Dunn Joseph Allan

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Rimrock Trail:

Содержание

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CHAPTER I
GRIT

"Mormon" Peters carefully shifted his weighty bulk in the chair that he dared not tilt, gazing dreamily at the saw-toothed mountains shimmering in the distance, sniffing luxuriously the scent of sage.

"They oughter spell Arizona with three 'C's,'" he said.

"Why?" asked Sandy Bourke, wiping the superfluous oil from the revolver he was meticulously cleaning.

"'Count of Climate, Cactus, Cattle – an' Coyotes."

"Makin' four, 'stead of three," said the managing partner of the Three Star Ranch.

Came a grunt from "Soda-Water" Sam as he put down his harmonica on which he had been playing *The Cowboy's Lament*, with variations.

"Huh! You got no more eddication than a horn-toad, an' less common sense. You don't spell Arizony with a 'C.' You can't. 'Cordin' to yore argymint you should spell Africa with a 'Z' 'cause they raise zebras there, 'stead of mustangs. Might make it two

'R's,' 'count of rim-rock an' – an' revolvers."

Mormon snorted.

"That's a hell of a name for a man born in Maricopa County to call a gun. *Revolver!* You 'mind me of the Boston perfesser who come to Arizona tryin' to prove the Cliff Dwellers was one of the Lost Tribes of Israel. He blows in with an introduction to the Double U, where I was workin'. Colonel Pawlin's wife has a cold snack ready, it bein' middlin' warm. The perfesser makes a pretty speech, after he'd eaten two men's share of victuals tryin', I reckon, to put some flesh on to his bones. An' he calls the lunch a *col-lay-shun*! Later, he asks the waitress down to the Rodeo Eatin' House, while he's waitin' for his train, for a serve-yet. A *serve-yet*! That's what he calls a napkin. You must have been eddicated in Boston, Sam, though it's the first time I ever suspected you of book learnin'."

It was Sunday afternoon on the Three Star rancheria. The riders, all the hands – with the exception of Pedro, the Mexican cocinero, indifferent to most things, including his cooking; and Joe, his half-breed helper, – had departed, clad in their best shirts, vests, trousers, Stetsons and bandannas of silk, some seeking a poker game on a neighboring rancho, some bent on courting. Pedro and Joe lay, faces down, under the shade of the trees about the tenaya, the stone cistern into which water was pumped by the windmills that worked in the fitful breezes.

The three partners, saddle-chums for years, ever seeking mutual employ, known through Texas and Arizona as the "Three

Musketeers of the Range," sat on the porch of the ranch-house, discussing business and lighter matters. One year before they had pooled their savings and Sandy Bourke, youngest of the three and the most aggressive, coolest and swiftest of action, had gloriously bucked the faro tiger and won enough to buy the Three Star Ranch and certain rights of free range. The purchase had not included the brand of the late owner. Originally the holding had been called the Two-Bar-P. As certain cattlemen were not wanting who had a knack of appropriating calves and changing the brands of steers, Sandy had been glad enough, in his capacity of business manager, to change the name of the ranch and brand. Two-Bar-P was too easily altered to H-B, U-P, U-B, O-P, or B; a score of combinations hard to prove as forgeries.

There had been lengthy argument concerning the new name. Three Star, so Soda-Water Sam – whose nickname was satirical – opined, smacked of the saloon rather than the ranch, but it was finally decided on and the branding-irons duly made.

Sandy Bourke had dark brown hair, inclined to be curly, a tendency he offset by frequent clipping of his thatch. The sobriquet of "Sandy" referred to his grit. He was broad-shouldered, tall and lean, weighing a hundred and seventy pounds of well-strung frame. His eyes were gray and the lids sun-puckered; his deeply tanned skin showed the freckles on face and hands as faint inlays; his long limber legs were slightly bowed.

Not so the curve of Soda-Water Sam's legs. You could pass a small keg between the latter's knees without interference.

Otherwise, Sam, whose last name was Manning, was mainly distinguished by his enormous drooping mustache, suggesting the horns of a Texas steer, inverted.

As for Mormon, disillusioned hero of three matrimonial adventures, woman-soft where Sandy was woman-shy, he was high-stomached, too stout for saddle-ease to himself or mount, sun-rouged where his partners were burned brown. His pate was bald save for a tonsure-fringe of grizzle-red.

All three were first-rate cattlemen, their enterprise bade fair for success, hampered only by the lack of capital, occasioned by Sandy's preference for modern methods as evidenced by thoroughbred bulls, high-grading of his steers, the steadily growing patches of alfalfa and the spreading network of irrigation ditches.

Business exhausted, ending with an often expressed desire for a woman cook who could also perform a few household chores, tagged with a last attempt to persuade Mormon to marry some comfortable person who would act in that capacity, they had reverted to the good-humored chaff that always marked their talks together.

Mormon, with stubby fingers wonderfully deft, was plaiting horsehair about a stick of hardwood to form the handle of a quirt, Sandy overhauling his two Colts and Sam furnishing orchestra on his harmonica. Now he put it to his lips, unable to find a sufficiently crushing retort to Mormon's diatribe against words of more than one syllable, breathing out the burden of "My Bonnie

lies over the Ocean."

Mormon, in a husky, yet musical bass, supplied the cowboy's version of the words.

"Last night, as I lay in the per-rair-ree.
And gazed at the stars in the sky,
I wondered if ever a cowboy,
Could drift to that sweet by-an'-by.

"Roll on, roll on,
Roll on, li'l' dogies, roll – "

He broke off suddenly, staring at the fringe of the waving mesquite.

"Look at that ornery coyote!" he said. "Got his nerve with him, the mangy calf-eater, comin' up to the ranch thataway."

Sam put down his harmonica.

"My Winchester's jest inside the door," he said. "But he'd scoot if I moved. Slip in a shell, Sandy, mebbe you kin git him in a minute."

"Yo're sheddin' yore skin, Sam. Got horn over yore eyes. Mormon, you need glasses fo' yore old age. That ain't a coyote, it's a dawg," pronounced Sandy.

The creature left the cover of the mesquite and came slowly but determinedly toward the ranch-house, past the corral and cook shack; its daring proclaiming it anything but a cowardly, foot-hill coyote. Its coat was whitish gray. Its brush was down,

almost trailing, its muzzle drooped, it went lamely on all four legs and occasionally limped on three.

"Collie!" proclaimed Sandy. "Pore devil's plumb tuckered out."

"Sheepdawg!" affirmed Sam, disgust in his voice. "Hell of a gall to come round a cattle ranch."

The gray-white dog came on, dry tongue lolling, observant of the men, glancing toward the tenaya where it smelled the slumbering Pedro and Joe. It halted twenty feet from the porch, one paw up, as Sandy bent forward and called to it.

"Come on, you dawg. Come in, ol' feller. Mormon, take that hair out of that pan of water an' set it where he can see it."

Mormon shifted the pan in which he had been soaking the horsehair for easier plaiting and the dog sniffed at it, watching Sandy closely with eyes that were dim from thirst and weariness. Sandy patted his knee encouragingly, and the tired animal seemed suddenly to make up its mind. Ignoring the water, it came straight to Sandy, uttered a harsh whine, catching at the leather tassel on the cowman's worn leather chaparejos, tugging feebly. As Sandy stooped to pat its head, powdered with the alkali dust that covered its coat, the collie released its hold and collapsed on one side, panting, utterly exhausted, with glazing eyes that held appeal.

Sandy reached for the pan, squatting down, and chucked some water from the palm of his hand into the open jaws, upon the swollen tongue. The dog licked his hand, whined again, tried to

stand up, failed, succeeded with the aid of friendly fingers in its ruff and eagerly lapped a few mouthfuls.

Again it seized the tassel and pulled, looking up into Sandy's face imploringly.

"Somethin' wrong," said the manager of the Three Star. "Tryin' to tell us about it. All right, ol' feller, you drink some more wateh. Let me look at that paw." He gently took the foot that clawed at his chaps and examined it. The pad was worn to the quick, bleeding. "Come out of the Bad Lands," he said, looking toward the range. "Through Pyramid Pass, likely."

"Some derned sheepman gone crazy an' shot his-self," grumbled Sam. "Somethin' bound to spile a quiet afternoon."

"Not many sheep over that way," said Mormon. "No range."

Sandy rolled the dog on his side and found the other pads in the same condition. Running his fingers beneath the ruff, scratching gently in sign of friendship, he discovered a leather collar with a brass tag, rudely engraved, the lettering worn but legible.

GRIT. Prop. P. Casey

"They sure named you right, son," he said. "We'll 'tend to P. Casey, soon's we've 'tended to you. You need fixin' if you're goin' to take us to him. You'll have to hoof it till we cut fair trail. Sam, fetch me some adhesive, will you? An' then saddle up; Pronto fo' me, a hawss fo' yoreself an' rope a spare mount."

"What for? The spare?"

"Don't know for sure. May have to bring him back."

"A sheepman to Three Star! I'd as soon have a sick rattler around. Mormon, yo're elected to nurse him."

Sam went into the house for the medical tape, then to the corral. Sandy bathed the raw pads softly, cut patches of the tape with his knife, put them on the abrasions, held them there for the warmth of his palm to set them. Grit licked at his hands whenever they were in reach, his brightening eyes full of understanding, shifting to watch Sam striding to the corral.

"One thing about a sheepman is allus good," said Mormon. "His dawg. Reckon you aim on me tendin' the ranch, Sandy?"

"Come if you want to."

"Two's plenty, I reckon. I do more ridin' through the week than I care for nowadays. I'll stick to the chair."

"Prod up Pedro to git some hot water ready. Keep a kittle b'ilin'. No tellin' what time we'll git back," said Sandy. "I'll take along some grub an' the medicine kit. Have to spare some of that whisky Sam's got stowed away."

"Goin' to waste booze at fifteen bucks a quart on a sheepman?" grumbled Mormon.

