

DUNNING HAL

WHITE WOLF'S

LAW

Hal Dunning
White Wolf's Law

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Hal Dunning

White Wolf's Law / A Western Story

CHAPTER I

APACHES OR LAVA GANG

Death had struck twice on that September afternoon, and two riders returning to Cannondale had marked the glow from a fire against the early evening sky.

At first they had mistaken it for a brush fire and had swung their horses off the trail and headed toward it as rapidly as the going would permit. The brush was as dry as tinder, and a fire, unless checked, spelled ruin both to townfolk and plainsmen.

The two riders slid their horses down the shelving bank of a wide arroyo. After their horses had scrambled up the farther side, it was "Toothpick" Jarrick who first realized the truth.

"Hey, 'Dutchy,' it's a house on fire!" he cried.

"Sure is!" Dutchy grunted and checked his horse to a trot.

"Get goin'!" Toothpick cried impatiently.

"Not any," Dutchy said shortly. "Lava Gang."

"Yuh sure talk as if words hurt yuh," Toothpick grumbled.

His companion's taciturnity was always a source of irritation to the tall, lanky cow-puncher, and he lapsed into a sulky silence for a time, chewing the ever-present toothpick in his mouth, from which he derived his name.

"Yuh mean maybe the gents they calls the Lava Gang is makin' another raid, and they may be still hangin' about?" Toothpick asked.

"Yep."

"Why don't yuh open yuhr mouth and let the words come out, instead of choking yuhrself on 'em, and makin' me explain to myself what yuh aim to say?" Toothpick asked scornfully.

Dutchy grunted, drew his rifle out of the boot beneath his saddle flap and balanced it across the pommel.

"If we're goin' to war, I'm sure plenty glad to have yuh along," Toothpick grumbled as he followed the example of his companion; "but yuh sure ain't no gent to relieve the tedium of existence with light chatter."

Accustomed as they were to the grim tragedies of the border, they were totally unprepared to find what they did close to the burning house. There was nothing left save smoldering rafters and bare adobe walls. Toothpick swung from his horse and quickly extinguished some brush that had been fired by a spark. Then he gave an exclamation and cried sharply:

"Hey, Dutchy, come here!"

Dutchy was a grizzled two-gun fighter who, rumor said, had once ridden "the long trail." He had lived close to the border all his life, yet he winced when he saw what the white-faced Toothpick pointed out to him.

A scant five yards from the doorway of the house, the body of a man lay half concealed in the brush. It was mutilated and scalped.

"Apache?" Toothpick queried as he slid a nervous hand to the hammer of his rifle and cast apprehensive glances into the darkness.

"Maybe so," Dutchy said shortly. "Let's see if we can find any others."

After a short search they discovered the body of a woman near a small shed. Powder marks on the back of her head told the story. She had been murdered deliberately – shot at close range.

“Skunks – downed a woman!” Toothpick swore.

“Cussin’ never hurt no one,” Dutchy growled. He wandered to the rear of the ruined house and a little later called: “Here’s a gent what’s got breath in him.”

Toothpick hastened to the side of Dutchy and found him kneeling beside a middle-aged man who was unconscious. The two cow-punchers dressed his wound. After a time the man’s eyelids fluttered open and he stared at them with frightened eyes.

“We’re friends, old-timer,” Toothpick told him. The man sighed with relief.

“Set fire to house to bring help,” the man whispered.

“Well, it come,” Toothpick soothed as he forced a little water between the man’s parched lips. “Who done this?”

The man’s eyes flashed and he raised himself on his elbow.

“*Le fils du Diable à Cheval – oui*– I knew him – ”

The man sank back and grew silent. Toothpick gave him more water. “Who’s the gent yuh knew?” he asked.

“*Le Diable à Cheval.*” The man’s voice was nothing but a faint whisper. He sighed and closed his eyes.

“Dable Chaval – huh, that’s a hell of a name,” Toothpick grumbled. “Reckon we’ll have to wait until he comes to again. Will he live?”

“Certain – then he’ll talk.” Dutchy was positive.

“When he does I’m aimin’ to start gunnin’ for the gent what murdered that woman,” Toothpick cried savagely.

“Me, too,” Dutchy said quietly.

They covered the wounded man with a blanket and once more continued their search of the surrounding bushes. Fifteen minutes later, just as they had decided there was nothing more to be found, a voice hailed them from the darkness.

“Hey, Dutchy, what’s goin’ on here?” the voice asked.

At the sound of the summons, both Toothpick and Dutchy instinctively leaped for cover. Recognition of the voice brought them to an abrupt halt.

“Huh, it’s the sheriff,” Toothpick said with a shamefaced grin.

Dutchy nodded and lowered the hammer of his rifle.

Three riders materialized from the darkness and entered the circle of light cast by the smoldering ruins. Tom Powers, the sheriff, came first. He was followed by his deputy, “Silent” Moore, and Sam Hogg, a wiry little man of fifty.

Tom Powers was a slender man of thirty. His face was gaunt, bony, and burned a brick red by the sun. At first his face looked hard, but his deep-set blue eyes told the character of the man. There was no hardness there, only force. He cast one quick glance at Dutchy’s grim face and sensed the tragedy.

“Where’s the Courfays?” he asked.

“Scattered about.” Dutchy waved his hand.

Sam Hogg was good-natured and was forever cracking jokes. He now joined in.

“You two boys sure scattered yourselves when you heard us shout,” he said, chuckling. “You acted skittish, like a pair of heifers just out of school.”

A second later his mirth came to an abrupt end when he saw the sheriff, who had dismounted, kneel beside the body of the mutilated man. He swore excitedly and joined the sheriff.

Toothpick briefly told what he knew of the tragedy. He led them first to the body of the woman, then to where the unconscious man lay. The man was muttering in delirium. The sheriff kneeled beside him and listened, but after a moment he arose to his feet and shook his head.

“Can’t catch a word. I know him, though – he was a brother of the woman over there and came from across the border to visit last week,” the sheriff explained.

“He was talkin’ when we – ” Toothpick began, but Dutchy brought his words to an abrupt halt by kicking him in the shins.

“Somebody comin’!” Dutchy warned in a low voice.

They listened and heard the noisy hoofs of a pair of horses and the crunching of wheels. A minute later two men in a buckboard drove up. The sheriff and Sam Hogg walked forward to greet them. Dutchy drew Toothpick aside.

“Some day yuh’ll dig yuhr grave with yuhr tongue,” he growled. “Don’t tell no one that that gent talked to us private.”

“But he didn’t say nothin’ I could understand,” Toothpick protested.

“Maybe the Lava Gang wouldn’t believe yuh,” Dutchy said grimly.

Judge Ransom, one of the two men in the buckboard, climbed out and listened gravely to what the sheriff had to say. He was a man of fifty-five, with the face of a scholar.

“Who’s that jasper?” Dutchy demanded as he nodded toward the buckboard.

“With the judge?”

“Yeh.”

“Gent named Bill Anderson. He’s the new political boss around here,” Toothpick explained.

The man was in his forties, of medium height, and stockily built. He had a round, apple-cheeked face and a jovial manner – one of those men whom others like on sight and hail as a boon companion. Yet a close observer might have detected something about the eyes that seemed to contradict the first impression.

“He rides around with the judge a hull lot,” Toothpick explained further. “Why for did yuh ask?”

“Knew a gent what looks like him once,” Dutchy muttered, with his eyes still watching Anderson, “twenty years ago.”

“Then it can’t be him.”

“Might have been his father,” Dutchy grunted.

They walked toward the others and arrived in time to hear the judge ask them:

“Who do you suppose did this?”

There was a moment of silence which was broken by Bill Anderson.

“I was over in Arizona last week, and the papers were talking about some renegade Apache who were raiding along the border. Maybe they have worked up this way,” he suggested.

“Maybe so,” the sheriff said doubtfully.

Silent Moore, the sheriff’s deputy, carefully examined the mutilated man for a moment; then, for the first time since his arrival, he opened his lips.

“I’ve fit the Apache – ’tain’t their work,” he said.

“Nonsense, man, it’s impossible to tell,” Bill Anderson exclaimed, and the others, with the exception of Toothpick and Dutchy, were inclined to agree with him.

“Greasers did that work – Apaches would have tracked down the man out there and killed him, and they would have used a club on the woman,” the deputy insisted stubbornly.

“Sure yuh’re right,” Sam Hogg cried with an oath. “White men or devils started in to make it look like Injuns – got scared before they finished and run for it.”

“The Lava Gang!” Toothpick cried excitedly. “Judge, where’s ‘Snippets’ and Mary?”

The judge’s face went white as he whispered: “You – you mean that letter from *them*?”

“Yeah, but where are the girls?” Toothpick asked again.

“They’re safe. I took them over to visit Sam Hogg’s wife at the Frying Pan Ranch this evening. Bill and I were coming back when we saw the fire.”

Toothpick relaxed and uttered a sigh of relief. The Lava Gang sometimes stole girls for ransom and held them across the border.

“What’s this – what letter?” the sheriff asked sharply.

“You all know that I am to preside at the trial of Pete Cable for murder, which takes place a week from to-day. Last week I received a warning signed by the Lava Gang, saying if I did not see that Cable was acquitted, some terrible thing would happen to me.”

“What did yuh do with the letter?” the sheriff demanded.

The judge shrugged. “I tore it up.”

“You are not going to pay any attention to the letter?” Bill Anderson asked curiously as his eyes searched the judge’s face.

“I intend to see justice done,” the judge replied firmly.

Bill Anderson pursed his lips and whistled soundlessly. The others turned and frowned at him. He smiled apologetically.

