“Now, look-a here, Forest; I come all the way from Arizony to see Robert Frobisher Henley, President, Treasurer and General Manager of the Henley Cattle & Sales Co. I reckon he’s not such a dang’ big toad in this here Chicawgo puddle that he can’t spare me the time I need. You wait here till I call yuh, which I hope will be right soon.” He patted her hand tenderly. “There’s a good girl,” he concluded.

Forest dropped on a plush-covered chair and Clive put a firm hand on the door that barred his way. He turned the knob and swung it open with a single motion, stepping calmly inside.

“What in hell do you mean by coming in here, sir?”

The angry query came from a short, red-faced

fat man who sat before a highly polished mahogany desk, talking with another. Clive closed the door and looked them over, suppressing a start. The fat man was talking to Streak, the gunman who had accompanied Cougar and Coldwater into the Cottonwood Valley with the sheep! Streak recognized Clive at the same instant and rose to his feet with a startled oath.

Clive ignored Streak and answered the fat man's question.

"I had to come onless I was willin' to pass up seein' yuh. Are yuh Robert Frobisher Henley?"

"Get the hell out of here, you impertinent pup," cried the other. "If you don't leave instantly I shall call the police."

Clive looked at him coldly. His voice took on a metallic quality when he responded.

"Call in all the dang' police yuh want to, Mr. Henley, but afore they can get here I reckon yo're a-goin' to have a leetle chin-chin with me."

The fat man saw determination and menace in Clive's eyes. He wilted a little as he said:

"Well, spiel your complaint; get it out of your system. You've ruined my morning as it is, so I presume I may as well humor you."

"Answer muh question, first," said the Swinging J foreman.

"What question?"

"Are you Robert Frobish ——"

"Hell, yes," cried the fat man. "What about it?"

A grim smile lighted Clive's face and in three strides he was beside Henley's desk. His left hand dipped in his inside coat pocket and drew forth a letter, which he laid before the other.

"Then, I reckon yo're the gent that wrote this here leetle billydoo," he said.

Henley glanced down at the paper, unfolded it and started to read, but before his eyes had scanned three lines he sprang to his feet, rage and alarm in his eyes.

"What's the meaning of this? What about this letter?" he shouted.

"Did you write it?" Clive persisted.

Henley sensed that Clive was feeling his way, wanting to be on sure ground at each step, before he made any assertions. He decided on evasion.

"Maybe yes, maybe no," he answered. "But what if I did?"

"Ormsby said for me not to say much until I was damn' shore I was on the right track," Clive drawled. "Well, I reckon I am. Yuh wrote that letter, all right. Now, I'll answer yuh. Mr. Henley, if I sign a legal agreement freein' yuh from all damage of the past, liability to future arrest, et cetera and so forth, at my hands or at the hands of the Swinging J ranch, will yuh give me a certyfyed check for one hundr'd thousand dollars? And then will yuh kick out them buzzards yuh've got runnin' yore ranches in Cottonwood Valley, put white men on 'em and run yore business there accordin' to Hoyle, so help yuh Je-hosy-fat?"

With an oath Henley seized the letter, ripping it to shreds and scattering the particles about the room.

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” he growled. “I believe you mentioned a letter. Where, pray, is the letter?”

To his surprise Clive burst into hearty laughter and hit his thigh a heavy thwack with his palm.

“I swan, but yo’re good,” he chuckled. “I don’t recollect givin’ yuh any letter, muhse’f, seein’ that yuh’ve tore’d the damn’ thing up, but since yuh mention letters I reckon I got six that was taken from old Cief Pence, and all of ’em is real, honest to gosh humdingers, too; and come to think of it there was a order in that mess, signed by yore-se’f, to the effect that certain Swingin’ J cows was to be taken out of the Brindle Canyon country and shipped to J. V. Sellers, here in Chicawgo. Yuh ever remember writin’ any such dang’ fool stuff as that?”