"Not if you an' Sam don't want I should," replied Sandy, with a smile. He knew his partners. "Now then, Grit," he went on to the dog in a confidential tone, "you-all have got to git grub an' wateh inside yore ribs. Savvy? I'm goin' to rustle some hash fo' you. You stay as you are, son."

He pressed the dog on its side once more, in the shade,

and went into the house. Mormon followed him. Grit watched them disappear, gave a little whine of impatience, accepted the situation philosophically as he listened to sounds from the corral that told him of horses being caught, and drooped his head on the dirt, lying relaxed, eyes closed, gaining strength against the return trip.

Sam rode to the porch on his roan, Sandy's pinto and a gray mare leading, and "tied them to the ground" with trailing reins as Sandy came out bearing a pan of food, a package and a leather case. Mormon showed at the door.

"Where'd you hide yore bottle, Sam?" he asked.

"Where you can't find it, you holler-legged galoot. Why?"

"Fill up a flask to take along, Sam," said Sandy. "Here, Grit, climb outside of this chuck."

He coaxed the collie to eat the food from his hand while Sam brought the whisky.

"Load my guns, Mormon," he requested.

Mormon did it without comment. The two blued Colts were as much a part of Sandy's working outfit as his belt, or the bridle of his horse. Sam buckled on his own cartridge belt, holster and pistol, fixed his spurs, tied the package of food to his saddle, filled two canteens and did the same with them. Sandy-offered the pan of water to Grit who drank in businesslike fashion, assured of the success of his mission. He stood up squarely on his legs, eased by the plastering. They were only tired now.

He shook himself vigorously, sending out the dust with which

he was powdered in all directions, making Mormon sneeze. He stretched his muzzle toward the mountains, threw it up and barked for the first time. As Sandy and Sam mounted, the latter leading the gray mare, Grit ran ahead of them and came back to make certain they were following. Then he headed for the spot in the mesquite whence he had emerged, marking the opening of a narrow trail. The horses broke into a lope, the two men, the three mounts, and the dog, off on their errand of mercy.

Mormon watched them well into the mesquite before he put back the hair in the water the dog had left and went on with his plaiting: As he handled the pliant horsehairs he talked aloud, range fashion.

"On'y sheepman I ever knowed worth trubblin' about was a woman. Used ter knit while she watched the woollies. Knit me a sweater – plumb useless waste of time an' yarn. If I'd taken it I'd have had to take her along with it. Wimmen is sure persistent. Seems like I must look like a dogie to most of 'em. They're allus wantin' to marry me an' mother me. I sure hope this one don't turn out to be a she-herder. 'P' might stand fer Polly."

CHAPTER II
CASEY

The two men followed the dog across the flats, through mesquite, through scattered sage and greasewood, mounting gradually through chaparral to barren slopes set with strange twisted shapes of cactus. When it became apparent that Sandy's hazard had hit the mark, as they entered the defile that made entrance for Pyramid Pass, the only path across the Cumbre Range to the Bad Lands beyond, Sandy reined in, coaxed up Grit, resentful, almost suspicious of any halt, lifting the collie to the saddle in front of him. Grit protested and the pinto plunged, but Sandy's persistence, the soothe of his steady voice, persuaded the dog at last to accommodate itself as best it could, helped by Sandy's one arm, sometimes with two as Sandy, riding with knees welded to Pronto's withers, dropping reins over the saddle horn, left the rest to the horse.

"I figger we got some distance yet," he said to Sam. "Dawg was goin' steady as a woodchuck ten mile' from water. Reckon my guess was right, – he wore his pads out crossin' the lava beds, though what in time any hombre who ain't plumb loco is trapesin' round there for, beats me. There is some grazin' on top of the Cumbre mesa, enough for a small herd, but the other side is jest plain hell with the lights out, one big slice of desert thirty mile'

wide."

"Minin' camp over that way, ain't there?"

"Was. There's a lava bed strip of six-seven miles at the end of the pass, then comes a bu'sted mesa, all box cañon an' rim-rock, shot with caves, nothin' greener than cactus an' not much of that. There's a twenty per cent. grade wagon road, or there was, for it warn't engineered none too careful, that run over to the mines. I was over there once, nigh on to ten years ago. They called the camp Hopeful then. Next year they changed the name to Dynamite. Jest natcherully blew up, did that camp. Nothin' left but a lot of tumbledown shacks an' a couple hundred shafts an' tunnels leadin' to nothin'. Reckon this P. Casey is a prospector, Sam. One of them half crazy old-timers, nosin' round tryin' to pick up lost leads. One of the 'riginal crowd that called the dump Hopeful, like enough. Desert Rat. Them fellers is born with hope an' it's the last thing to leave 'em."

"Hope's a good hawss," said Sam. "But it sure needs Luck fo' a runnin' mate."

"You said it." Sandy relapsed into silence.

At the far end of the pass the dog struggled to get down. They looked out upon a stretch of desolation. Sandy had called it six or seven miles. It might have been two or twenty. The deceit of rarefied air was intensified by the dazzle of the merciless sun beating down on powdered alkali, on snaky flows of weathered lava, on mock lakes that sparkled and dissolved in mirage. The broken mesa, across which ran the road to the deserted

mining camp, mysteriously changed form before their eyes; unsubstantial masses in pastel lights and shades of saffron, mauve and rose. Over all was the hard vault of the sky-like polished turquoise.

"I'll let him give us a lead," said Sandy, "soon as we hit the lava. We can foller his trail that fur. Sit tight, son." Grit whined but subsided under the restraining hands.

"How about a drink 'fore we tackle that?" asked Sam, nodding at the shimmering view.

"Better hold off for a while." Sandy took the lead, bending from the saddle, reading the trail that Grit's paws had left in the alkali and sand. Cactus reared its spiny stems or sprawled over the ground more like strange water-growths that had survived the emptying of an inland sea than vegetation of the land. Once the dog's tracks led aside to a scummy puddle, saucered by alkali, dotted with the spoor of desert animals that drank the bitter water in extremity. Then it ran straight to a wide reef of lava. Sandy set down the collie. Grit ran fast across the pitted surface, ahead of the horses, waiting for them to cross the lava. They had hard work to get him to come to hand again, but he gave in at last to the knowledge that they would not go on otherwise.

"Sand's too hot fo' yore pads, dawg," said Sandy, "Raise the mischief with that tape. Shack erlong, Pronto. Give you a slice of Pedro's dried-apple pie when we git back, to make up for workin' you Sunday." The pinto tossed a pink muzzle and his master reached to pat the dusty, sweat-streaked neck. Alkali rose

about them in clouds. Grit's trail, though blurred in the soft soil, was plain enough. The two riders went silently on at a steady walking gait. Talk in the saddle with men who make range-riding a business comes only in spurts.

"Never see a prospector with a dawg afore," said Sam at last. "An' that a sheep dawg."

"Dawg 'ud be apt to tucker out in desert travel," agreed Sandy. "Mean one more mouth fo' water."

He, like Sam, speculated on the kind of man P. Casey – if it was Casey they were after – might be. If not a sheepman or a prospector, a third probability made him an outlaw, a man with a price on his head, hiding in the wilds from punishment. It sufficed to them that he was a man whom a dog loved enough to bear a call to help his master.

Slowly, the mesa ahead took on more definite shape. The shadows resolved themselves into ravines and cañons. They entered a gorge filled with boulders and rounded rocks, over which the sure-footed ponies made clattering, slippery progress. Here and there the gaunt skeleton of a tree, white as if lime-washed, showed that once cottonwoods had flourished before the devouring desert had claimed the territory. The cactus was all prickly pear, the gray-green flesh of the flat leaves starred with brilliant blossom. Along one side of the cañon, mounting zigzag, showed the remains of a road, broken down by landslip and the furious rush of cloud-burst waters.

Making this, finding it free of wagon sign or horse tracks,

Sandy picked up Grit's trail once again. The collie wriggled, shot up its muzzle, whined, licked Sandy's face.

"Nigh there," suggested Sam. Sandy nodded and let the dog get down. Grit raced off, nose high, streaking around a curve. When they reached it he was out of sight. The road had been built up in places on the outer edge with stones, dry-piled. They had fallen away, the grade following, so that sometimes all that was left for passage was a ledge along which the horses sidled carefully in single file, stirrups brushing the inside bank. The zigzags ended, the cañon narrowed, deepened. Sandy looked down to the dry bed of it four hundred feet below. The road rose at a steep pitch, cliff to the right, precipice to the left, stretching on and up to the summit of the pass.

Suddenly Pronto shied violently, tried to bolt up the cliff, scrambling goatwise for twenty feet to stand shivering and snorting. Sandy's balance was automatic, the muscles of his knees clamped for grip, he gave the pinto its head, trusting to it to establish footing. He saw Sam's roan dancing in the trail, the led mare plunging, dust rising all about them. Left-handed, a Colt flashed out of Sandy's holster, barked twice, the echoes tossing between the cañon walls. In the road a rattlesnake writhed, headless, its body, thicker than a man's wrist, checkered in dirty gray and chocolate diamonds.

"Git down there, you hysteric son of a gun," he said to the horse. "It's all over." The pinto hesitated, shifted unwilling hoofs, squatted on its haunches and, tail sweeping the dirt, tobogganed

down to the road, jumping catwise the moment it was reached, away from the squirming terror. Sandy forced him back, leaned far down, tucked the barrel of the gun under the snake's body and hurled it looping into the gorge. Sam got his roan and the mare under control as the dust subsided.

"More'n a dozen buttons," said Sandy. "Listen!"

Grit, unseen, ahead, was barking in staccato volleys. There was another sound, a faint shout, unmistakably; human. The men looked at each other with eyebrows raised.

"That ain't no man's voice," said Sam. "That's a gal." He looked quizzically at Sandy, knowing his chum's inhibition.

Sandy was woman-shy. Men met his level glance, fairly, with swift certainty that here stood a man, four-square; or shiftily, according to their ease of conscience, knowing his breed. Sandy was a two-gun man but he was not a killer. There were no notches on the handles of his Colts. In earlier days he had shot with deadly aim and purpose, but never save in self-defense and upon the side of law and right and order. Among men his poise was secure but, in a woman's presence, Sandy Bourke's tongue was tied save in emergency, his wits tangled. Whatever he privately felt of the attraction of the opposite sex, the proximity of a girl produced an embarrassment he hated but could not help. He had seen admiration, desire for closer acquaintance, in many a fair face but such invitation affected him as the sight of a circling loop affects a horse in a remuda.