“No offense, judge. I was admiring your courage. If, as you seem to think, the Lava Gang did this, I would stay in after dark,” the plump politician said.

“To blazes with the Lava Gang! We’ll have the whole bunch in jail before the trial is finished,” Sam Hogg exploded.

Bill Anderson lit a cigarette, then smiled.

“You have to catch them first.”

“We’ll do it.”

Sam Hogg spoke positively, but somehow his words brought cold comfort to the judge.

Some fifteen miles to the southwest there was a great barren waste of lava rock. The Lava Gang had received their name from the fact that after each raid their trail was lost on the smooth slopes of the lava fields. No one knew a single member of the gang. It was suspected that they had their real headquarters in Cannondale. They were as elusive as ghosts. The thought that a member of the gang might be present at that moment made the judge grow thoughtful.

Sam Hogg growled like an angry terrier.

“If we don’t trail ’em to-morrow, I’ll send for that little hellion, ‘Jim-twin’ Allen. I’m bettin’ he’d trail ’em. I hears he’s better than a bloodhound.”

Bill Anderson laughed.

“He’d probably throw in with the Lava Gang himself.”

“Him? Not any!” Toothpick snorted. “He wouldn’t have no truck with hombres what steal girls. He’ll come a-runnin’ and a-shootin’ if I tells him about it.”

“Fairy tales,” the judge snorted.

“You tell him to come, judge, and watch his smoke,” Toothpick pleaded.

“A judge ask help from an outlaw who is wanted for murder in a dozen States?” Anderson laughed again.

“You gents stop gabbin’ and help me get this hombre in the buckboard,” the sheriff called.

A bed of blankets was made on the floor of the wagon, and the unconscious man was lifted in.

“Mr. Anderson, yuh drive him easy to town,” directed the sheriff. “An’ if he starts talkin’, yuh listen hard, ’cause I got a hunch that hombre will sure tell us a heap more about the Lava Gang than we knows now.”

“I’ll certain listen if he starts talking,” Anderson replied. He climbed into the buckboard and picked up the reins. Dutchy watched the team until it vanished in the night.

“I’d sure like to know where I seen that gent before, an’, if I ain’t seen him, who does he remind me of?” Dutchy muttered to himself.

Silent Moore was sent to town to gather a posse. The judge called Dutchy aside and whispered an order to him. Dutchy was known as a deadly fighter and a man who could be trusted.

“Dutchy, I want you to ride to the Frying Pan Ranch, and I don’t want you to let my daughter or Snippets out of your sight until this is over.”

The grizzled puncher mounted his horse and galloped off. The others remained.

Toward morning Silent Moore returned with the posse, and at the first streak of dawn they took up the trail of the murderers. For a time it led due south toward the Mexican border; then it headed sharply to the west, toward the lava fields. Here the trail was lost.

The lava fields were a maze of smooth slopes, abrupt ridges, and deep depressions. For seventy miles they roughly paralleled the border. And in all that expanse of rock there was no sign of verdure, save only an occasional cactus.

The posse scattered and searched for the trail. The sun blazed down and turned the desolate place into a furnace. The hunters were grim men, not easily turned aside. The sun baked them, they suffered from the lack of water, but they continued to search.

Toward noon, "Ace" Cutts, with five of the judge's riders from the Bar X Ranch, joined the search. The men dismounted and climbed the jagged slopes. They cut their hands and tore their boots on the knifelike edges of the lava rock.

The sun rose past meridian. The rocks and sand were too hot to touch. All that day the men of the posse continued their search, but found nothing. At last, toward evening, they realized their hunt was in vain. Beaten, baffled, they gathered for the return trip to town.

"Yuh figure Jim Allen could track those devils?" Tom Powers asked of Toothpick.

"Sure could," the lanky cow-puncher replied.

The sheriff reined in his horse. "Then if yuh know where he is, go get him."

Toothpick was about to answer when he saw Ace Cutts and three other riders were closely watching him. He remembered Dutchy's warning. He decided to remain silent. If he sought out Jim Allen, it would be well not to let people know it. He shook his head.

"The little devil is like a flea – no one knows where to find him," he declared. The remark seemed plausible enough.

They were close to Cannondale when another of the judge's riders joined them. The lathered flanks of his pony told of a hard ride. He swayed in his saddle as he sought out his boss.

"Judge, they jumped us an' downed Hank and Bill. They got me in the shoulder –"

"And those two hundred two-year-olds?"

The judge knew the answer even before he asked the question.

"They run 'em off."

Judge Ransom gripped his saddle. No one there realized what this meant to him – financial ruin. The Lava Gang had made good their threat.

The sheriff had hoped that the wounded man they had found the night before would be able to identify one of the murderers. But this hope was dashed when he met Bill Anderson as they entered the town.

"That poor fellow," Anderson told him, "got one of his bandages loose and bled to death. I never heard him move, but he was dead when I got to town."

The sheriff, followed by Toothpick, hurried to the doctor's house, where they were shown the dead man.

"Toothpick, yuh helped do him up; look them bandages over," the sheriff said.

After a brief examination Toothpick straightened, caught the sheriff's eye and nodded.

"I ain't no match for sneaks. If yuh know where to find him, go fetch Jim-twin Allen!" the sheriff cried passionately.

"Yuh might tell folks I've gone north to see my mother," Toothpick warned.

CHAPTER II

AN UNEXPECTED GUEST

In spite of the fact that Cannondale was the county seat, and that it had also the advantage of being on the transcontinental railroad, it had always remained just a cow town.

Main Street, little over a block in length, was the business center. It was paralleled by Madison and North Streets. Madison was given over to one or two boarding houses, a few cottages, and many empty lots. North Street was closely lined with Mexican shacks. State and Depot Streets intersected Main.

The town had three hotels, two large, combination dance-and-gambling halls, and ten smaller saloons. Of the gambling halls the Red Queen was far the most pretentious. Located in the center of the block on Main Street, it was really the hub of the whole town.

On the day before the trial of Pete Cable for murder the Red Queen was doing a land-office business, for Dame Rumor had been busy, and it was freely predicted that there was bound to be trouble at the trial.

Just what form this trouble would take no one seemed to know, but a murder trial, with the added attraction of a possible jail breaking or lynching, was sufficient to send every able-bodied man within riding distance scurrying into town.

Thus, on this occasion, every hotel was full and the hitching racks along Main Street were lined with horses and buckboards; crowds milled about the courthouse, surged in and out of saloons, gathered in hotel lobbies and in the street, drank, sang, and excitedly discussed the coming trial. The general opinion was that Pete Cable would hang. In spite of this, however, odds were offered freely in the Red Queen that the accused man would be acquitted.

In the late afternoon, "Tad" Hicks, "Windy Sam," and "Kansas" Jones, three Frying Pan punchers, rode into town. They tied their horses to the hitch rack of Moe's Emporium and went across the street to the Comfort House. They pushed through the crowd at the bar and shouted for a drink. But, having thirstily downed that, they refused a second round virtuously. They had been ordered by their boss, Sam Hogg, to remain sober until after the transcontinental train arrived. Now they swaggered down Main Street; and as they passed the Hogg Hardware Store, run by Sam's brother, its owner greeted them.

"Howdy, boys. This town's so durned full of strangers, and I'm so glad to see a gent what I know, that I'll buy yuh a drink," Jim Hogg said heartily.

"Yuh're durn right. She's so full of strangers I don't know her," Windy agreed.

"An' they is all bad-lookin' hombres," Kansas said. Suddenly he was struck with an idea and he added hopefully: "Do yuh reckon there's anything in this talk about the Lava Gang bustin' up the trial to-morrow?"

"Hello, Toothpick, you ole hoss thief!" Kansas hailed a passing rider.

Toothpick Jarrick pulled in his pony and edged it toward the sidewalk. The pony's head drooped; its coat was rough with dried sweat and dust. Its rider's genial, grinning face was streaked with grime; dust covered his jeans. Both he and the pony bore evidence of having come far and fast that day.

"Lo," he greeted. "Mr. Hogg, ain't yuh afraid of being seen with three mutton eaters like them jaspers?"

"Howdy, Toothpick. Hit the ground and have a drink," Jim Hogg invited.

Toothpick shook his head and turned his horse into the street again.

"Where yuh been all week?" Windy asked.

“Me? Fellow, I’ve been playin’ the messenger of destiny.” Toothpick grinned over his shoulder as he headed his horse toward the livery stable.

“Darn idiot!” Jim Hogg spluttered as the four lined up at the bar of the Lone Star. “I’m plumb sick of this here mystery. My brother Sam is packin’ a gun under his vest and another on his hip. The sheriff is nutty with worry, an’ if yuh ask him anything he looks sick and scared. Tough hombres drift into town, and the sheriff gets him more deputies. I hear gents betting the judge don’t dare come back to town, and now I hears he’s due to arrive. I’m bettin’ Sam sent yuh boys to town to help guard him when he comes in.”

“Safe bet,” Windy admitted, “for he sure enough told us plain to stay sober and meet him at the depot.”

“Why for, did he tell yuh? Not any!” Jim Hogg continued his complaint. “Yuh can’t talk natural without some gent sayin’, ‘Hush!’ Toothpick disappears and comes back an’ says he’s the ‘messenger of destiny.’ What in blazes did he mean by that, and where’s he been for the last six days? Lava Gang! Why, this town is gettin’ so scared it’s going to drop dead of heart failure, an’ if yuh ask some one what he thinks, he looks over his shoulder and says, ‘Hush.’ Maybe yuh boys knows what it’s all about.”

Windy put his finger to his lips, looked over his shoulder, then whispered: “This here town is goin’ to have its sins wiped out, like Sodom an’ Gomore.”