Henley’s face suddenly went gray and he clutched at his desk for support. He bent across the mahogany surface and whispered rapidly to Streak. The latter stood and clapped his hat on his head. Carelessly, as though he had been requested to depart, Streak said:

“Sure, sure, Mr. Henley; I’ll be leavin’ and show up tomorra about that business. Well, s’long.” He turned and strode toward the door. His hand touched the knob, but never turned it.

With the snakelike movement that had given

him his nickname, Streak turned and threw up his right hand, a gun clutched in his fingers. A crashing roar filled the room.

But it was Clive's own .45 that had spoken. Out of the tail, of his eye he had watched Streak, anticipating something like this. Now, as coolly as though he were shooting the head from a rattlesnake he struck the gun from Streak's hand by the simple process of sending a bullet into his arm.

Dropping his gun back into its holster under his arm, Clive walked over, picked up Streak's fallen six-shooter and tossed it into a waste-basket. The door flew open and two white-faced girls rushed in. They were Forest and Henley's secretary.

"Sho, now, Forest," Clive drawled softly, "don't yuh be skeered none. A toad just tried to pot-shot me from behind and I plugged him in the arm. He ain't hurted bad, but he shore ain't a-goin' to do no more shootin' ontill he gets patched up considerable."

He turned to Streak.

"I know yuh, Streak," he said, "and I reckon I know that yo're here a-tippin' off Henley to what's be'n goin' on in Cottonwood Valley and to what happened to his Brindletown gang, which has ske-daddled sudden like back down to Greaser land. And I reckon yuh also told him about Cief Pence and what took place at the Diamond L. And yuh know me, too, Streak, and yuh know what I'll do

to yuh if yuh try any more of yore damn' Injun shootin'. Now, I got too much on you and Henley to worry about either of yuh talkin' to no police or anybody, so yuh better stay to hell out of this here argyment from now on. *Sabe?*"

In perfect command of the situation Clive turned to the girls.

"You young ladies please return outside and wait a leetle while and," he looked directly at Henley's secretary, "I'll give yuh a leetle tip — if yuh don't want to put yore boss in jail yuh won't call no police in on this. Ain't I right, Henley?" He looked now at the fat man, whose face no longer was red.

Desperately Henley nodded, mumbling:

"Do not call the police, Miss Brice. It is all right, and you may leave us."

With the door closed again and Henley seated at his desk, Clive walked over to the chair Streak had occupied and dropped into it. Streak was sitting on the floor, nursing his maimed arm, which he had managed to bandage with his bandana. Clive calmly rolled a brown-paper cigarette the while Henley watched his lean, tanned fingers with fascinated eyes; calmly he struck a match, lit the paper pellet and pinched out the blazing ember; calmly he dropped the charred wood into the wastebasket and turned to Henley, gazing fairly into the fat man's eyes.

"Now, Mr. Henley, you and me is a-goin' to talk business a-plenty," he said.

A little color came back into Henley's face and he breathed easier.

"Just exactly what do you want?" he asked finally.

Clive kept his unswerving gaze on the other's shifting eyes.

"I want one hundr'd thousand dollars, Henley, and I won't take a damn' cent less for layin' off yore hide, either."

"You are either crazy by nature or a plain damn' fool," snapped Henley, getting a little courage back and deciding on bluster. But Clive was prepared.

"Yuh'll either give me a hundr'd thousand dollars or yuh'll go to jail, and that ain't no plain damn' foolishness, I'll tell a man," he said coolly.

"I'm not sure that I know what you are talking about, Mr. — er — Morgan, wasn't it?"

"Yuh know muh name well enough, I reckon, for yuh more'n likely have had it spieled to yuh by yore bunch of rustlers out there in Cottonwood Valley. If yuh believe what they've prob'ly told yuh already about me, yuh orta know that I'm meanin' business now, too."