He gave Sam no chance for banter. Action was forward and

it always straightened out the short-circuitings of Sandy's mental reflexes toward womankind. He touched Pronto's flanks with the dulled rowels he wore, and the pinto broke into a lope. A big boulder was perched upon the nigh side of the road. Grit came out from behind it, barked, whirled and seemingly dived into the cañon. Coming up with the mare, Sam found Sandy dismounted, waiting for him.

What had happened was plain to both of them. The rotten, hastily made road collapsed under the lurch of a wagon jolting over outcrop uncovered by the rains. Scored dirt where frantic hoofs had pawed in vain, tire marks that ended in side scrapes and vanished.

Sam got off the roan, the tired horses standing still, snuffing the marks of trouble. Far down the slope Grit gave tongue. The cliff shouldered out and they could see nothing from the broken road. How any one could have hurtled over the precipice and be still able to call for help without the aid of some miracle was an enigma. They listened for another shout but, save for the barking of the dog, there was silence in the grim gorge. In the sky, two buzzards wheeled.

Sandy poured a scant measure of water from his canteen into the punched-in crown of his Stetson, after he had knocked out the dust. Sam did the same, giving each horse a mouth-rinse and a swallow of tepid water so they would stand more contentedly. Each took a swift swig from the containers. Sandy untied the package of food and the leather medicine kit, Sam slapped his

hip to be sure of his whisky flask. Aided by their high heels, digging them in the unstable dirt, they worked down the cliff, rounding the shoulder.

A wide ledge of outcrop jutted out from the cañon wall jagged into battlements. Piled there was a wagon, on its side, the canvas tilt sagged in, its hoops broken. A white horse, emaciated, little more than buzzard meat when alive, lay with its legs stiff in the air, neck flattened and head limp. A broken pole, with splintered ends, crossed the body of its mate, a bay, gaunt-hipped, high of ribs. It lay still, but its flanks heaved, catching a flash of sun on its dull hide.

Between the wheels of the wagon knelt a girl in a gown of faded blue, head hidden behind a sunbonnet. She leaned forward in the shadow of the wagon. Sandy caught a glimpse of a huddled body beyond her. Grit sat on his haunches, head toward the road, thrown back at each bark. Sandy reached the ledge first. The girl did not turn her head, though his descent was noisy. He touched her gently on the shoulder, telling himself that she was "just a kid."

She looked up, her face lined where tears had laned down through the mask of dust. Now she was past crying. Her eyes met Sandy's pitifully, holding neither surprise nor hope.

"He's dead." She seemed to be stating a fact long accepted.

"He's dead. An' he made me jump. You come too late, mister."

The man lay stretched out, head and shoulders hidden, his

gaunt body dressed in jeans, once blue, long since washed and sun-faded to the green of turquoise matrix. The boots were rusty, patched. The wagon-bed, toppling sidewise, had crashed down on his chest. Rock partly supported the weight of it. Sandy picked up a gnarled hand, scarred, calloused and shrunken, the hand of an old prospector.

"Yore dad?" he asked, kneeling by the girl.

"Yes." She stood up, slight and straight, with limbs and body just curving into womanhood. "The hawsses was tuckered out," she said, "or Dad c'ud have made it. They didn't have no strength left, 'thout food or water. The damned road jest slid out from under. Dad made me jump. I figgered he was goin' to, but his bad leg must have caught in the brake. We slid over like water slides over a rock. He didn't have a hell-chance." As she spoke them the oaths were merely emphasis. She talked as had her father.

Sandy nodded.

"Got an ax with the outfit?" he asked. Then turning to Sam as the girl went round to the back of the fallen wagon and fumbled about through the rear opening of the canvas tilt: "Man's alive, Sam. Caught a flirt of the pulse. Have to pry up the wagon. Git that bu'sted end of the tongue."

The girl handed an ax to Sandy mutely, watching them as Sandy pried loose the part of the tongue still bolted to the wagon, getting it clear of the horses.

"Think you can drag out yore dad by the laigs when we lift the body of the wagon?" he asked her. "May not be able to hold it

more'n a few seconds. May slip on us, the levers is pritty short."

She stooped, taking hold of a wrinkled boot in each hand, back of the heel. A tear splashed down on one of them and she shook the salt water from her eyes impatiently as if she had faced tragedy before and knew it must be looked at calmly.

The two men adjusted the boulders they had set for fulcrums and shoved down on the stout pieces of ash, their muscles bunching, the veins standing out corded on their arms. Grit ran from one to the other with eager little whines, sensing what was being attempted, eager to help. The wagon-bed creaked, lifted a little.

"Now," grunted Sandy, "snake him out."

The girl tugged, stepping backward, her pliant strength equal to the dead drag of the body. Sandy, straining down, saw a white beard appear, stained with blood, an aged seamed face, hollow at cheek and temple, sparse of hair, the flesh putty-colored despite its tan. Grit leaped in and licked the quiet features as Sam and Sandy eased down the wagon.

"Whisky, Sam."

The girl sat cross-legged, her father's head in her lap, one hand smoothing his forehead while the other felt under his vest and shirt, above his heart.

"He ain't gone yit," she announced.

The old miner's teeth were tight clenched, but there were gaps in them through which the whisky Sandy administered trickled.

"Daddy! Daddy!"

It might have been the tender agony of the cry to which Patrick Casey's dulling brain responded, sending the message of his will along the nerves to transmit a final summons. His body twitched, he choked, swallowed, opened gray eyes, filmy with death, brightening with intelligence as he saw his daughter bending over him, the face of Sandy above her shoulder. The gray eyes interrogated Sandy's long and earnestly until the light began to fade out of them and the wrinkled lids shuttered down.

Another swallow of the raw spirits and they opened flutteringly again. The lips moved soundlessly. Then, while one hand groped waveringly upward to rest upon his daughter's head, Sandy, bending low, caught three syllables, repeated over and over, desperately, mere ghosts of words, taxing cruelly the last breath of the wheezing lungs beneath the battered ribs, the final spurt of the spirit.

"*Molly – mines!*"

"I'll look out for that, pardner," said Sandy.

The eyelids fluttered, the old hands fell away, the jaw relaxed, serenity came to the lined face, and no little dignity. For the first time the girl gave way, lying prone, sobbing out her grief while the two cowmen looked aside. The bay horse began to groan and writhe.

"Got to kill that cavallo," said Sam in a whisper.

"Wait a minute." The girl had quieted, was kneeling with clasped hands, lips moving silently. Prayer, such as it was, over, she rose, her fists tight closed, striving to control her quivering

chin – doing it. She looked up as the shadow of a buzzard was flung against the cliff by the slanting sun.

"We got to bury him, 'count of them damn buzzards."

"We'll tend to that," said Sandy. "Ef you-all 'll take the dawg on up to the hawsses…"

"No! I helped to bury Jim Clancy, out in the desert, I'm goin' to help bury Dad. It's goin' to be lonesome out here – " She twisted her mouth, setting teeth into the lower lip sharply as she gazed at the desolate cliffs, the birds swinging their tireless, expectant circles in the throat of the gorge.

"Dad allus figgered he'd die somewheres in the desert. 'Lowed it 'ud be his luck. He wanted to be put within the sound of runnin' water – he's gone so often 'thout it. But – " She shrugged her thin shoulders resignedly, the inheritance of the prospector's philosophy strong within her.

"See here, miss," said Sandy, while Sam crawled into the wagon in search of the dead miner's pick and shovel that now, instead of uncovering riches, would dig his grave, "how old air you?"

"Fifteen. My name's Margaret – Molly for short – same as my Ma. She's been dead for twelve years."

"Well, Miss Molly, suppose you-all come on to the Three Star fo' a spell with my two pardners an' me? You do that an' mebbe we can fix yore daddy's idee about runnin' water. We'd come back an' git him an' we'll make a place fo' him under our big cottonwoods below the big spring. I w'udn't wonder but what he

c'ud hear the water gugglin' plain as it runs down the overflow to the alfalfa patches."

Molly Casey gazed at him with such a sudden glow of gratitude in her eyes that Sandy felt embarrassed. He had been comforting a girl, a boyish girl, and here a woman looked at him, with understanding.

"Yo're sure a white man," she said. "I'll git even with you some time if I work the bones of my fingers through the flesh fo' you. Thanks don't amount to a damn 'thout somethin' back of 'em. I'll come through."

She put out her roughened little hand, man-fashion, and Sandy took it as Sam emerged from the wagon with the tools. The bay mare groaned and gave a shrill cry, horribly human. Sam drew his gun, putting down pick and shovel.

"Got any water you c'ud spare?" asked the girl. Sandy handed her his canteen.

"Use it all," he said. "Soon's it's dark, it'll cool off. We'll git through all right."

He picked up the tools and moved toward Sam as the bay collapsed to the merciful bullet. The girl washed away as best she could the stains of blood and travel from the dead face while Sandy sounded with the pick for soil deep enough for a temporary grave.

The body would have to lie on the ledge over night, nothing but burial could save it from marauding coyotes, though the wagon might have baffled the buzzards. The two set to work digging

a shallow trench down to bedrock, rolling up loose boulders for a cairn. The whirring chorus of the cicadas drummed an elfin requiem. Now and then there came the chink of bit, or hoof on rock, from the waiting horses in the broken road. The sun was low, horizontal rays piercing the flood of violet haze in the cañon. Across the gorge the cliff, above the wash of shadow, glowed saffron; a light wind wailed down the bore. Lizards flirted in and out of the crevices as the miner was laid in his temporary grave, the girl dry-eyed again.

She had brought a little work box from the wagon, of mahogany studded with disks of pearl in brass mountings. Out of this she produced a handkerchief of soft China silk brocade, its white turned yellow with age. This she spread over her father's features, showing strangely distinct in the failing light.