“Yuh dang fool!” Hogg spluttered.

Here the bartender cut in. “I ain’t boastin’ that I knows anything, but I’ve kept bar all over this here territory, an’ I’m tellin’ yuh I never see so many tough gangs gathered together as they is in this town. Hell is sure goin’ to pop.”

“Why? How? When?” The irate little storekeeper shot out his questions like a machine gun. “What makes yuh think so?”

“Feel it in my bones,” the bartender hedged mysteriously.

They left the bar and headed toward the station.

The arrival of the Limited was a big event in Cannondale, and a large group of loafers always watched it hurl itself across the prairie and come to an impatient stop at the little station. On this night the three riders found nearly a hundred people lounging there. Sam Hogg was walking up and down impatiently and talking to Tim Lynch, owner of the Lone Star Saloon. The three punchers found perches on a baggage truck, rolled their cigarettes, and looked about for some one to annoy.

They saw Toothpick and the sheriff whispering together in the shadow of the freight house, but the lanky cow-puncher was too quick on the come-back for their taste, and Sheriff Tom Powers was touchy these days, so they continued to search for easier prey. Tad Hicks jerked his thumb toward Dutchy and Silent Moore, leaning against the wall.

“Wish I’d thought of tellin’ Jim Hogg to go question them hombres,” he grinned.

The others chuckled and then grew glum at this lost opportunity, for Dutchy and Silent had the reputation of being morose and taciturn.

Mrs. Ransom, the judge’s wife, her daughter, Mary, and Snippets McPherson strolled by.

“Howdy, ladies,” Kansas called.

Mrs. Ransom nodded, Mary giggled, and Snippets smiled.

“Hello, boys,” she cried. “Kansas, when are you going to bring me over that dun horse to break for you?”

Kansas flushed and the others guffawed. The week before, the said dun had set him afoot ignominiously, where he had been found by Snippets.

“Never mind, Kansas. I was only funnin’. I know your cinch broke, ’cause I found your saddle,” she added contritely.

“Now, yuh darned tadpoles, will yuh believe what I tole yuh? Yuh know darn well *that* girl don’t lie!” Kansas cried. He gazed after Snippets gratefully, for, if the truth be known, his cinch had

not broken; that had been his alibi for the greatest disgrace that can happen to a puncher – to have a broken horse throw him and leave him afoot.

“She’s sure a swell gal,” Tad Hicks said admiringly.

“She’s more like a fellow than a gal, an’ she sure rides like one,” Windy agreed.

The three women passed on down the platform. When they reached Toothpick and the sheriff, Snippets stopped and stared at the tall cowboy.

“Why, Snip,” Mary giggled. “Are you in love with Toothpick? You’re blushing.”

Snippets did not heed her. When Toothpick failed to see her she plucked at his sleeve.

“Toothpick?” Her greeting was a question.

The lanky cow-puncher swung about and snatched off his hat. He had known Snippets ever since she was a child. Then he had worked for her father up North.

“Lo, kid,” he greeted.

“Did yuh see him?” she asked in an eager whisper.

“See who?” Toothpick feigned ignorance.

“Don’t tease. You know,” she pleaded.

“Yuh can spill it to her,” Tom Powers said as he went over to join Mrs. Ransom and Mary.

“Yeh, I seen him,” Toothpick told the girl.

She waited for him to go on. Her dark eyes, wistfully eager, were fixed upon him.

“I goes to El Crucifixo, like yuh tells me to,” drawled Toothpick. “An’ I’m tellin’ yuh I seen there a million dollars’ worth of outlaws, ’cause a gent down there ain’t known socially unless he carries a thousand, dead or alive. I ambles into the Palace Saloon, and the gents look hard at me, an’ that bunch can sure look hard. A couple slid up to me and ask me bluntlike who I am. I tell ’em quick I’m huntin’ Jim-twin Allen. At that they eye me different. Then I spots Jim sittin’ at a table by his lonesome, and I calls him. He’s darned glad to see me. Fie tells those hard hombres I’m his friend, and they get soft, pronto.”

His deliberation irritated the girl.

“But is he coming?” she demanded impatiently.

“Sure is.”

Snippets’ eyes lighted with joy.

“I tell him about the Lava Gang, and he won’t come. Then I tell him yuh want him to come, and still he refuses. He gets sorta bitter an’ says he ain’t no cow-thief catcher – that’s his brother Jack’s job. I plead with him and tell him how your uncle’s in danger. He says he’s not comin’ up here to help your uncle hang a man. By accident I tell how the Lava Gang now and then runs off gals across the border fer ransom and how they murdered that Courfay woman. At that he says quicklike he’ll come a-runnin’.”

“When is he coming?” she asked quickly.

He shook his head. “I dunno.”

“And when you told him I wanted him to come, he wouldn’t?” she asked softly.

“Positively not,” Toothpick said bluntly.

Another question trembled on her lips, but her eyes clouded and she turned away, leaving it unsaid. Toothpick called to her.

“Yuh know why he refused,” he grumbled. “Yuh know darn well Jim Allen is an outlaw and hasn’t a Chinaman’s chance of being pardoned. He’d be a hell of a fellow if he came to see a girl like yuh. But I’ll tell yuh this: He talked a heap about yuh and made me promise I’d tell yuh he was no good, an’ that he thought yuh was only a fool romantic gal what thinks yuh like him’ cause he’s the famous ‘White Wolf.’”

“That’s not true, Toothpick,” she said quietly.

“Sure, I knows,” he told her.

“It’s not the Wolf I like, but – ”

“Sure, you and me and Dutchy is the same. We likes the kid, Jim Allen, what blubbers about his hosses.” Toothpick twirled his hat to hide his emotion.

“It’s a damned shame!” he exploded. “Just the same, kid, yuh want to forget yuh ever see him and marry some nice tame gent.”

“Like you, Toothpick?” she asked, smiling.

“Me?” Toothpick grunted. “Not any! I knows yuh too well. Yuhr tongue is too darned sharp. It keeps a man hoppin’ all the time. Come on! Here’s the train.”

The Limited rose from a far murmur to a rasping, grinding rush of sound and roared to a stop, grumbling, sputtering, like some great steel animal suddenly foiled in its rush through the prairie night. Within the lighted cars, passengers turned in casual curiosity to look at the station throng. But, contrary to its usual custom, that throng did not return the stares. For once interest was not centered on the Limited itself; all eyes were turned toward one man as he descended alone, slowly, with dignity. He faced the curious eyes calmly as he greeted his wife and daughter.

Erect, distinguished with his white goatee and the broad black hat that shaded sincere gray eyes, by no gesture did he betray excitement. And yet he knew that, of that crowd, almost every one knew his difficulties, knew why he had gone to the capitol, were avidly curious about the outcome of the visit, and were even more on edge concerning the trial to-morrow.

Cannondale knew that the judge had been in financial straits ever since the Lava Gang had stolen two hundred of his steers. He had tried unsuccessfully to get his notes renewed at the local bank; finally, he had made this trip to the capitol, where he had friends. But there, also, failure stalked him. His ranch was in debt, and it was hinted that his political position was none too secure.

Rumor said the judge had incurred the antagonism of the Mexican vote and would not be re-elected. How this story had reached Washington he did not know. But of the two banks where he was best known, one refused outright to make a loan and the other postponed it until the judge was forced to leave for Cannondale to preside at the murder trial. Vaguely he suspected that the tentacles of the Lava Gang stretched even into the furthestmost political and financial centers. As he boarded the train for home he resolved to fight the gang to the end, whatever that end might be.

No trace of emotion, beyond pleasure at seeing her, tintured the greeting kiss he gave his wife; no hint of the sword above their heads. Yet one glance at his eyes told the kindly, white-haired little woman that their difficulties were still unsolved. She pressed his hand in the comforting reassurance of her own courage and understanding.

His daughter Mary gave him a resounding kiss and a cheery “Hello, dad.” The family troubles had as yet only vaguely affected Mary; they had not toned down her treble giggle nor her natural nineteen-year-old interest in the arrangement of her blond curls. Snippets, though a year younger, was far more seriously concerned than Mary, because she understood better the gravity of the judge’s situation.

The conductor waved his lantern, the engine snorted response, and the Limited slid majestically past the spectators. At its rear there trailed a smoking car. As this drew abreast of the station platform, the door banged open and a husky brakeman appeared, dragging a small man by the scruff of the neck. The brakeman seized his victim by the collar and, catching him by the seat of the pants, he heaved him outward.

The small man rolled head over heels, to the spectators’ howls of mirth. He fetched up at the feet of the judge and his friends.

“You darned drunken hobo, it takes money to ride on this train,” the brakeman bawled as he shook his fist at the forlorn figure.

The little man stumbled to his feet and disclosed a dirty face largely obscured by blue glasses. His trousers were too large and bagged at the waist. His threadbare coat hung in tatters. A battered bit of felt draped his head in the semblance of a hat, and one toe protruded from an overlarge shoe. He clinched a grimy fist and shook it after the jeering brakeman.

“You mutton face! Just you dare come back here, and I’ll give you a licking so your mother won’t know you!” he cried shrilly.

His futile rage, his puny fists, brought another gale of mirth from the onlookers.

As if stirred by the laughter, his rage mounted, and he lapsed into shrill abuse mixed with oaths. Toothpick seized him by the shoulder and shook him.

“Hey, you little runt, there’s ladies present,” he warned sharply. “Get out of here, pronto!”

He gave the hobo a rough shove that sent him staggering. The small man gave one glance at the tall Toothpick and limped forlornly up the platform.