"Just how do you expect to collect one hundred thousand dollars from me?" Henley was more at ease now and reaching in a drawer of the desk he drew forth a fat, light brown cigar, and lighted it calmly.

"I reckon I'll have to convince yuh further on just what I got on yuh," said Clive. "Listen,

Henley; I know that yuh sold a lot of stock in this here company of yore'n and that yuh didn't have no titles to a lot of ground yuh claimed. That made yuh liable for fraud. I could 've got yuh there, mebbe, but yuh covered yore tracks by sayin' yuh'd sold them ranches yuh never owned; but that left yuh open where I did get yuh, for yuh was stealin' cows and sellin' 'em, and usin' the money yuh got that-a-way to make up that deef-icit in yore treasury."

"Interesting, if true," agreed Henley. "I wonder how you expect to prove all this?"

"Yuh don't reckon yuh can deny the words yuh wrote to old Cief Pence, do yuh?"

"Pence? Cief Pence? Somehow, I don't seem to recall that name," murmured the fat man.

"Well, I'll remind yuh a leetle, then," said Clive patiently, yet with a mounting anger. "Yuh gosh danged horned toad, Ormsby said yuh'd try to pull off some slicker stuff on me, and it begins to look like yuh was. But I reckon I can spike yore guns there, 'cause I hunted up old Cief Pence, skeered hell out of him, and made him come to Chicawgo with me. I got him right here now, in a hotel waitin' and he's ready to go before any court of justice and make a affydavit to what yuh told him verbally and by letter. Now, what have yuh got to say to that?"

"I believe you and I would better talk this thing over," said Henley, his voice suddenly suave and persuasive. "There are no witnesses to our

conversation save Streak, so I think we can be frank with each other. Now, to save further argument, I will admit I put over a fraudulent stock deal, and that I organized a band of rustlers to make good the money I looted from my company's treasury. But if we go into court over it I think I can beat you. It takes money to fight court cases and your proof would have to be overwhelming. Don't forget I would have a preponderance of witnesses, and they would be directly from the Cottonwood Valley, too."

"What are yuh drivin' at, now?" Clive asked, aware that Henley was taking a new tack.

"Just this: What would you say to you and I making a deal?" Henley rose and came around to Clive, who rose to his feet also and stood warily on guard. The fat man went on:

"Supposing that you give me those letters you claim to have, and sign a little quit notice in this whole affair; then supposing that I hand you for your trouble, a personal check for twenty-five thousand dol —"

Clive's fist landing squarely on Henley's mouth stopped the flow of words. Henley catapulted backwards and brought up with a crash against his desk. He rose, holding his bruised mouth, his face a literal inferno of rage and hate. With a curse he shook his fist at Clive.

"Damn you," he cried viciously, "I'll see you in hell now before I'll make any sort of a deal with you. Go to court, see if I care. I'll spend every

cent I have fighting you, and I don't think you have enough money behind you to carry the case any farther than the local courts, either."

"You keep a civil tongue between yore teeth after this, yuh dang' sheep nose," cried Clive, "and I won't hit yuh no more. Now, as far as goin' to court is concerned, I reckon I will if I have to but somehow it seems to me that I won't have to."

"Get out of here," shouted Henley, "get out at once, and do what you damn' please after you leave, too."

Clive eyed him coldly.

"I reckon I don't leave without muh money or onless you leave at the same time in company with a policeman," he said, and added: "I reckon yuh don't know that we raided Brindletown once and brought back four hundr'd head of Swingin' J cows and a lot of Lazy X stock from that valley; now, do yuh? And yuh prob'ly don't know that we took the whole outfits of the Swingin' J, the Lazy X and Circle Dot and rounded up that bunch of outlaws yuh had in the Cottonwood Valley, either. We took Bender, Horner and all the rest of 'em, but we didn't get Horner until we located him hidin' out at Bender's. Now, yuh listen to me chirp, Henley: Every dang' one of them fellers, on a promise of freedom, has signed confessions and ever one of them papers pins the whole shebang on you direct. How are yuh goin' to rub that out?"