"I don't want the dirt pressin' on his face," she said.

From the dead man's clothes Sandy and Sam had taken the few personal belongings, from the inner pocket of the vest some papers that Sandy knew for location claims.

"Want to take some duds erlong to the ranch?" he asked Molly. "We can bring in the rest of the stuff later. Got to shack erlong, it's gittin' dark. Brought an extry hawss with us. Can you ride?"

"Some. I ain't had much chance."

"Don't know how the mare'll stand yore skirt. If she won't Pinto'll pack you."

"I'll fix that." She clambered into the wagon. Before she came out with her bundle they piled the cairn, a mask of broken rim-

rock heavy enough to foil the scratching of coyotes.

It looked to Sandy as if the girl had changed into a boy. The slender figure, silhouetted against the afterglow, softly pulsing masses of fiery cloud above the top of the mesa, was dressed in jean overalls, a wide-rimmed hat hiding length of hair.

"I reckon I can fool that hawss of yores now," she said. "I gen'ally dress thisaway 'cept when we expect to go nigh the settlements or a ranch where we aim to visit. We was makin' for the Two-Bar-P outfit, where Grit came from when he was a bit of a pup. I expected that's where he was headin' for when I sent him off after help, but you come instead."

"I was wonderin' how he come to make the ranch," said Sandy. "You see we-all bought the Two-Bar-P, though I never figgered old Samson 'ud ever own a sheepdawg. He might give one away fast enough."

"Grit was sent him for a present by a man who summered at the ranch an' heerd Samson say he wanted a dawg," said the girl. "He was a tenderfoot when he come, an' when he left, 'count bein' sick. Samson didn't want to kill the dawg an' didn't want to keep him, so he gave him to Dad an' me when I was ten years old. Are you ready to start?"

She had avoided looking toward the grave, purposely Sandy thought, talking to bridge over the last good-by, the chance of a breakdown. Suddenly she pointed down the cliff.

"Wait a minute," she cried and disappeared, sliding and leaping down like a goat, reappearing with her hat half filled with

crimson silk-petaled cactus blooms, scattering them at the head of the cairn.

"Seemed like there jest had to be flowers," she said as, with Grit nosing close to his mistress, they mounted to the road. The gray mare made no bother and soon they were riding down toward the strip of Bad Lands. Sandy let the collie go afoot for the time.

The glory of the range departed, the cliffs turned slate color, then black, while a host of stars marshaled and burned without flicker. The wind moaned through the trough of the cañon as they rode out on the plain. Up somewhere in the darkness the buzzards came circling down, to settle on the ledge beside the carcasses of the two horses.

It was close to midnight when they reached the home ranch, riding past the outbuildings, the bunk-house of the men where a light twinkled, the cook shack, the corrals, up to the main house. There they alighted. All about cottonwoods rustled in the dark, the air was sweet and cool, not far from frost. Molly Casey shivered as she moved stiffly in her saddle. Sandy lifted her from the saddle and carried her up the steps, across the porch, kicking open the door of the living-room where the embers of a fire glowed. There was no other light in the big room, but there was sufficient to show the great form of Mormon, stowed at ease in a chair, asleep and snoring.

Sam struck a match and lit a lamp. He struck Mormon mightily between his shoulders.

"Gawd!" gasped the heavyweight partner. "I been asleep. But there's a kittle of hot water, Sandy. Where's the – what in time are you totin'? A gel or a boy?"

"This is Miss Molly Casey," said Sandy gravely, setting down the girl. "Miss Casey, this is Mr. Peters. Mormon, Miss Molly is goin' to tie up to the Three Star for a bit."

Mormon, a little sheepish at the suddenly developing age of the girl as she shook hands with him, recovered himself and beamed at her. "Yo're sure welcome," he said. "Boss hired you? Cowgirl or cook?"

Sandy noticed the girl's lips quiver and he slipped an arm about her shoulders. He was not woman-shy with this girl who needed help, and who seemed a boy.

"Don't you take no notice of him an' his kiddin'," he said. "We'll make him rustle some grub fo' all of us an' then we-all 'll turn in. I'll show you yore room. Up the stairs an' the last door on the right. Here's some matches. There's a lamp on the bureau up there. Give you a call when supper's ready."

He led her to the door and gave her a friendly little shove, guessing that she wanted to be alone.

"The kid's lost her father, lost most everything 'cept her dawg," he said to Mormon. "Thought we might adopt her, sort of, then I thought mebbe we'd hire her – for mascot."

"Lost her daddy? An' me hornin' in an' tryin' to kid her! I ain't got the sense of a drowned gopher, sometimes," said Mormon contritely.

"She's game, plumb through, ain't she, Sam? Stands right up to trouble?"

"You bet. Mormon, open up a can of greengages, will ye? I reckon she's got a sweet tooth, same as me."

Molly Casey was not through standing up to trouble. They coaxed her to eat and she managed to make a meal that satisfied them. Then she got up to go to her room, with Grit nuzzling close to her, her fingers in his ruff, twisting nervously at the strands of hair.

"Do you reckon," she asked the three partners, "that Dad knows he fooled me when he told me to jump? If I'd known he c'udn't git clear I'd have stuck – same as he would if I was caught. Do you reckon he knows that – now?"

"I'd be surprised if he didn't," said Sandy gravely. "You did what he wanted, anyway."

She shook her head.

"If I'd been on the outside, he w'udn't have jumped, no matter how much I begged him. I didn't think of the brake. Don't seem quite square, somehow, way I acted. Good night. What time do you-all git up?"

"With the sun, soon's the big bell rings," said Sandy. "Good night."

She looked at them gravely and went out.

"Botherin' about playin' square in jumpin'," said Sandy. "That gel is square on all twelve eidges. Sam, slide out an' muzzle that bell. She'll likely cry herself to sleep after a bit but she'll need all

the sleep she can git. No sense in wakin' her up at sun-up."

"How'd you come to know so much about gels?" asked Mormon.

"Me? I don't know the first thing about 'em," protested Sandy.

"No more'n any man," put in Sam. "'Cept it's Mormon. He's sure had the experience."

"Experience," said Mormon, with a yawn, "may teach a man somethin' about mules but not wimmen. Woman is like the climate of the state of Kansas, where I was born. Thirty-four below at times and as high as one-sixteen above. Blowin' hot an' cold, rangin' from a balmy breeze through a rain shower or a thunder-storm, up to a snortin' tornado. Average number of workin' days, about one hundred an' fifty. Them's statistics. It ain't so hard to set down what a woman's done at the end of a year, if you got a good mem'ry, but tryin' to guess what she is goin' to do has got the weather man backed off inter a corner an' squealin' for help. They ain't all like Kansas. My first resembled it, the second was sorter tropic – she run off with a rainmaker an' I hear she's been divorced three times since then. Mebbe that's an exaggeration. My third must have been born someways nigh the no'th pole. W'en she got mad she'd freeze the blood in yore veins.

"No, sir, that feller in the po'try who says, 'I learned about wimmen from 'er,' was braggin'. Now, this gel of Casey's 'pears like what her dad 'ud call a good prospect, but you can't tell. Fool's gold is bright enough but you can't change it to the real stuff no matter how you polish it."

"Ever see the sour-milk batter Pedro fixes fo' hot cakes?" asked Sam.

"Sure I have. What's that got to do with it?" demanded Mormon.

"That's what you've got sloppin' inside of yore haid 'stead of brains. Yore disposition concernin' wimmen is gen'ally soured. You 'mind me of the man from New Jersey who come out west to buy a ranch. A hawss throwed him five times hand-runnin'. He ropes a steer that happens to run into the bum loop he was swingin' an' it snakes him out'n the saddle. A pesky cow chases him when he was afoot, a couple calves gits a rope twisted round his stummick an' lastly a mule kicks him into a bunch of cactus. Whereupon he remarks, 'I don't figger I was calculated for runnin' a cattle ranch,' sells out an' goes back to herdin' muskeeters in New Jersey.

"Mormon, you warn't calculated to handle wimmen. This li'l' gel is game as they make 'em, an' I reckon she's right sweet if she on'y gits a chance. Leastwise, I see several signs of pay dirt this afternoon an' evenin' as I reckon Sandy done the same. She's been trailin' her dad all over hell an' creation, talkin' like him, swearin' like him, actin' like him. Never see nothin' different. All she needs is a chance."

"What's the idee in pickin' on me?" asked Mormon aggrievedly. "She's as welcome as grass in spring. They ain't no one got a bigger heart than me fo' kids."

"No one got a bigger heart, mebbe," said Sam caustically.

"Nor none a smaller brain. All engine an' no gasoline in the tank!"

"She's an orphan," went on Sandy. "She ain't got a cent that I know of. The claims her old dad mentioned ain't no good because, in the first place, they'd have been worked if they was; second place, they're over to Dynamite an' the sharps say Dynamite's a flivver. All she has in sight is the dawg. Some dawg! Comes in from the desert an' takes us out to her an' Pat Casey – him dyin'. Ef it hadn't been fo' the dawg, she'd have stayed there, to my notion. Got some sort of idee she'd deserted ship ef she hadn't stuck till it was too late fo' her to crawl out of that slit in the mesa. She's fifteen an' she's got sense. I figger we better turn in right now an' hold a pow-wow with the gel ter-morrer."

"Second the motion," said Sam.

"Third it," said Mormon.

And the Three Musketeers of the Range went off to bed.

CHAPTER III
MOLLY

Molly came down next morning in the faded blue gingham. Sandy marked how worn it was and marked an item in his mind – clothes. He smiled at her with the sudden showing of his sound white teeth that made many friends. She was much too young, too frank, too like a boy to affect him with any of his woman-shyness. He did not realize how close she was to womanhood, seeing only how much she must have missed of real girlhood.

Molly had a snubby nose, a wide mouth, Irish eyes of blue that were far apart and crystal clear, freckles and a lot of brown hair that she wore in a long braid wound twice about her well-shaped head. She was a combination of curves and angles, of well-rounded neck and arms and legs with collar-bones and hips over-apparent, immature but not awkward.