“Poor fellow!” Mrs. Ransom fluttered after the tattered figure. Even in her own troubles she pitied this scarecrow of a man. “Why did they throw you off the train?”

He paused, then drew down his mouth and whined to gain her sympathy.

“I bought me a ticket to Chi – that’s Chicago – where I live, ma’am. Me muvver is sick. That feller stole my ticket and guv it to a friend, then threw me off.”

Mrs. Ransom struggled between the contrary emotions of pity and common sense. She knew the story was not true, yet he was so forlorn and hungry looking. Pity won.

“Here’s a dollar. Go buy yourself some food,” she said. Then, struck with an idea, she added sternly: “Promise you won’t drink it up.”

The tramp straightened up.

“Me, ma’am?” He was all injured innocence. “Why, ma’am, I never touch the stuff.”

The crowd chuckled. Tom Powers snorted disgust. He seized the man’s arm.

“What’s yuhr name?” he snapped.

The hobo glanced at the star on the sheriff’s coat and tried to slink away. Pinioned by the heavy hand, he cowered as if he expected a blow.

“Mister, I ain’t done nothin’. I’ll get out of town on the first train,” he pleaded.

“You got until to-morrow afternoon to do it,” warned the sheriff.

As the hobo slunk away the three Frying Pan riders looked after him longingly. He was an ideal mark for their humor. Sam Hogg sensed their longing.

“It’s all right, boys,” he said. “You can go along now. Looks like they ain’t goin’ to be no trouble here, after all. Not right now, leastways.”

As one man the three humorists started after the scarecrow. Mrs. Ransom bristled to his protection.

“You bullies!” She shook a warning finger. “If I hear of you tormenting that poor little fellow, I’ll – well, I’ll be angry.”

“Huh, ma’am,” Tad Hicks stuttered. “We wa’n’t thinkin’ of doin’ nothin’, nohow.”

“We figured we’d take him to dinner with us-all,” Windy added with defensive genius.

Mrs. Ransom shook her head, smiling, as they joined the hobo. They towered above him – a tatterdemalion dwarf between three guardsmen.

She rejoined her husband. The sheriff nodded, and the judge and his family moved toward their home. Ransom was flanked by two deputies and further protected by Silent and Dutchy, who brought up a grim rear guard.

Snippets turned back and ran to Toothpick.

“Thank you for protecting me from that man,” she smiled, teasing.

“Huh?” Toothpick queried dumbly.

“Oh, you men! How dumb you are!” She stamped her foot. Then, on tiptoe, she delivered a quick kiss on the nose of the astounded Toothpick and ran to rejoin her party.

Toothpick stared after her. He felt gingerly of his nose and scratched his head.

“She meant somethin’ by that. But what was it?” he asked himself, and gave up the answer.

CHAPTER III

KING OF LIARS

Tad Hicks, Windy Sam, and Kansas Jones, out of sight of the depot platform, seized the little hobo's arms and dragged him willy-nilly behind a saloon.

"Yuh promised yuh wouldn't drink up that cartwheel Mrs. Ransom guv yuh," Tad Hicks reminded him.

"Aw, get out and leave me be," the hobo said truculently, with an evident attempt at bravado.

"What's that?" Windy roared as he tightened his grip on the arm.

The hobo's truculence vanished, and he whined: "Nothin' – where we goin' to eat?"

They led him to a Mexican eating house on Depot Street, where they were joined by Toothpick. Having planked their charge in a chair and ordered food, they settled back to have a little fun with the victim.

"What's yuhr name?" Windy Sam commenced.

"Jim Anson. What's yours?" the hobo asked.

"Windy Sam, now – "

The man called Jim Anson interrupted him.

"Is you called that because you talk too much, or because what you say don't mean nothin'?" he asked innocently.

"Ha-ha!" the others exclaimed, and dug the red-faced Sam in the ribs.

One after the other they plied him with questions, but his answers always left them floundering. He had a way of turning a thrust into a boomerang. He did this with such a guileless, cringing air that they were never sure whether he was secretly laughing at them or if his answers were accidental. Before the meal was over he had them grinning at his absurd tales. In spite of themselves they listened, absorbed, and momentarily almost believed what he said.

"Rise up, liars, and salute yuhr king!" Toothpick shouted.

For a moment there was a change in the hobo's face. The fawning expression was replaced by a broad, lovable grin that made the punchers' hearts warm toward Jim Anson. Toothpick started. For a moment he studied the hobo's face, saw the fawning smile there again, and shook his head.

The five adjourned to Maria's Cantina, on the corner of Depot Street. Jim Anson insisted that the first drink was on him and ordered it in a loud voice. Another followed and another. Toothpick chuckled when he saw that, while Jim Anson always ordered the drinks, one of the three riders paid for them.

All the while Jim Anson asked them questions in such a way that they never realized they were being pumped. He turned on Toothpick and skillfully ferreted from him the story of the murder of the Courfay family two weeks before.

"When we got there they was all dead, except one gent what says: 'Fees do dible chable' which I figures is French." Toothpick rambled on with his story, but Jim Anson was not listening.

"*Fils du Diable à Cheval*," he muttered to himself. "Sons of the Devil on Horseback. Gosh!"

A little later "Mac" Kennedy, an Eastern dude, sauntered in. Jim Anson, after studying him a minute, turned to the others.

"Who's that gazebo all dressed up like a Christmas tree?" he asked.

"He's a white-livered dude," Windy snorted contemptuously.

"He comes out here about three months back and says it's for his health," Kansas elaborated. "Buys the Bar X, a little runt of a ranch what backs up against the lava fields."

"He don't look yellow," Anson said meditatively.

"He is, though. Plumb yellow, from the neck down and feet up," Tad Hicks hiccuped.

Ten minutes later Bill Anderson stepped into the *cantina*. He hesitated for a moment when he saw the group at the table; then he nodded to them.

“Boss in the back room?” he asked of Maria.

“*Si, si, señor.*”

Anderson walked quickly to a door in the back, glancing over his shoulder at the five at the table. Apparently they were too interested in themselves to note his actions. Quietly he passed through and closed the door after him.

Jim Anson insisted on buying one last drink here, despite his comrades' urging to try the liquor elsewhere. Maria brought the drinks. Kennedy, the dude laughed as he watched them. He leaned over the bar and whispered something to Maria, then left the *cantina*.

The cow-punchers began to sing, and the woman came forward and ordered them to leave.

“All right, we'll go,” Jim Anson said with drunken dignity. He staggered to his feet and swayed toward the rear door. He turned the handle and kicked it open. It led to a storeroom.

“That's not the way, stupid.” The woman gave him a violent shove after the others. He grinned drunkenly at her and staggered out.

About ten that evening Bill Anderson swung in at Judge Ransom's gate and knocked at the door. When he and the judge were comfortably installed in easy-chairs before a fire, he looked squarely at Ransom.

“What are you going to do about the trial to-morrow?” he asked bluntly.

“My duty,” the older man replied with equal bluntness.

“Judge, don't think I'm asking you to do anything else,” Anderson added quickly. “You know I'm not in politics for my health. When I came here a couple of years ago, every one was at odds. The leaders of the party were fighting among themselves. I'm not flattering myself when I say that all stopped when I took hold. Judge, you understand that I'd soon lose my leadership if I nominated men who were not elected.”

The judge had hoped against hope that Bill Anderson would back him because of his record, even if the Mexican vote was against him. He was sure, if he could get the nomination, he would be re-elected. Now his heart sank.

“Let's be frank, judge. If you insist on bearing down too heavily in the trial to-morrow, you lose the Mexican vote, and, much as I want to, judge, I don't see how I can propose you for renomination.”

The judge pulled thoughtfully at his goatee. For the first time since he had known Bill Anderson, he detected a certain sinister quality beneath his bland air of good fellowship.

“But, Anderson, this Pete Cable isn't a Mexican,” he said.

“That's not the question,” Anderson replied. “For some reason the Mexican vote is interested in him. Now, why not be sensible? Go easy at the trial. Cable was drunk, he made a mistake and killed this Easterner. Other men have killed in this town and gotten away with it. Why not be reasonable? Remember, you are not being asked to do anything dishonorable. All these people ask you to do is to sit quiet – to do nothing.”

“You ask me to do nothing – nothing but pervert justice,” the judge said quietly.

The political boss' good nature and blandness dropped away. A stranger to the judge stood before him, with a face that was hard and cruel.

“This house is mortgaged, isn't it?” Anderson snapped.

This hit home, for the place was mortgaged to the hilt, and the notes were due the following month. Ransom paled, but his eyes were steady as he gazed into Anderson's granitelike brown ones.

“Is that a threat?” he asked.

“Only a reminder,” Anderson said savagely. The next moment the judge heard the front door slam, and he was alone.

Slowly he paced the floor. He and his wife had struggled for his present position, for this home. What sacrifices she had made to allow him to finish law school, and through the years of poverty that

had followed his graduation! Little by little, after that, came success, until recently they had dreamed of the time when he would go to Washington, a United States senator. All that rosy future had seemed assured – until last month.

Now, not only the future, but the present, might be wiped out. Their savings were wasted; his hope of reflection crumbled; their home would go next. All because of a murder trial with its mysterious ramifications. There would be no college for Mary, no ease in old age for his wife.

Rebellion and temptation seized him. What right had he to bring ruin on his family? All he had to do was to let events take their course, as Anderson had directed. His credit would be good once more; his dreams of Washington might come true. Back and forth he walked and struggled with the devils of temptation.

A door opened gently, and Snippets stood before him.

“Uncle,” she said softly, “I heard. I couldn’t help it.”

“You heard?” he said, and his voice was harsh. “Then what shall I do? Ruin my wife and child?”