Henley's face again blanched.

"Furthermore," Clive continued relentlessly,

“We made it so hot for old Bender the day afore I left the valley that he kicked in with a sworn statement to the effect that yo’re the whole works behind that Brindletown gang that skedaddled for Mexico and that was robbin’ ranches clean down around Benson. We also got the signed agreement atween him and you for him to run the ranch as though he owned it, file a deed to it and all, the while yuh hold the actual ownership in yore safe back here and use him as a buffer to ward off any danger of yuh bein’ connected with his dirty work. Now, are yuh goin’ to be able to get around that?”

“Settle with him, Henley, or we’ll all land in jail,” groaned Streak, who had listened to the proceedings with fear rising higher in his heart every minute. “I don’t mind cashin’ in if I got the range under muh feet, but I’m damned if I’m a-goin’ to prison, not if I have to hand Morgan evidence myself.”

Henley drew a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his mouth, where tiny smears of blood oozed from his battered lips. His bravado seemed falling from him. Streak’s words had knocked from under him a prop he had been counting on for support.

“I’ll tell you what I’ll do, Morgan,” he said, and Clive saw fear and subterfuge mingled in his eyes, “I’ll go into this thing this afternoon and tonight and see if I can scare up one hundred thousand dollars. You come back here at ten tomorrow morning. If I have been able to raise

the entire sum, I'll hand it to you then; otherwise, I'll have to negotiate a note with you."

Clive laughed harshly.

"Yuh think I'm a-goin' to walk out of here and give yuh the rest of the day and a whole night to make yore get-a-way in? Me? Not much, Henley. You and me settles afore I leave this room, or the police 'll come here and take Streak and you down where yuh can do yore explainin' to a court of justice, and among other charges I'll place ag'in yuh, will be about six different murders. Blaze Ormsby said yuh can't get out on no bail when yo're locked up for murder, either."

Henley saw that he was cornered. Streak began reviling him and urging that he meet Clive's demands forthwith, and under the strain Henley reached for a button on his desk. Clive stopped him.

"What are yuh a-goin' to do?" he asked.

"Call my secretary and have her type off the agreement for you to sign, after which she will draw you the check for one hundred thousand dollars," Henley answered, his voice weak.

"Where are yuh aimin' to get that money? Yuh figgerin' on givin' me a Henley Cattle & Sales Co. check?"

Henley raised his eyebrows and gave his lips a soft pat with his handkerchief.

"Certainly," he answered, then, with some asperity, "What other check do you think I would give you, you damn' fool?"

“Well, mebbe I am a damn’ fool, shore enough, but just the same I ain’t takin’ no Henley Cattle & Sales Co. check, and yuh can buck the old bank on that. That money don’t belong to yuh, but to yore stockholders, and they ain’t to blame for yore dirty work. No, sir-ee; yo’re a-goin’ to give me yore own personal check and it’s a-goin’ to be certyfied and then cashed, so’s that the money can be put plumb into muh two hands right here in this very room.”

“Heavens, Morgan, I don’t have a hundred thousand dollars myself.”

“I reckon yo’re a dang’ liar, Henley. Yuh sold four hundr’d thousand dollars worth of stolen cows, and yuh on’y had to put two hundr’d and fifty thousand in yore treasury to fix up them phoney sales of ranches. That left yuh a hundr’d and fifty thousand and old Bender says yuh on’y give that Brindletown crowd fifty thousand all told. I reckon yuh sunk the rest of it on yore sock, so shell out, and do it damn’ *pronto*. I want to get out of this man’s town as soon’s ever I can.”

“And I will get from you in return?”