None of the three partners observed these things in detail. All of them noted that her eyes were steady, friendly, trusting, and that when she smiled at them it was like the flash of water in a tree-shady pond, when a trout leaps. Grit, entering with her, divided his attentions among the men, shoving a moist nose at last into Sandy's palm and lying down obedient, his tail thumping amicably, as Sandy examined the tape protectors.

"You lie round the ranch for a day or so," he told the collie,

"an' you'll be as good as new."

"Fo' a sheepdawg," said Mormon, "he sure shapes fine."

Molly's eyes flashed. "He don't *know* he's a sheepdawg," she protested. "He's never even seen one, 'less it was a mountain sheep, 'way up against the skyline. Samson liked him. Don't you like him?"

"I like him fine," Mormon answered hurriedly. "Fine!"

"Ef you-all didn't, we c'ud shack on somewheres. I c'ud git work down to the settlemints, I reckon. I don't aim to put you out any. I've been thinkin' erbout that. 'Less you should happen to want a woman to run the house. I don't know much about housekeepin' but I c'ud l'arn. It's a woman's job, chasin' dirt. I can cook – some. Dad used to say my camp-bread an' biscuits was fine. I c'ud earn what I eat, I reckon. An' what Grit 'ud eat. We don't aim to stay unless we pay – someway."

There was a touch of fire to her independence, a chip on the shoulder of her pride the three partners recognized and respected.

"See here, Molly Casey," – Sandy used exactly the same tone and manner he would have taken with a boy – "that's yore way of lookin' at it. Then there's our side. You figger yore dad was a pritty good miner, I reckon?"

"He sure knew rock. Every one 'lowed that. They was always more'n one wantin' to grubstake him but he'd never take it. Figgered he didn't want to split any strike he might make an' figgered he w'udn't take no man's money 'less he was dead sure

of payin' him back. Dad was a good miner."

"All right. Now, yore dad believes in them claims. The last two words he says was 'Molly' and 'mines.' I give him my word then and there, like he would have to me, to watch out for yore interests. My word is my pardners' word. I'm willin' to gamble those claims of his'll pan out some day. Until they do, ef you-all 'll stay on at the Three Star, stop Mormon stompin' in from the corral with dirty boots, ride herd on Sam an' me the same way, mebbe cook us up some of them biscuits once in a while, why, it'll be fine! Then there's yore schoolin'. Yore dad 'ud wish you to have that. I don't suppose you've had a heap. An' you sabe, Molly, that you swear mo' often than a gel usually swears."

She opened her eyes wide. "But I don't cuss when I say 'em. An' I don't use the worst ones. Dad w'udn't let me. I can read an' write, spell an' cipher some. But Dad needed me more'n I needed learnin'."

"But you got to have it," said Mormon earnestly. "S'pose them claims pan out way rich and you git all-fired wealthy? Bein' a gel, you sabe clothes, di'monds, silks, satins an' feather fuss. You'll want to learn the pianner. You'll want to know what to git an' how to wear it. Won't want folks laffin' at you like they laffed at Sam, time he won fo' hundred dollars shootin' craps an' went to Galveston where a smart Alec of a clerk sells him a spiketail coat, wash vest an' black pants with braid on the seams.

"Sam, he don't know how to wear 'em, or when. His laigs sure looked prominent in them braided pants. Warn't any side pockets

in 'em, neither, fo' him to hide his hands. Sam's laigs got warped when he was young, lyin' out nights in the rain 'thout a tarp'. That suit set back Sam a heap of money an' it ain't no mo' use to him than an extry shell to a terrapin."

He grinned at Molly with his face creased into good humor that could not be resisted. She laughed as Sam joined in, but the determination of her rounded chin returned after the merriment had passed.

"If you did that – took my Daddy's place," she said, "why, we'd be pardners, same as him an' me was. When the claims pan out, half of it'll have to be yores. I won't stay no other way."

The glances of the three partners exchanged a mutual conclusion, a mutual approval.

"That goes," said Sandy, putting out his hand. "Fo' all three of us. When the mines are payin' dividends, we split, half on 'count of the Three Star, half to you. Providin' you fall in line with the eddication, so's to do yore dad, yo'se'f an' us, yore pardners, due credit when the money starts comin' in. Sabe?"

"I don't sabe the eddication part of it," she answered. "Jest what does that mean? I don't want to go to school with a lot of kids who'll laf at me."

"You don't have to. As pardners," Sandy went on earnestly, "I don't mind tellin' you that the Three Bar has put all its chips into the kitty an', while we figger sure to win, we can't cash in any till the increase of the herds starts to make a showin'. Not till after the fall round-up, anyway. So yore eddication'll have to be put

off a bit. Meantime you'll learn to ride an' rope an' mebbe break a colt or two, between meals an' ridin' herd on the dirt. When you start in, it'll be at one of them schools in the East where they make a speshulty of western heiresses. How's that sound?"

"Sounds fine. On'y, you've picked up Dad's hand to gamble with. Mebbe it ain't yore game, nor the one you'd choose to play if it wasn't forced on you."

"Sister," said Sam, "yo're skinnin' yore hides too close. Sandy 'ud gamble on which way a horn-toad'll spit. It's meat an' drink to him. We won this ranch on a gamble – him playin'. He gambles as he breathes. An' whatever hand he plays, me an' Mormon backs. Why, if we win on this minin' deal, we're way ahead of the game, seein' we don't put up anythin' in cold collateral. It's a sure-fire cinch."

"Sam says it," backed Sandy. "One good gamble!"

Molly's eyes had lightened for a moment, losing their gloom of grief they had held since the shadow of the circling buzzards in the gorge had darkened them. She fumbled at the waistband of her one-piece gown, working at it with her fingers, producing a golden eagle which she handed to Sandy.

"That's my luck-piece," she said. "Dad give it to me one time he cleaned up good on a placer claim. Nex' time you gamble, will you play that – for me? Half an' half on the winnin's. I sure need some clothes."

The glint of the born gambler's superstition showed in Sandy's eyes as he took the ten dollars.

"I sure will do that," he said. "An' mighty soon. Now then, talk's over, all agreed. Sam an' me has got some work to do outside. Won't be back much before sun-down. Mormon, he's goin' to be middlin' busy, too. Molly, you jest acquaint yorese'f with the Three Star. Riders won't be back till dark. No one about but Mormon, Pedro the cook, an' Joe. Rest up all you can. I'm goin' to bring yore dad in to runnin' water."

Tears welled in Molly's eyes as she thanked him. Again Sandy saw the girlish frankness change to the gratefulness of a woman's spirit, looking out at him between her lids. It made him a little uneasy. The men went out together, walking toward the corral.

"Sam an' me's goin' to bring in what's left of Pat Casey, Mormon. Wagon's kindlin', harness is plumb rotten. Ain't much to bring 'cept him, I reckon. We'll take the buckboard, with a tarp' to stow him under. Up to you to knock together a coffin an' dig a grave under the cottonwoods an' below the spring. Right where that li'l' knoll makes the overflow curve 'ud be a good spot. Use up them extry boards we got for the bunk-house. Git Joe to help you. No sense in lettin' the gel see you, of course."

"Nice occupation fo' a sunny day," grumbled Mormon, but, as the buckboard drove off, he was busy planing boards in the blacksmith's shop, with the door closed against intrusion.

Mid-afternoon found him with the coffin completed. He rounded up the half-breed to help him dig the grave, first locating Molly in a hammock he had slung for her in the shade of the trees by the cistern. He had furnished her with his pet literature,

an enormous mail-order catalogue from a Chicago firm. It was on the ground, the breeze ruffling the illustrated pages, lifting some stray wisps of hair on the girl's neck as she lay, fast asleep, relaxed in the wide canvas hammock, her face checkered by the shifting leaves between her and the sun.

Mormon could move as softly as a cat, for all his bulk. There was turf about the cistern, he had made no sound arriving, but he tiptoed off, his kindly mouth rounded into an O of silence, his weather crinkled eyes half-closed.

"She's jest a baby," he said, half aloud, as he passed beyond the trees to where Joe waited with pick and spade.

The soil was soft and clear from stone. An hour sufficed to sink a shaft for Pat Casey's last bed. Mormon carefully adjusted the headboard he had fashioned from a thick plank, to be carved later when the lettering was decided upon. This done he buckled on the belt he had discarded, from which his holster and revolver swung. Sandy carried two guns, his partners one, habits of earlier, more stirring days, toting them as inevitably as they wore spurs, though there was little occasion to use them on the Three Star, save to put a hurt animal out of misery, or kill a rattlesnake.

Moisture streamed from Mormon's face, patched his clothes as the heat and his exertions temporarily melted some of his superfluous adiposity. Joe, his mahogany face stolid as a wooden carving, rolled a cigarette.

"I sure hate to see a nameless grave," said Mormon.

"Si, Señor," Joe's amiability agreed.

"You go git a dipper. I'm drier'n Dry Crick. Fetch it full from the spring." The half-breed ambled off. Mormon wiped his face with his bandanna. Suddenly his big body stiffened. He heard Molly's voice from the cistern, frightened, then storming in anger. Mormon ran at a sprinter's gait from the cottonwoods, along a side of the corral, through the trees bordering the cistern. The girl was out of the hammock, facing a man in riding breeches and puttees, his face concealed for the moment by his hands. A sleeve of the girl's frock was torn away, the outworn fabric in streamers. The man's hands came down and Mormon recognized him for Jim Plimsoll, owner of the Good Luck Pool Parlors, in the little cattle town of Hereford, where faro, roulette, chuckaluck and craps were played in the back room, owner also of a near-by horse ranch. There was blood on his face, the marks of finger nails.

Plimsoll jumped for the girl, caught her by one arm roughly. She struggled fiercely, silently, striking at him with her free fist. Mormon's gun flashed from its sheath as he shouted at the man. Plimsoll wheeled, releasing Molly. His dark face was livid with rage, a pistol gleamed as he plucked it from beneath the waistband of his riding breeches. The turf spatted between his feet as Mormon fired.