“No. Make them proud of you,” she said firmly.

The judge’s face cleared, and he smiled. “Thank Heaven for you, my child,” he said. “You’re right. That’s the one thing I must do.”

Anderson left the judge’s house in a high rage, but the moment he was in the open his anger gradually left him, and he was once more his cool, calculating self.

“That’s the first time I lost my temper in nine years,” he told himself. “Now what’s to be done? First thing to-morrow I’ve got to see the judge and apologize. I guess I better go and talk it over with my dear brother. How pleased he would be if he knew I’d lost my temper!”

He laughed and strode briskly down Main Street toward the Red Queen. Across from the Lone Star he saw Toothpick, Tad Hicks, Windy Sam, and Jim Anson, staggering along, arm in arm. They had left Kansas asleep at the Lone Star. Anderson waved at them; he was once more the politician.

“Come on, boys, I’ll buy you a drink,” he called.

They staggered after him into the Red Queen and lurched against the bar. The place was filled with shouting, singing men. The back of the long bar shone ornately with polished glasses, mirrors, colored bottles, and other glittering paraphernalia.

Anderson ordered the drinks, and his four guests drank thirstily, with profuse thanks. He nodded to them, told them he would see them later, and pushed his way through the milling crowd toward the gambling room. Unseen, Jim Anson slipped through the crowd in his wake.

The gambling room of the Red Queen was on the left of the dance hall. Here Francisco Garcia, the owner, could be found on any night. The Toad, as he was called by some, but always behind his back, acted as lookout for a big game. He sat on a raised platform between the two faro tables. He was so powerfully built that he looked squat despite his height. Heavy jowls, thick lips, and protruding eyes relieved the monotony of his full-moon face. His swarthinness hinted at Mexican blood. Garcia himself never carried a visible weapon; he relied on his two paid killers for protection – “Yuma Kid” and “Baldy” Flynn. And because his enemies had a strange habit of disappearing or ending violently, he was more feared than any other man along the border.

Bill Anderson, with Jim Anson, still unnoted, at his heels, sauntered to the table and watched the play for a moment. Then he smiled to Garcia.

“Having a big game?”

The Toad grunted.

“I wanted a word with you, but to-morrow will do.” Anderson turned away.

Jim Anson, that ubiquitous hobo, flopped drunkenly at a near-by table. From beneath his tattered hat brim he studied the gross Mexican and the two killers who lounged against the wall behind him. “Gosh! The Devil on Horseback,” murmured Anson to himself. “And he had four sons! Horned lizards. Rattlers. Coyotes, mixed up with tiger and Spanish bull.”

He wandered out to the dance hall, staggering; yet, strangely enough, when a bully struck at him, he seemed to float away to escape the blow.

His comrades at the bar were now noisy and riotous with drink.

"I'd sure like to see some of this money that's bein' bet that Pete Cable won't get his neck stretched," Windy announced to the world.

"Yuh wanta see it? Take a look at this." A wad of bills dropped on the bar. The three punchers swung about to stare at the money and at the man with the high, cackling voice who had produced it.

They met the toothless leer of old Baldy Flynn. Behind Baldy lounged the Yuma Kid, twenty-one-year-old, two-gun killer. The Kid's pale eyes met theirs, and his two buck teeth shone in a menacing sneer. Most men could easily whip the narrow-chested Yuma Kid in a hand-to-hand encounter, but he did not fight that way; and he was feared along the border.

Baldy and the Kid, Garcia's two hired slayers, were inseparable. They were bound together by the bond of skill with a Colt and by their unscrupulous cruelty, despite their varying characters. The Yuma Kid seldom talked, never laughed, and never drank. He avoided quarrels, save for profit. Baldy, on the contrary, loved his liquor, his own jokes, and above all loved to quarrel with those who failed to laugh with him.

Toothpick realized that he and Windy stood no chance against these two killers; he knew their reputation. Yet the bar was crowded; people were listening and were already commencing to shuffle to one side in the hope of a fight.

"Yuh gents is talkin' loud. I'm bettin' yuh my roll that Pete don't get his neck stretched," Baldy cackled.

Toothpick saw the menace in the killer's eyes, and it sobered him. He tried to gather his scattered wits. He glanced at his friends and saw that they were incapable of action. Tad Hicks, with drooping head, clung to the rail of the bar. Toothpick knew that Baldy would push the affair and try to force Windy to take water. This, no matter what the consequences, Toothpick would not permit; certainly not, with that crowd of spectators all watching and listening. Windy had been a fool; Toothpick would have to use his wits to get him out of it. He chose his words carefully.

"That roll of yallerbacks sure makes me hungry like a coyote, 'cause it's three days to pay day," he said, grinning. Both he and Windy moved to the left. If it came to gun play, their right hands would not be hampered in the draw.

Baldy cackled derisively again. He turned to the hushed bystanders and grinned. Out of the tail of his eye Toothpick saw Jim Anson squirm through the crowd toward them.

Baldy spoke slowly and raised his voice: "Gents, I'm askin' yuh to step up an' –"

Boom! A Colt roared behind Toothpick. Like flashes of light, guns leaped into the hands of Baldy and the Yuma Kid.

"What the hell?" snarled Baldy.

Toothpick swung about and saw Jim Anson looking foolishly at a smoking Colt on the floor.

"Darn it!" the hobo wailed. "The durn thing was loaded."

He looked so foolish as he stared at the gun that the crowd rocked with mirth, but Baldy spat like a wild cat.

"What did yuh expect, yuh bum?" he shrieked.

Tad Hicks had been aroused from his sleep by the shot and stared stupidly at Jim Anson.

"When yuh guv it to me, yuh didn't say it was loaded," Anson stuttered reproachfully.

Tad held out a wavering hand and picked up the gun.

"Kick that hobo out o' here," cried Baldy. Hands seized Jim Anson and sent him spinning to the sidewalk.

Jim Anson disposed of, Baldy turned again to Toothpick and Windy; but before he could speak, Bill Anderson shoved his way to the bar between the killer and the two riders.

"It's right kind of you, Baldy," he remarked.

“Huh?” Baldy blinked with surprise. “What yuh mean?”

Bill Anderson looked at him blandly.

“Didn’t you say, just as that fool hobo learned that guns are loaded: ‘Gents, I’m askin’ you to step up and name your poison?’ There’s your money on the bar.”

The crowd chuckled and moved a step closer to the bar. Anderson, without waiting for a reply, called to the bartender:

“I’ll take straight whisky for mine.”

After one look into Anderson’s eyes, Baldy grinned ingratiatingly.

Toothpick and Windy decided that discretion was the better part of valor. Dragging Tad Hicks with them, they slipped out of the bar.

“Huh!” Windy complained, as the cool air refreshed him. “I was lit up considerable, but now I’m plumb sober.”

“Me, too. Baldy scared me sober,” Toothpick agreed. “I’m goin’ to buy that hobo drinks aplenty, ’cause he sure stopped Baldy from hurtin’ my feelings.”

“Sure did. But I’m tellin’ yuh that Bill Anderson is some nervy hombre, runnin’ in on a sidewinder rattler like that toothless old ape. Folks says he’s a grafter, but I’ll vote for a coyote, if he tells me to, just because he made that Baldy draw in his horns,” Windy confided.

Toothpick did not reply. He was puzzling out an answer to a riddle. Why had Baldy backed down, when Anderson confronted him? He left Windy and Tad Hicks at the Lone Star and then went to look for Jim Anson.

“That little runt sure saved my reputation, an’ he can have half of my bed, even if he is a dirty little tramp,” he told himself.

He wandered about, searching bar after bar. At last he discovered the hobo asleep in Maria’s. Before him on the table stood a half-empty bottle. Toothpick shook him awake. However, Anson refused to move until they had finished the bottle. Toothpick was agreeable because he was now stone sober. They had emptied the bottle when, to their surprise, Anderson stepped out of the back room. His face clouded when he saw them.

“Darned good of yuh, Mr. Anderson, to steer Baldy away to-night,” Toothpick called.

Anderson smiled genially.

“That’s nothing. Is that the little bum who just discovered guns are loaded?” he asked.

Toothpick nodded.

“Who is he?”

“A hobo what got hisself thrown off the train this evenin’.”

Anderson called good night and left. The moment he was gone Jim Anson grasped Toothpick’s arm and staggered out with him. To better support the drunken hobo, Toothpick slipped a hand beneath his armpit. He jerked the hand away suddenly.

“Say, who are you?” he demanded. “Yuh got a gun there in a shoulder holster, and yuh made believe yuh didn’t savvy guns.”

The hobo dropped his stagger and stood erect.

“Where’s my hosses, Toothpick?” he asked softly.

Toothpick jumped; the whine had left that voice, and he knew it now.

“Gosh! Jim-twin Allen!” he whispered.

Allen laughed.

“Huh! That’s what Snippets meant by callin’ me stupid,” said Toothpick. “Yuh sure got everybody fooled except her.”

“Maybe so,” Allen said indifferently. “I give the brakeman five bucks to throw me off that train.”

The two rode together out of town toward the lava fields.

“Why for did yuh watch Anderson at Maria’s to-night?” asked Toothpick.

“Cause I was plumb curious to savvy why Anderson went in that back room and come out with straw on his boots. Is there a stable in that block?”

“Yeh. They’s one behind the Red Queen.”

“Thought so,” Allen grunted sleepily.