“From me yuh get a agreement that I personal like, and the Swingin’ J won’t never do nothin’ ag’in yuh, legal or otherwise; I’ll sign a receipt sayin’ we’re paid up in full for all damage, et cetera and so forth at yore hands. I reckon that orta be sufficient.”

“Hell’s fire, Henley; quit quibblin’ and get down to business,” growled Streak.

“I guess that will be sufficient,” agreed Henley. “I’ll have my secretary draw up the paper at once.” He pressed the button.

Miss Brice appeared, her face pale. Henley indicated a chair and she dropped into it, pencil and note book in hand. He began dictating and Clive smoked and listened to the fat man’s smooth, rolling voice. An hour later the secretary laid down the typed agreement and Clive, reading it, placed the carbon copy in his pocket.

“We’re all set now,” he remarked, “soon as yuh fix up that check. Of course, yuh understand that when I sign this it don’t pr’tect yuh from old Simmons of the Lazy X or Bud Hart of the Circle Dot, and I reckon they shore are a-rearin’ to get at yuh with violent hands. Howsumever, Simmons is to get thirty thousand of this money and Hart’s to get fifteen thousand, so the chances are they’ll let the thing die, onless yuh start yore crookedness ag’in, in which case, Lord help yuh. Yuh see, we all figgered this thing out and that was their loss, while we arrived at the conclusion that fifty-five thousand would cover our end of it just about right.”

He paused as Henley drew a check book from his pocket, then added:

“Yuh onderstand, also, that I’ll sign this paper on the agreement that yuh put new men on them ranches of yores, that yuh take ’em over in yore own name, all legal and clear, and that yuh quit yore crooked work down in the Cottonwood Valley?”

Henley nodded, his pen moving swiftly across the check. He blotted it and called to his secretary.

“I want you to get this certified, Miss Brice, and bring it here immediately.”

“There wouldn’t be a bit of use a-bringin’ that certyfyed check back here, ma’am,” Clive said, “except that I’ll see it’s indorsed all proper like, to make everything legal, for while yo’re about it, yo’re to have it cashed, too, and bring me the simoleons in the biggest dang’ bills the bank’s got.”

Henley’s face fell. A desperate light came into his eyes but his voice was smooth and apparently was friendly when he said:

“You would be crazy to carry so much cash with you, Morgan. Take the certified check and deposit it when you get home. Perhaps you don’t know it, but a certified check isn’t like an ordinary one. When the bank certifies it, it makes the check absolutely good. It is a surety that the money is on deposit and that it has been charged immediately against the drawer’s account. In other words, it is exactly the same as cash, but, unin-dorsed, not so easy to get away with.”

Clive chuckled.

“Yo’re shore one dang’ slick gent, ain’t yuh? But yuh ain’t no slicker ’n Blaze Ormsby, I reckon. He said yuh likely would try that very thing on me and he told me to remind yuh that certyfyin’ a check don’t keep the drawer from stoppin’ payment on it if he’s so minded. Nope, me, I reckon

I'll take the cash. Now, just let me see that check, then yore secrytary can get it certyfyed."

Henley acknowledged his defeat with a curse and threw the check at Clive viciously. The latter picked it up, glanced at it hurriedly, then tossed it back to Henley.

"I reckon yuh'll have to make it out all over ag'in, Henley; sorry to keep yuh waitin' this way, of course, but we got to have everything right and legal, ain't we, Henley?"

Puzzled and a little startled, Henley picked up the check. His eyes told him it was made out properly. He snapped:

"What the hell are you driving at now? You've beaten me, and here's the check for the sum you demand; likewise, my secretary is waiting here to do your bidding as to having it certified and cashed."

Clive chuckled again, his eyes suddenly turning sunny.

"Don't get impatient, now, Henley. Yuh got that paper made out to Miss Forest Glade, which, while showin' yuh knowed damn' well who I was representin' in this leetle affair, ain't ezackly correct. Just write it all over ag'in, and this time, make it payable to Mrs. Clive Morgan."

THE END



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