"Got the drop on ye, Jim! Nex' shot'll be higher. Shove that gun back. Now then," as Plimsoll sullenly obeyed, "what in hell do you figger yo're doin'?" Mormon's jovial face was tense, his voice stern and cold, he stood crouched forward a little from the

hips, legs apart, his gun a thing of menace that seemed to be alive, snaky.

"Keep still," he ordered, walking toward the pair, his gun covering Plimsoll, the cheery blue of his eyes changed to the color of ice in the shade, the pupils mere pin-pricks. Molly glanced at him once, fingers caressing her bruised arm.

"He kissed me while I was asleep, the damned skunk!" she flared. "I'd sooner hev rattlesnake-pizen on my lips!" She stopped rubbing the arm to scrub fiercely at her mouth with the back of her hand.

"It ain't the first time I've kissed you," said Plimsoll. "Yore dad didn't stop me from doin' it. I didn't notice you scratching like a wildcat either. Where's your dad? And where do you come in on this deal between old friends?" he demanded of Mormon.

"Her dad's dead," said Mormon simply. "Molly is stayin' fo' a spell at the Three Star. Sandy Bourke, Sam Manning an' me is lookin' out fo' her, an' we aim to do a good job of it. Sabe?"

Plimsoll's thin-lipped mouth sneered with his eyes.

"Gone in for baby-farming, have you, or robbing the cradle? Who's playing the king in this deal? I – " The leer suddenly vanished from his face, the tip of his tongue licked his lips. Mormon's gun was slowly coming up level with his heart, steady as Mormon's gaze, finger compressing the trigger.

"The law reckons you a man – so fur," said Mormon. "Yore pals 'ud pack a jury to hang me fo' shootin' the dirty heart out of you, but – ef you ever let out a foul word or a look about that gel,

I'll take my chance of their bein' enough white men round here to 'quit me. There ought to be a bounty on yore scalp an' ears. You hear me, Jim Plimsoll, I'm talkin' straight. Now git, head yore hawss fo' the short trail to Hereford an' keep travelin'. Pronto!"

Plimsoll's pony was standing under the trees and the gambler turned and, with an attempted laugh, swaggered toward it.

The threat to his personal safety, his desire to fling a sneer at Mormon, seemed to have halted any correlation of the statement concerning the death of the girl's father until now.

"If that's true about your dad," he said, "I'm sorry. How did he die?"

Sensing the hypocrisy of the shift to sympathy, the girl took a step forward. Mormon's pupils contracted again; his finger itched to press the trigger it touched.

"It's none of yore business," said the girl. "You git."

Plimsoll's eyes shifted to Mormon's big body, stiffening to the crouch that prefaced shooting. He faced toward the trees again, flinging his last words over his shoulder.

"None of my business? I don't agree with you there, you little hell-weasel. Your father and me had more than one deal together. You and I may have to do business together yet, Molly mine!"

Molly's teeth showed between her parted lips, her fingers were hooked. Mormon anticipated her indignant leap. His gun spurted fire, the expensive Stetson broadrim seemed lifted from Plimsoll's hair by an invisible hand. With the report it sailed forward, side-slipped, landed on its rim, perforated by a steel-

nosed thirty-eight caliber bullet.

"I give you last warnin'," roared Mormon.

Plimsoll sprang ahead like a racer at the starter's shot, snatched at his hat, missed it, let it lie as he ran on to his horse, mounted and went galloping off. Mormon holstered his gun and swung about to Molly, standing with crimson cheeks, blazing eyes and a young bosom turbulent with emotions.

"I wisht you'd killed him. I wisht you'd killed him!" she cried. "I wisht I had a gun – or a knife! I hate him – hate him —*hate him*! When he says he was ever in a deal with Dad, he lies. Dad stood for him and that was all. He purtended to be awful strong for Dad, purtended to be fond of me, jest to swarm 'round Dad, for some reason. Brought me a doll once. I was thirteen. What in hell did I want with a doll?" she panted. "I burned the damn thing that night in the fire. He kissed me an' Dad seemed to think I owed it him for the doll. I nigh bit my lip off afterward. I wisht yore first shot had been higher, or yore second lower, Peters."

"Call me Uncle Mormon, Molly. I had all I c'ud do not to make it plumb center, li'l' gel, but the jury'd ring in a cold deck on me if I had. He's sure some snake. But we'll take care of Jim Plimsoll, yore Uncle Mormon, with Sam an' Sandy."

Patting Molly's shoulder, Mormon smiled at her with his irresistible grin, and she reflected it faintly as she tucked in the remnants of her torn sleeve.

"That's the on'y dress I got till Sandy Bourke wins me some money," she said. "You sure are quick, Uncle Mormon, when you

git inter action. An' you can shoot some."

"I reckon I coil up tight, between times, like a spring. Used to be pritty light an' limber on my feet oncet. As for shootin', I wish Sandy 'ud been here. He'd have shot both the heels off that fo'-flusher, right an' left, 'thout you ever see his hands move. I ain't so bad, Sam's better, but we had to throw a lot of lead in practise. Sandy shoots like he walks or breathes. It comes natcherul to him, like Sam's ear fo' music. I've allus 'lowed Sandy must hev cut his teeth on a cartridge."

His arm around her shoulder, purposely chatting away, Mormon led Molly toward the ranch-house, waving off the half-breed who came toward them, his dipper of the spring water half emptied in the excitement. Plimsoll's horse was stirring up a dust-cloud on the way to Hereford, other puffs, far-away toward the range, proclaimed that the buckboard was on its way with its funeral freight.

The body of the old prospector was lowered into the grave with the last of the daylight. The raw scar of the grave was covered with turfs Mormon ordered cut by the half-breed. Molly Casey walked away alone, her head high, the corner of her lower lip caught under her teeth, eyes winking back the tears. It was the headboard that had forced her struggle for composure. Mormon had marked on it, with the heavy lead of a carpenter's pencil.

PATRICK CASEY

lies here

where the grass grows

and the water runs. He

looked for gold in the desert

and found death

Buried June 10, 1920

"Ef that suits you," he told Molly, "they's a chap over to Hereford who's a wolf on carvin'. My letterin's punk. When yore mines pay you c'ud have it in stone."

"You-all are awful good to me," was all she could trust herself to say. Each of the Three Musketeers of the Range felt a tug to take her in his arms and comfort her. Instead they looked at one another, as men of their breed do. Sam pulled at his mustache. Mormon rubbed the top of his bald head and Sandy rolled a cigarette and smoked it silently.

Molly ate no supper that night. Before dawn Sandy thought he heard the door of her room open and soft footfalls stealing down the stairs. When he went later to the spring he found the grave covered with the wild blooms that the girl had picked in the dewy dawn.

CHAPTER IV
SANDY CALLS THE TURN

It was a week after Plimsoll's dismissal from the Three Star premises, that one of the riders, coming back from Hereford with the mail, brought rumors of a new strike at Dynamite. Neither of the partners paid much attention to a report so often revived by rumor and as swiftly dying out again. But the man said that Plimsoll had stated that he expected to go over to the mining camp in the interests of claims located by Patrick Casey in which he had a half-interest, by reason of having grubstaked the prospector.

"There's the thorn under *that* saddle," said Sandy to Mormon. "That's what Jim Plimsoll meant by his 'deal.' I don't believe he'd stir up things unless he was fairly sure there was something doin' oveh to Dynamite. He may be wrong but he usually tries to bet safe."

"Molly's father located Dynamite, didn't he?"

"So she tells me. Hopeful, as he called it. Seems he picked up some rich float. This float was where a dyke of porphyry comes up to the surface an' got weathered away down to the pay ore. Leastwise, this was her dad's theory. He told her everything he thought as they shacked erlong together, I reckon, an' she remembers it. He figgers this sylvanite lies under this porphyry

reef, sabe? Porphyry snakes underground, sometimes fifty feet thick, sometimes twice that, an' hard as steel. Matter of luck where you hit it how fur you have to go. Cost too much time an' labor an' money for the crowd that made up the rush to stay with it, 'less some one of them hits it at grass roots an' stahts a real boom atop of the rush. They don't an' Hopeful becomes Hopeless. Me, I got fo'-five chances to grubstake in that time, but I'm broke. I reckon Casey's claims, which is now Molly's claims, is the pick of the camp. Not much doubt, from what I pick up, that he was sure a good miner. One of the ol' Desert Rats that does the locatin' fo' some one else to git the money.

"Molly ses her dad never grubstaked. She don't lie an' she was close to the old man. Mo' like pardners than dad an' daughter. Plimsoll smells somethin'. Figgers there's somethin' in the rumor an' stahts this talk of bein' pardners with Casey 'cause there's a strike. Me, I'm goin' to take a pasear to town soon an' I'll have a li'l' conversation with Jim the Gambolier."

"Count me in on that," said Sam.

"Me too," said Mormon.

"Can't all three leave the ranch to once," demurred Sandy.

The half-breed came sleepily round the corner of the ranch-house and struck at the gong for the breakfast call. The vibrations flooded the air with wave after wave of barbaric sound and Joe pounded, with awakening delight in the savage noise and rhythm, until Sandy, after yelling uselessly, threw a rock at him and hit him between the shoulders, whereupon the light died out of his

face and he shuffled away.

With the boom of the gong, daylight leaped up from the rim of the world. In the east the mountains seemed artificial, sharply profiled like a theatrical setting, a slate-purple in color. To the west, the sharp crests were luminous with a halo that stole down them, staining them rose. With the jump of the sun everything took on color and lost form, plain and hills swimming, seeming to be composed of vapor, the shapes of the mountains shifting every second, tenuous, smoky. The air was crisp, making the fingers tingle. The riders came from their bunk-houses, yawning, sloshing a hasty toilet at a trough with good-natured banter, hurrying on to the shack, where Joe tendered them the prodigious array of viands provided by Pedro, who waited himself on the three partners and the girl, at the ranch-house. The smell of bacon and hot coffee spiced the air. Sam, twisting his mustache, led the way.