CHAPTER IV

SONS OF THE DEVIL

By eight o'clock the following morning, every seat in the courtroom was taken; men crowded the aisles and perched on the window sills. At eight thirty the sheriff closed the doors and refused to allow any more to crowd in. Exactly at nine Judge Ransom stepped from his house and walked slowly down Main Street toward the courthouse. As he passed State Street, Dutchy and Silent Moore stepped up and followed him. The judge did not look back, but he knew they were there. He quickened his pace, for their presence reminded him forcibly of his danger.

The crowd before the Red Queen grew silent as the judge approached. He nodded to several friends on the porch of the Comfort Hotel, as he cut across Depot Street toward a small door which led to his chambers. At his knock it was opened by the sheriff. The judge and his two shadows passed in, and the door was locked behind them.

A few minutes later he entered the courtroom and took his seat on the bench; outwardly he was calm, inwardly he twitched with nervousness.

The prisoner was brought in, the charge was read, and the trial was on. Pete Cable, a big brute of a man, grinned insolently. The judge realized with something of a shock that, in spite of the prisoner's pale skin and American name, he was a Mexican; he understood now why the Mexican vote would be against him in the next election.

The Honorable J. T. Williams, the defense lawyer, had been imported from Washington at great expense. He towered over Bill Herrick, the little prosecuting attorney, who was obviously nervous and frightened. The judge wondered if Herrick, too, had been threatened, and, if so, if he had weakened.

Tom Powers had seen to it that there was no chance to fix the jury. He had collected his panel only the night before, and no man knew he was to serve until given a summons, when he was straight-way conducted to the jail and locked up in a large room.

From the first it was apparent that Williams sought delay. He did all in his power to make the trial drag and to encumber it with technicalities. He offered objection after objection, forced the judge to rule on a fine point of law at every opportunity.

One by one the jurymen were called, and Williams challenged them peremptorily. He had no idea of the size of the panel called by the sheriff and hoped to force him to call another. If he were successful, the defense would not be caught napping again and would see that among those called there were several who would bring in a verdict of acquittal, no matter what the evidence.

But by late afternoon Williams saw his challenges mostly used up, and still there was no sign of the end of the panel. The jury box was full before the court adjourned for the day.

The judge was thoughtful as, followed by his two shadows, he walked home that evening. The die was cast; he had clearly shown that he was in the camp of justice. He refused to think of the consequences.

Bill Anderson was waiting for him when he arrived at his house. The political boss apologized for losing his temper the evening before. His regret appeared so sincere that the judge almost forgot that momentary flash he had seen of the man's real character.

A little later Mac Kennedy and Ace Cutts arrived. Kennedy was a frequent visitor at the house and a great favorite of Mrs. Ransom's. Ace Cutts was a sleek-haired young fellow of twenty-three, who went in for flashy clothes and handmade boots. He had full charge of the Bar X, and the judge had brought him up as his own son, although he had never adopted the boy legally. At times Ace's wildness bothered him. Now Ace drew his foster father aside.

“Look here, dad. Why lean over so straight you fall over backward? Be sensible. Take things easy. They can't possibly acquit Pete Cable. Why not work things to have a hung verdict? Then you grant a new trial. You can be in Washington, and another judge will hang him.”

“I'm sorry to hear you talk like that, my boy,” the judge said severely.

Ace flared up.

“Rats! It's sense. They'll break you,” he cried angrily.

“Ace, come on, if you're going to dinner with me!” Kennedy called sharply.

Kennedy said good night to the judge and departed, followed by the sulky Ace.

The judge watched them thoughtfully. He wished Ace would get control of that temper; he said foolish things when he was angry, and people might misunderstand him.

About ten that night Toothpick and Jim Allen arrived back in town. All day they had lain flat on their stomachs, under cover of brush, and watched the lava fields with a pair of powerful binoculars. Now they had circled the town and entered it from the north.

Toothpick went to the jail, where he held a long, whispered conference with the sheriff. Powers' expression changed from surprise to delight as he listened. Allen went to Maria's cantina. He staggered as he arrived, but he had money to pay for a bottle, so Maria allowed him to remain. He chose a table close to the rear door; here he drank the first bottle and called for another. He was halfway through this when Dutchy and another man entered. They argued drunkenly for a time, and ended in a fist fight.

A table and a chair crashed over. Maria screamed. She left her bar to stop the fight and assailed the two men with furious words. They mumbled and staggered out. When she returned to the bar she looked about for Allen; he had vanished. Puzzled, she stared about for a moment, then shrugged her shoulders with indifferent indolence.

Allen had slipped, under cover of the fight, out of the back door. He found, as he expected, another door beyond, that led from the storeroom into a path. This, in turn, led to an alley, which cut the block in two and was lined by shacks, little better than hovels. Directly opposite from the intersection of the path and the alley lay a corral.

“That's where Mr. Anderson got straw on his feet. He comes by that narrow alley so he won't have to go by them greaser shacks, 'cause, if he did, they might talk. Let's see what he comes for.” Allen chuckled to himself.

He removed his blue glasses, took a Colt from his shoulder holster, and tucked it inside his belt. Then he flitted across the alley and ducked under the corral bars, silent as a ghost. He crossed the corral to a wall on the farther side. Music within told him that this was the rear of the Red Queen Saloon. There was no door here, so he slipped over to the barn and examined that. He passed the double doors that led to the stable. Beyond these he found a small door which was locked. He recrossed the corral, slipped under the bars, and tiptoed down the alley toward Depot Street. In one or two of the shacks there were lights, and once he passed two slovenly Mexicans seated in a doorway. They called to him, but he hurried by.

Back on Main Street he fell into his rôle once more, staggering and singing softly to himself. He peered through the doors of the Red Queen, not daring to enter, because of the danger of being thrown out. Yet if he found Anderson, he had a plan that he thought would reinstate him in the Red Queen. He waited until several men clattered in to the bar and slipped in after them. He ducked through into the dancing hall, unseen by the bartenders. By good luck he found Anderson watching a poker game. He plucked his sleeve.

Anderson scowled at him.

“Say, mister,” he whined, “don't let that sheriff jug me. They tell me you're a good guy that don't kick a guy just 'cause he's down on his luck.”

Several other men who heard the hobo's appeal looked curiously at the tattered figure and laughed.

“You just stick in here, an’ Powers dasen’t come in after yuh,” one of them said.

“But them gents out front will give me the bum’s rush,” the hobo complained.

Anderson grinned good-naturedly. “I’ve been down on my luck myself. Tom Powers can’t touch you, if you have a job.”

The hobo drew back suspiciously.

“I ain’t very strong, mister.”

Again the others laughed, and the political boss smiled.

“I wasn’t thinking of anything that would hurt your health,” he said. “How about doing odd jobs about the Red Queen?”

Anderson went over to the Toad and talked to him for a moment. The Toad grinned and assented. Allen had known there was no love lost between Anderson and Tom Powers, but, even so, things had worked out better than he had hoped. Now he was hired as handy man about the Red Queen.

He took up his new duties on the spot. And between errands he kept his ears open.

“Ace is sure shootin’ ’em high to-night. I bet he’s lost over a thousand,” he heard a man say.

“It must come easy to him, because he lost more than that last night,” another laughed.

Allen wandered over to the poker table. Ace Cutts’ face was sullen. Ace was a poor gambler, for he became angry and forced his luck. He bluffed wildly and tried to outdraw the other players. Allen watched his chips melt away until the last one was gone. Ace leaped to his feet and went over to Bill Anderson.

“I’m busted, Bill; let me have five hundred,” he demanded.

Anderson’s face grew flinty, his eyes hard.

“And you’ll pay me back out of the sixty a month the judge gives you,” he said with a harsh laugh.

Ace Cutts’ dark face flushed; his eyes grew stormy. He leaned forward as if to whisper something, but Anderson turned away. Ace glared at him, then jammed on his hat and went out to the bar.

“Where the hell does he get his money?” some one asked Anderson.

The political boss shrugged.

“Maybe he signs the judge’s name to papers,” he suggested.

The other nodded. But Allen was not satisfied with this explanation, for he knew that Anderson knew the judge was broke. A little later he walked out of the Red Queen and headed toward the Ransoms’ house. As he passed it he whistled softly, then stopped in the shade of some bushes a little farther on. There he was joined by Dutchy.

“That was sure a realistic scrap yuh pulled in Maria’s,” Allen said by way of greeting.

“Yuh got what yuh was after?” Dutchy asked.

Allen nodded. They whispered together for a few minutes, until Toothpick rode up and dismounted. Without a word he handed his bridle to Allen, who mounted and trotted down the street.

“Damn the little cuss! Why doesn’t he tell a fellow what he’s doin’?” Toothpick said irritably.

“So yuh can tell the folks in the Red Queen about it?” Dutchy was scornful. “I’m bettin’ he’ll find a way through them lava fields.”

The following morning, when court opened, the room was again packed. The judge took his seat, and the first witness took the stand. The prosecuting attorney, visibly upset, began the questioning. It was apparent at once that the attorney had been “fixed”; he might as well have been the defending lawyer, for he asked only questions that were favorable to the prisoner. The witness looked disappointed when he was excused. He had had something to tell and had not the chance to do it. He had been asked many questions, but none of importance.

Another witness took the stand, and the district attorney followed the same tactics. The judge saw Williams frown. The local attorney was making the thing too obvious. The jury glanced at one

another and whispered among themselves. But this witness was a pugnacious Irishman, and when he was excused he refused to leave the chair.

“Ain’t yuh goin’ to ask me if Oi seen Pete Cable down that dude?” he roared.

The district attorney paled. He glanced appealingly toward Williams. Before he could determine on a line of action, the foreman of the jury decided to question the witness himself.

“Did yuh see the prisoner down that dude?” he asked.

“Shure Oi did. The dude was skeered stiff whin Pete yanked out his gun. Pete said deliberate: ‘Oi’ll learn yuh to call me a card cheat.’ Thin he plunked the dude twice in the stomach.”

Williams shouted: “I object!”

The spectators began to move restlessly and mutter in low tones. The judge hammered on his desk. When silence was restored, he overruled Williams’ objection.

The district attorney met the belligerent eye of the foreman; he sensed the angry restlessness of the spectators. He was between the devil and the deep sea. A coward at heart, he yielded to the present menace. He had started this trial crooked, but he would have to finish it straight. Instantly he did a right-about face and changed his tactics. He called witness after witness, and his questions were now keenly edged.

When the prosecution rested, not a man in the room would have taken the short end of a thousand to one that Pete Cable would not hang. The straight stories of those witnesses seemed already to have placed the rope around his bull-like neck. Confidence had left even the prisoner; pasty yellow mantled his usually red face.

Williams did what he could; he called witnesses who flatly contradicted the first evidence, but under cross-examination they floundered and contradicted themselves. By five o’clock the rival attorneys asked time to prepare their summing up, and court adjourned.

That night the district attorney made a wise decision; he slept in the jail. And two deputies reenforced the judge’s usual escort of Dutchy and Silent.

Late that night Allen attacked the mysterious little door in the barn with a large variety of keys. It gave at last, and he slipped inside. A ladder led to a hayloft, and he went up. He had no light and fumbled for many minutes before he found another door in the farther end of the loft. More key manipulation and it, too, yielded. Cautiously he crept along the short hall beyond and listened at the door at the end.

“I’ve done all I will to save that fool,” an unfamiliar voice rasped.

“He’s your brother.” Allen knew that heavy guttural. It belonged to Francisco Garcia, the Toad.

“You and he are alike. You lose your temper and kill,” the other man replied.

Allen searched his memory. Where had he heard that voice? At the risk of missing something he hurried to the door at the other end and listened. If any one came in through the barn he would be caught like a rat in a trap. Five seconds later he was back again, straining his ears.

“We’ll talk about that when he comes,” the unknown man said. “We have got to start a clean-up pronto. It’s our only chance. We got to get these gents out of the way.” He read a list of names, which Allen carefully noted. When the man had finished, he added: “Jim Allen’s in town!”

“The Wolf!” A chair crashed as the Toad leaped up.

“Skinny saw him and those grays of his over near the lava fields,” the other added. “Skinny’s downstairs waiting.”

“*Dios!* The man who killed our father!” the heavy voice of the Toad cried.

“There’s two people in town who may know where he holes out – Toothpick and that girl Snippets.”

“Then we have to – ”

Like a flash Allen slipped back along the hall. Already his exit was barred! A blurred figure stood at the top of the ladder. He waited, knowing that whoever it was had seen him in the shadows. The figure vanished behind a post.

“Francisco!” the man called. “There’s some one out here.”

The inner door to the room was flung open, and Allen heard a voice bawl for Baldy and the Yuma Kid. Noiselessly Allen circled the post which hid the man. He was within five feet of the square hole which led to the floor below when he heard steps pounding upstairs as the two killers answered the call of their boss. He picked up a board and hurled it across to the opposite wall; he knew that the man behind the post would look instinctively in that direction. He leaped for the trapdoor. He plunged through before the man had time to turn and fire. Allen landed on his feet, agile as a cat. The outer door was blocked now by another man. A Colt roared, and the door was empty. Allen slipped through the corral bars.

He ran down the alley and five minutes later entered the Red Queen. He was once more the hobo as he slouched into a chair where he could watch the door that led into the Toad’s private quarters. He considered his discoveries. He had learned that there was another brother mixed up in this affair. He would see to it that Toothpick was sent out of danger and that Snippets was guarded. He had a suspicion as to who this other brother was, but no proof. As a matter of fact, he had no proof of anything. He would have to get that, and there was very little time to be lost.

Fifteen minutes later the Toad, followed by his killers, entered. Allen waited for some time and then decided that the unknown man had left the barn by the back way. Shuffling, with his hands thrust deep in his pockets, he went to the bar. Here he had a couple of drinks, which, as usual, went, not down his throat, but into the cuspidor.

He staggered out to the sidewalk and commenced to sing. As he neared the jail Tom Powers came out and seized him by the arm.

“I told yuh I’d run yuh in if I caught yuh again,” he cried, and, to the amusement of several spectators, he dragged the cursing little hobo to the jail door. When this was closed behind them the sheriff released Allen’s arm and led the unresisting tramp into his own private office.

“I’m glad to meet yuh, Mr. Allen,” the sheriff said as he studied the tattered figure opposite him. Allen grinned.

“We sure worked that pretty. Yuh got to keep me in jail a couple of days. I found the way through them lava fields, and I want to see where it goes to, so I’m lightin’ out for there to-night, and I don’t reckon I’ll be back until after to-morrow.”

“And the people over in the Red Queen will think yuh’re in jail,” the sheriff chuckled. “A good alibi.”

“I suppose yuh want to learn what I found out. Maybe yuh recollect a hombre what used to hang out along the Texas border about seven years ago what called himself ‘*le Diable à Cheval*?’”

“Yuh betcha – and he was some devil, too,” the sheriff said.

“He used to steal girls over the border and hold ’em fer ransom,” Allen went on. “I followed the gent – the Devil on Horseback – for near a month, then I ketched him and downed him.”

The sheriff stared.

“He had four sons by four wives, and all four sons is right here in town. One of ’em ain’t far from us here.”

“You mean Pete Cable?” the sheriff demanded.

“Sure. That’s why the other three are raising such hell to keep Pete from stretching hemp. I betcha yuh could guess another if yuh thinks hard enough.”

Without a moment’s hesitation the sheriff answered. “The Toad! An’ I’d say I knew the third if he weren’t white.”

“Didn’t I tell yuh they had different mothers?” Allen grinned.

“Then Anderson did fix those bandages!” the sheriff cried with an oath. “Who’s the fourth?” he asked.

“I ain’t got no idea – don’t even know what he looks like. But I did hear once that a gent in Texas who was called ‘Cupid Dart’ was a son of the Devil.”

“The two-gun sheriff and bad man?”

“The same.”

Briefly Allen told the sheriff about the death list he had heard the unknown man read out in the secret room.

“Two nights from now yuh have Tim Lynch, the Hogg brothers, Doc Robinson an’ yourself meet me at the judge’s, an’ I’ll have somethin’ to tell yuh,” he promised. “An’ yuh can warn them gents that the bunch they calls the Lava Gang is goin’ to down ’em, ’cause if they can get the judge’s crowd out of the way, they can run things as they choose. With Anderson controllin’ the white vote, and the Toad the greaser vote, they’d sure break this country wide open and plenty. Yuh and yuhr friends be careful.”

The sheriff shook his head. As yet they had no proof against their enemies. Yet there was something in the matter-of-fact way Allen spoke that made him hope their difficulties would be over soon.

“Yuh got a back door here?” Allen asked.

The sheriff led him to the small door that opened into a vacant lot behind the jail.

“Yuh tell Dutchy not to let Snippets out of his sight,” Allen gave his final warning. He vanished into the night.

Scarcely had the door closed on him when some one pounded on the front door. The sheriff opened it to an excited news bearer.

“Some one knifed Doc Robinson,” gasped the man.

The sheriff called two of his deputies and ran to the doctor’s house. The doctor had been knifed in bed. No one had seen the murderer come or go.

With a sick feeling, the sheriff remembered Allen’s story of the fatal list. He left the deputies in charge and went to warn the others of that death list. Each took it seriously and quietly, with the exception of Jim Hogg, who sputtered and insisted he had a right to know who was going to attack him and why.

“I don’t know who, but the why of it is because yuh’re an honest man,” Tom Powers told him.

The sheriff found Dutchy in his usual place before the judge’s house. When the sheriff gave him Allen’s message his only reply was a grunt of reassurance.

CHAPTER V

THE WOLF SHOWS HIMSELF

On the following day, about eleven o'clock, a great shout went up from the crowd before the courthouse. The jury had brought in a verdict of first-degree murder against Pete Cable.

On Thursday night, after dinner, Tim Lynch, the Hogg brothers, and the sheriff met in the judge's house. They had been there but a short time when Ace Cutts, followed by Anderson, strolled into the room. The sheriff frowned when he saw them, but he realized that it would be better to keep them here now than to allow them to go away. They must suspect something about the gathering.

"Dad told me that little fake, Jim Allen, was coming here to-night, so I thought I'd drop in and look him over," Ace said sneeringly.

Sam Hogg bounced to his feet. "You promised to tell no one!"

"Ace is really my son, and it just slipped out," the judge apologized. He looked sternly at Ace. "You kept your word?"

"Sure thing. Bill, here, never heard a word about the Wolf until we came in here," Ace replied.

"That's true, gentlemen," Anderson corroborated him.

The sheriff doubted both of them. He considered swiftly. He could not reach Allen now and warn him not to come. Dutchy had gone downtown. If he himself left to find Allen he might miss him. Better to remain here and help the Wolf when he came.

Bill Anderson regarded the waiting circle sardonically. "I've always been curious to see Jim-twin Allen," he said. "You'll forgive me if I mention that an alliance between a judge, a sheriff, and an outlaw has its humorous side."

"You're quite right," said the judge thoughtfully. "But if he can help us we are justified in allying ourselves with him."

"If he was the devil and could lead us into the lava fields I'd follow, hanging onto his tail," said the sheriff.

"If what I hears is true, that he can follow trail like an Apache or a bloodhound, I'm bettin' he can lead us through them lava fields," Sam Hogg cried warmly.