"Smells like somethin' in the line of new bread to me," he said. "Bread or – it ain't *biscuits*, Molly?"

"Sure is." Molly came in with a plate piled high with biscuits that were evidently the present pride of her heart. "Made a-plenty," she announced. "Had to wrastle Pedro away from the stove an' I ain't quite on to that oven yet, but they look good, don't they?"

"They sure do," said Sandy, taking one to break and butter it. The eagerness with which his jaws clamped down upon it died into a meditative chewing as of a cow uncertain about the

quality of her cud. He swallowed, took a deep swig of coffee and deliberately went on with his biscuit. Mormon and Sam solemnly followed his example while Molly beamed at them.

"You don't *say* they're good?" she said.

"Too busy eating," said Sandy. And winked at Sam.

Molly caught the wink, took a biscuit, buttered it, bit into it.

Camp-bread and biscuits, eaten in the open, garnished with the wilderness sauce that creates appetite, eaten piping hot, are mighty palatable though the dough is mixed with water and shortening is lacking. As a camp cook, Molly was a success. Confused with Pedro's offer of lard and a stove that was complicated compared to her Dutch kettle, the result was a bitter failure that she acknowledged as soon as her teeth met through the deceptive crust.

Molly was slow to tears and quick to wrath. She picked up the plate of biscuits and marched out with them, her back very straight. In the kitchen the three partners heard first the smash of crockery, then the bang of a pan, a staccato volley of words. She came in again, empty-handed, eyes blazing.

"There's no bread. Pedro's makin' hot cakes." Then, as they looked at her solemnly: "You think you're damned smart, don't you, tryin' to fool me, purtendin' they was good when they'd pizen the chickens? I hate folks who *act* lies, same as them that speaks 'em."

"I've tasted worse," said Mormon. "Honest I have, Molly. My first wife put too much saleratus an' salt in at first but, after a bit,

she was a wonder – as a cook."

Molly, as always, melted to his grin.

"I ain't got no mo' manners than a chuckawaller," she said penitently. "Sandy, would you bring me a cook-book in from town?"

"Got one somewheres around."

"No we ain't. Mormon used the leaves for shavin'," said Sam. "Last winter. W'udn't use his derned ol' catalogue."

"I'll git one," said Sandy. "Here's the hot cakes."

They devoured the savory stacks, spread with butter and sage-honey, in comparative silence. There came the noise of the riders going off for the day's duties laid out by Sam, acting foreman for the month. Sandy got up and went to the window, turning in mock dismay.

"Here comes that Bailey female," he announced. "Young Ed Bailey drivin' the flivver. Sure stahted bright an' early. Wonder what she's nosin' afteh now? Mormon – an' you, Sam," he added sharply, "you'll stick around till she goes. Sabe? I don't aim to be talked to death an' then pickled by her vinegar, like I was las' time she come oveh."

A tinny machine, in need of paint, short of oil, braked squeakingly as a horn squawked and the auto halted by the porch steps. Young Ed Bailey slung one leg over another disproportionate limb, glanced at the windows, rolled a cigarette and lit it. His aunt, tall, gaunt, clad in starched dress and starched sunbonnet, with a rigidity of spine and feature that helped the

fancy that these also had been starched, descended, strode across the porch and entered the living-room, her bright eyes darting all about, needling Molly, taking in every detail.

"Out lookin' fo' a stray," she announced. "Red-an'-white heifer we had up to the house for milkin'. Got rambuncterous an' loped off. Had one horn crumpled. Rawhide halter, ef she ain't got rid of it. You ain't seen her, hev you?"

"No m'm, we ain't. No strange heifer round the Three Star that answers that description." Sam winked at Molly, who was flushing under the inspection of Miranda Bailey, maiden sister of the neighbor owner of the Double-Dumbbell Ranch. He fancied the missing milker an excuse if not an actual invention to furnish opportunity for a visit to the Three Star, an inspection of Molly Casey and subsequent gossip. "You-all air up to date," he said, "ridin' herd in a flivver."

"I see a piece in the paper the other day," she said, "about men playin' a game with autos 'stead of hawsses – polo it was called – an' another piece about cowboys cuttin' out an' ropin' from autos. Hawsses is passin'. Science is replacin' of 'em."

"Reckon they'll last my time," drawled Sandy. "I hear they aim to roll food up in pills an' do us cattlemen out of a livin'. But I ain't worryin'. Me, I prefers steaks – somethin' I can set my teeth in. I reckon there's mo' like me. Let me make you 'quainted with Miss Bailey, Molly. This is Molly Casey, whose dad is dead. Molly, if you-all want to skip out an' tend to them chickens, hop to it."

Molly caught the suggestion that was more than a hint and

started for the door. The woman checked her with a question.

"How old air you, Molly Casey?"

The girl turned, her eyes blank, her manner charged with indifference that unbent to be polite.

"Fifteen." And she went out.

"H'm," said Miranda Bailey, "fifteen. Worse'n I imagined."

Sandy's eyebrows went up. The breath that carried his words might have come from a refrigerator.

"You goin' back in the flivver?" he asked, "or was you aimin' to keep a-lookin' fo' that red-an'-white heifer?"

Miranda sniffed.

"I'm goin', soon's as I've said somethin' in the way of a word of advice an' warnin', seein' as how I happened this way. It's a woman's matter or I wouldn't meddle. But, what with talk goin' round Hereford in settin'-rooms, in restyrongs, in kitchens, as well as in dance-halls an' gamblin' hells where they sell moonshine, it's time it was carried to you which is most concerned, I take it, for the good of the child, not to mention yore own repitashuns."

"Where was it *you* heard it, ma'am?" asked Sam politely.

"Where you never would, Mister Soda-Water Sam-u-el Manning," she flashed. "In the parlor of the Baptis' Church. I ain't much time an' I ain't goin' to waste it to mince matters. Here's a gel, a'most a woman, livin' with you three bachelor men."

"I've been married," ventured Mormon.

"So I understand. Where's yore wife?"

"One of 'em's dead, one of 'em's divorced an' I don't rightly sabe where the third is, nor I ain't losin' weight concernin' that neither."

"More shame to you. You're one of these women-haters, I s'pose?"

"No m'm, I ain't. That's been my trouble. I admire the sex but I've been a bad picker. I'm jest a woman-dodger."

Miranda's sniff turned into a snort.

"I ain't heard nothin' much ag'in' you men, I'll say that," she conceded. "I reckon you-all think I've jest come hornin' in on what ain't my affair. Mebbe that's so. If you've figgered this out same way I have, tell me an' I'll admit I'm jest an extry an' beg yore pardons."

"Miss Bailey," said Sandy, his manner changed to courtesy, "I believe you've come here to do us a service – an' Molly likewise. So fur's I sabe there's been some remahks passed concernin' her stayin' here 'thout a chaperon, so to speak. Any one that 'ud staht that sort of talk is a blood relation to a centipede an' mebbe I can give a guess as to who it is. I reckon I can persuade him to quit."

"Mebbe, but you can't stop what's started any more'n a horn-toad can stop a landslide, Sandy Bourke. You can't kill scandal with gunplay. The gel's too young, in one way, an' not young enough in another, to be stayin' on at the Three Star. You oughter have sense enough to know that. Ef one of you was married, or had a wife that 'ud stay with you, it 'ud be different. Or if there

was a woman housekeeper to the outfit."

"That ain't possible," put in Mormon. "I told you I'm a woman-dodger. Sandy here is woman-shy. Sam is wedded to his mouth-organ."

The flivver horn squawked outside. Miranda pointed her finger at Sandy.

"There's chores waitin' fo' me. I didn't come off at daylight jest to be spyin', whatever you men may think. You either got to git a grown woman here or send the gel away, fo' her own good, 'fore the talk gits so it'll shadder her life. I ain't married. I don't expect to be, but I aimed to be, once, 'cept for a dirty bit of gossip that started in my home town 'thout a word of truth in it. Now, I've said my say, you-all talk it over."

Sandy went to the door with her, helped her into the machine. It shudderingly gathered itself together and wheezed off; he came back with his face serious.

"She's right," he said.

"Mormon," said Sam, "it's up to you. Advertise fo' Number Three to come back – all is forgiven – or git you a divo'ce, it's plumb easy oveh in the nex' state – an' pick a good one this time."

"We got to send her away," said Sandy. "Me, I'm goin' into Herefo'd to-night. I aim to git a cook-book, interview Jim Plimsoll an' then bu'st his bank. One of you come erlong. Match fo' it."

"Bu'st the bank what with?" asked Sam.

Sandy produced the ten-dollar luck-piece and held it up.

"This. Mormon, choose yore side."

"Heads."

Sandy flipped the coin. It fell with a golden ring on the floor. "Tails," said Sandy inspecting it. "You come, Sam. Staht afteh noon. Oil up yore gun."

"I knowed I'd lose," said Mormon dolefully. "Dang my luck anyway."

It was a little after seven o'clock when Sandy and Sam walked out of the Cactus Restaurant, leaving their ponies hitched to the rail in front. They strolled down the main street of Hereford across the railroad tracks to where the "Brisket," as the cowboys styled the little town's tenderloin, huddled its collection of shacks, with their false fronts faced to the dusty street and their rear entrances, still cumbered with cases of empty bottles and idle kegs, turned to the almost dry bed of the creek. The signs of ante-prohibition days, blistered and faded, were still in place. Light showed in windows where fly-specked useless licenses were displayed. Back of the bars a melancholy array of soda-water advertised lack of interest in soft drinks. The front rooms held no loungers, but the click of chips and murmurs of talk came from behind closed doors.

Sandy stopped outside the place labeled "Good Luck Pool Parlors. J. Plimsoll, Prop." The line "Best Liquor and Cigars" was half smeared out. He patted gently the butts of the two Colts in the holsters, whose ends were tied down to the fringe ornaments of his chaps. Sam stroked his ropey mustache and eased the gun

at his hip. Sandy pushed open the door and went in. A man was playing Canfield at a table in the deserted bar. As the pair entered he looked up with a "Howdy, gents?" shoving back a rickety table and chair noisily on the uneven floor. The inner door swung silently as at a signal and Jim Plimsoll came out. He stiffened a little at the sight of the Three Star men and then grinned at Sam.