"You fellows are wastin' your time," Ace Cutts put in. "He ain't got nerve enough to come here."

"Yuh mean he ain't big enough fool to come into a town filled with gents what is longin' to plug him," Jim Hogg corrected.

"Call it that if yuh like."

"I am afraid I agree with Ace; whether it is fear or caution which keeps him away, he won't come to-night," the judge said heavily.

"He will come, because he said he would," affirmed a girl's voice. Snippets had entered the room in time to hear the last remarks.

Anderson laughed tolerantly. "That sounds like a schoolgirl's admiration for Robin Hood."

"Robin Hood – huh! Allen's rep is made by fools, girls, and old men," Ace snapped. "I'm tellin' yuh he ain't no good and he won't come. And we're wasting our time not havin' a rider beatin' it to Texas to get Cupid Dart, the gent I was tellin' you of."

His words held a word of hate. The other men looked at him curiously. Jim Hogg scratched his head. The judge looked questioningly at the others.

"I think Ace is right," Bill Anderson said judiciously. "We have all heard of Cupid Dart. Why not send for him? Even if Allen does come, it is a question if we can trust him."

"Trust him? Of course you can't trust him! He's a bushwhackin' killer, who kills men by shootin' them in the back. I know men who have seen him do it." Ace's face was pale with rage.

"Why do you hate him?" the girl asked quietly.

“Because you are a sorta cousin of mine, and I hate to think of you having truck with a man like him,” Ace replied bitterly.

“I have no truck with him; I have never heard one word from him since the day he rode away after saving my father. He told me then that friendship between a girl like myself and a man like him was impossible.”

The girl's face was flushed. In spite of herself her voice trembled. But her eyes were steady as she looked into Ace's angry brown ones.

“Darn it, the girl's in love with the little runt,” Sam Hogg whispered to his brother. He went over and placed an arm about the girl's shoulder.

“Ace, yuh got Allen wrong,” he said defensively. “When I was in the Rangers and he hung out in Texas, I chased him plenty. And he had the rep then, among bad hombres, of bein' square. An' I don't believe he killed any gent what didn't need killin' bad.”

“Only men who fear him hate him,” the girl said softly.

Ace Cutts took a step toward her, but Anderson grasped his arm.

“You fool!” he exclaimed in a whisper.

His back was toward the others. His lips formed a sentence that could be read only by Ace. The young man nodded sullenly and made an effort to recover his composure.

“When he comes,” Snippets said anxiously to Tom Powers, “remember you promised there will be no shooting.”

“Are you scared I'll drop your hero?” Ace jeeringly asked.

“There's going to be no gun play,” Tom Powers cut in sharply.

“Make him give you his word,” she insisted.

The worry in her voice was apparent to all. Ace was triumphant.

“I promise you I won't – ” he began.

Sam Hogg read the reason correctly for the girl's anxiety and he interrupted sharply.

“Yuh idiot! She ain't scared for the Wolf. But she's worried that yuh'll make a fool play so's the Wolf will have to drop yuh before the judge.”

Ace Cutts jeered and slapped his holstered gun. The little cattleman looked meaningly toward Tom Powers, who nodded, crossed to Ace Cutts, and slipped the gun from its holster. Snippets smiled gratefully at the grizzled ex-Ranger. Ace Cutts lapsed into sulky silence.

Then a noise at the rear of the room made them turn. The door that led to the kitchen swung open. Just outside the doorway stood a shadowy figure. It moved forward into the lamplight.

“You bum, what you doing here?” Jim Hogg rasped.

The newcomer was the hobo they knew as Jim Anson.

“Howdy, gents,” he said. “Yuh sent for me?”

He removed the blue glasses and tilted back his battered hat. As he advanced farther into the room they saw the two big Colts strapped at his thighs. His loose mouth split in a broad grin, and his big, uneven teeth flashed white.

The clock on the wall ticked loudly in the silence. The assembled men stared wonderingly at the undersized boy. It was Snippets who broke the silence.

“Uncle, this is Jim-twin Allen.”

The judge coughed and said foolishly: “I thought you were Jim Anson.”

Jim Allen grinned again. That contagious grin made the two Hogg brothers chuckle aloud, and even the judge and the sheriff smiled in return.

“No, I ain't Jim Anson. I knows there was gents in this town longin' for my scalp, so I sorta disguises myself. And as there was gents sneakin' around in the bushes out there, I had to pretend to still be Jim Anson. I reckon some one of yuh gents talked, 'cause the Toad's got all of his killers out there waitin' for me. I told the Yuma Kid I had a message for the judge, so he let me pass,” Allen explained.

The men were amazed. It seemed unbelievable. Jim Anson, the cowardly, whining little bum! Jim-twin Allen! Their glances traveled from his shapeless moccasins to his boyish, freckled face. But from his strange, animallike eyes, there could be no doubt he was the man for whom they were waiting. They also understood how he had come by the name of the Wolf.

Ace Cutts' face was ghastly white. With an effort he switched his eyes from Allen to Bill Anderson. The latter was licking his dry lips and staring at the famous outlaw, hypnotized. The realization that Jim Anson was Jim Allen had stunned the politician. Desperately he tried to figure what this would mean. At all costs Allen must not leave that room. He shot a glance to Ace Cutts. The latter began to slide unobtrusively toward the front door.

"I'm right glad to meet yuh, Jim Allen," Sam Hogg cried heartily.

His brother, Jim, chuckled. "An' you tole me yuh chased this feller ragged when yuh was in the Texas Rangers."

"I sure did," the cattleman said ruefully. "I bet the Rangers winded a hundred horses chasin' yuh when yuh was hangin' around lower Texas. An' we never got close enough to throw lead at yuh. Yuh still got them grays yuh had then?"

Allen's face clouded as he glanced quickly at Snippets.

"I got one of 'em – but Queen is dead. I got her son, though."

The ex-Ranger had heard that story. Snippets had told him how Allen had ridden his favorite horse to death in order to save her father. He understood what a sacrifice that had been – for to men who ride the long trail, horses become more than horses. They are friends, companions, and the only living things to be trusted. Sam Hogg cleared his throat.

"Heard about that," he murmured. "It was sure a fittin' end for a grand ol' hoss. When my time comes I hopes I go out like that. I hears the whole town turned out unanimous and planted Queen in style."

"Yeah," Allen murmured dully. The others watched the little rancher and the even smaller outlaw in wonder. Bill Anderson glanced at Ace Cutts, who was close to the door now. Then his eyes once more sought Allen, and he sneered. A man who could sentimentalize over the death of a horse could hardly be as redoubtable an antagonist as rumor painted him.

Allen stepped away from the girl, who had laid her hand on his arm. He looked at Anderson and grinned once more.

"Let's get down to business," Tom Powers spoke.

"Sure, we're wasting time," Anderson snapped. "Allen, we think, because you are an outlaw, you may know the whereabouts of the Lava Gang. If you will lead us to them we will pay you well."

There was something intolerably offensive in the way Bill Anderson spoke. Jim Hogg opened his lips to protest – but the expression on Allen's face did not change. There was nothing there to indicate he had noticed the veiled insult in Anderson's words; if anything, his grin grew broader.

"Yuh mean, I, bein' on the dodge, maybe knows some of the Lava Gang and will give up my friends if yuh pays me enough?" he asked gently.

"No, we don't mean that," the judge cried.

"Not at all," Tim Lynch added.

Allen ignored the judge, glanced meaningfully at Tom Powers, then faced Bill Anderson, who was lounging against the fireplace. This maneuver placed Ace Cutts behind the little outlaw. Anderson had expected Allen to grow angry, to bluster, and this calmness disconcerted him. However, he had gained his objective, which was to concentrate Allen's attention on himself; and Allen's back was now toward the door.

"We are not asking you to betray your friends, but if you will lead us to them, we will pay you well." The explanation was even more offensive than the original statement.

"Yuh aimin' to get me mad?" Allen asked. He grinned at Bill Anderson and shook his head.

“Mister, I never get mad, 'cause things might happen if I did, and me not notice 'em. I let yuh talk 'cause I wasn't sure – now I'm certain.”

Only one of the bystanders, Powers, understood the significance of Allen's words. The others glanced curiously from Allen to Anderson. The politician's face flushed, and he shot a quick glance at Ace Cutts, who had reached the door, then he glanced over his shoulder into the mirror behind him. At once he understood that Allen had been watching Ace Cutts reflected there, and was fully aware of the foreman's attempt to gain the outside, where he could give the alarm to the Yuma Kid and the others waiting there.

“Yuh gents gave me yuhr promise no one was to leave the room while I was here,” Allen reminded.

“We sure did,” Jim Hogg cried.

“Get away from that door, Ace,” Tim Lynch snapped.

“Ace, don't leave this room,” the judge commanded.

Ace Cutts had his hand on the doorknob. Now he paused.

“If he turns that knob I'll drop him,” Allen said.

All expression had left the little gunman's voice. It was flat, toneless. But its very flatness made Ace hesitate. He glanced at Anderson, who nodded to him to go. Then realization came to him that Allen had been watching him in the mirror and that Anderson knew it. Even if he failed to get clear of the door before Allen fired, Anderson would have gained his objective, for a shot in that room would bring the Toad's killers on the run. Anderson was deliberately trying to sacrifice Ace. He dropped the doorknob as if it had suddenly grown red-hot, threw himself into a chair, and stared fixedly at his neat boots.

“I am given to understand that you know the members of the Lava Gang,” the judge said.

“Yeah, I knows them,” Allen replied softly.

“You can trust every one here. Will you give me their names?”

“I came here to tell yuh, but I've changed my mind.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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