"How was the last bottle, Soda-Water?" he asked. "You didn't have to change your name with Prohibition, did you? Nor your habits."

"Main thing that's changed is the quality of yore booze – an' the price, neither fo' the better," said Sam carelessly.

"We ain't drinkin' ter-night, Jim," said Sandy. "Dropped in to hev a li'l' talk with you an' then take a buck at the tiger."

Plimsoll's eyes glittered.

"Said talk bein' private," continued Sandy.

Plimsoll threw a glance at the man who had been posted for lookout and he left with a curious gaze that took in Sandy's guns.

"Sorry I was away from the ranch, time you called," said Sandy, sitting with one leg thrown over the corner of the table. "Hope to be there nex' time. I hear you-all claim to have an interest in Pat Casey's minin' locations, his interest now bein' his daughter's?"

"That any of your business?"

"I aim to make it my business," replied Sandy.

For a moment the two men fought a pitched battle with their eyes. It was a warfare that Sandy Bourke was an expert in. The

steel of his glance often saved him the lead in his cartridges. Jim Plimsoll was no fool to wage uneven contest. He fancied he would have the advantage over Sandy later, if the pair really meant to play faro – in his place.

"I grubstaked him for the Hopeful-Dynamite discovery," he said.

"Got any papeh showin' that? Witnessed."

"You know as well as I do that papers ain't often drawn on grubstaking contracts. A man's word is considered good."

"Pat Casey's would have been, I reckon," said Sandy.

"I've got witnesses."

"Well, we'll let that matteh slide till the mines make a showin'. Meantime, there's talk goin' on in this town concernin' the gel an' her livin' at Three Star. I look to you to contradict that so't of gossip, Plimsoll, from now on."

Plimsoll flushed angrily.

"Who in hell do you think you are?" he demanded. "Who appointed you censor to any man's speech?"

"A *man's* speech don't have to be censored, Plimsoll. An' I reckon you know who I am."

"You come here looking for trouble, with me?"

"I never hunt trouble, Jim. If I can't help buttin' into it, like a man might ride into a rattlesnake in the mesquite, I aim to handle it. Ef I ever got into real trouble, an' it resembled you, I'd make you climb so fast, Plimsoll, you'd wish you had horns on yore knees an' eyebrows."

Plimsoll forced a laugh. "Fair warning, Sandy. I never raise a fuss with a two-gun man. It ain't healthy. You've got me wrong in this matter."

"Glad to hear it. Then there won't be no argyment. Game open?"

"Wide. An' a little hundred-proof stuff to take the alkali out of your throats. How about it?"

"I don't drink when I'm playin'. I aim to break the bank ternight. I'm feelin' lucky. Brought my mascot erlong."

"Meaning Sam here?"

All three laughed for a mutual clearance of the situation. Sandy had said what he wanted and knew that Plimsoll interpreted it correctly. They went into the back room amicably after Plimsoll had recalled his lookout.

There was little to indicate the passing of the Volstead Act in the Good Luck Pool Room, where the tables had long ago been taken out, though the cue racks still stood in place. The place was foul with smoke and reeked with the fumes of expensive but indifferently distilled liquor. Hereford – the "brisket" end of it – had never been fussy about mixed drinks. Redeye was, and continued to be, the favorite. A faro and a roulette game, with a craps table, made up the equipment, outside of half a dozen small tables given over to stud and draw poker.

Some fifty men were present, most of them playing. Many of them nodded at Sandy and Sam as they walked over to the faro layout and stood looking on. Plimsoll left them and went back to

a table near the door, where his chair was turned down at a game of draw. He started talking in a low tone to the man seated next to him. The first interest of their entrance soon died out. The dealer at faro went on imperturbably sliding card after card out of the case, the case-keeper fingered the buttons on the wires of his abacus and the players shifted their chips about the layout or nervously shuffled them between the fingers of one hand.

Sandy knew the dealer for Sim Hahn, a man whose livelihood lay in the dexterity of his slim well-kept fingers and his ability to reckon the bets; swiftly to drag in or pay out losings and winnings without an error. His face was without a wrinkle, clean-shaven, every slick black hair in place, the flesh wax-like. He held a record – whispered, not attested – of having more than once beaten a protesting gambler to the draw and then subscribing to the funeral. As he came to the last turn, with three cards left in the box, he paused, waiting for bets to be made. His eyes met Sandy's and he nodded. Three men named the order of the last three cards. None of them guessed the right one of the six ways in which they might have appeared. Hahn took in, paid out, shuffled the cards for a new deal. Sam nudged Sandy, speaking out of the corner of his mouth words that no one else could catch.

"The hombre Plimsoll's talkin' to is 'Butch' Parsons. He's the killer Brady hired over to the M-Bar-M to chase off the nesters."

Sandy said nothing, did not move. As the play began he turned and looked at the "killer" who had been named "Butch," after he had shot two heads of families that had preempted land on

the range that Brady claimed as part of his holding. Whatever the justice of that claim, it was generally understood that Butch had killed in cold blood, Brady's political pull smothering prosecution and inquiry. Butch had a hawkish nose and an outcurving chin. He was practically bald. Reddish eyebrows straggled sparsely above pale blue eyes, the color of cheap graniteware. His lips were thin and pallid, making a hard line of his mouth. He packed a gun, well back of him, as he sat at the game. Meeting Sandy's lightly passing gaze, Butch sent out a puff of smoke from his half-finished cigar. The pale eyes pointed the action, it might have been a challenge, even a covert insult. Sandy ignored it, devoting his attention to the case-keeper.

The jacks came out early, three of them losing, showing second on the turn. A dozen bets went down on the fourth jack to win. Sandy placed the luck-piece on the card, reached for a "copper" marker, and played it to lose.

"That's a luck-piece, Hahn," he said. "If it loses, I'll take it up." Hahn gave him an eye-flick of acknowledgment. He was used to mascots. Sandy watched the play until at last the jack slid off to rest by the side of the case, leaving the winning card, a nine, exposed. Sandy alone had won. The luck-piece had proved its merit.

In twenty minutes Sam borrowed a stack from Sandy's steadily accumulating winnings and departed for the craps table. He wanted quicker action than faro gave him. Luck flirted with him, never entirely deserting him. And Sandy won until the news of

his luck spread through the room. The gamblers began to get the hunch that the Three Star man was going to break the bank. Not all at the faro layout attempted to follow his bets. Plimsoll's roll had never yet been very badly crimped. With the peculiar paradox of their kind, while they told each other that Plimsoll's game was square, they held the secret conviction that Hahn's fingers would manipulate the case in an emergency so that the house would win. And they waited feverishly for the time to come when such a show-down would arrive.

Sandy did not have many chips in front of him, but there were five small oblongs of blue, markers representing five hundred dollars apiece. Hahn laid the fingers of his right hand lightly across the top of the case, the fingers of his left hand curled about it. It had come down to the last turn of the deal again. Every player and onlooker knew what the three cards were – a queen, a five and a deuce. The checking-board showed that the queen had lost twice and won once, the five had won three times and the deuce had won twice and lost once. Most of the players shifted their bets accordingly, the queen to win, the five and deuce to lose. Hahn still waited.

"Goin' to call th' turn?"

All eyes shifted to Sandy. No one else was going to try to name that combination. If the order of the three cards were named correctly the bank would pay four to one. If Sandy staked all on his call he would win over ten thousand dollars. Plimsoll would have to open his safe. Hahn did not have that amount in his cash

drawer.

The rest – save Sam, now close behind Sandy, with ninety dollars winnings cashed-in – watched Sandy enviously and curiously. Hahn was a wonder. The case might be crooked, the spring eccentric. Plimsoll himself was looking on. Butch Parsons stood beside him for a second and then strolled into the front room. Another man followed him.

Sandy shoved the markers across the board, followed by his chips. Apparently aimlessly, he hitched at his belt and the two Colts with their tied-down holsters swung a little to the front, their handles just touching his hips.

"Deuce – queen – five, I'm bettin'," he said. "*An' deal 'em slow.*" His voice drawled and his eyes lifted to Hahn's and rested there.

Hahn had been mechanically chewing gum most of the evening. Now his cheek muscles bulged more plainly and the end of his tongue showed for a second between his lips. His right hand dropped and he drew out a deuce. Eyes shifted from Sandy to Plimsoll, to Hahn. Little beads of moisture oozed out on the dealer's forehead. Plimsoll's black brows met. Sandy's face was placid. Breaths were indrawn as Hahn paid out and raked in on the card, his left hand covering the top of the case.

The atmosphere was charged with intensity. Plimsoll's dark eyes were boring through the dealer's lowered lids.

"Move yo' fingehs, dealer, an' reveal royalty," drawled Sandy. "The queen wins!" His hands were on his hips, fingers touching

the butts of his guns, his eyes burned. For all its drag there was a ring to his voice.

Hahn shot one swift look at him and removed his hand. The queen showed. The room gasped. Plimsoll clapped Sandy on the shoulder.

"You did it," he said. "Broke the bank when you called that turn. Game's closed and the drinks on the house. How'll you have it?"

The crowd made way as Plimsoll walked across to his safe, twirled the combination, opened the doors and took out a stack of bills.

"Bills from a century up," said Sandy. "The odds and ends in gold – for the drinks."

The excitement was dying down. The man from the Three Star had won and had been paid. Plimsoll's game was square. A few, reading the slight signs of Hahn's nervousness, still held some doubts, but the games were closing. The drinks were brought. Two men lounged out into the front room after they had tossed theirs down. Sandy slipped the folded bills into the breast pocket of his shirt in a compact package.

"See who went out?" asked Sam in his side whisper.

"Yep. Saw it in the glass of that picture. We'll go out the back way. Not yet." He shouldered his way through the congratulating crowd, Sam close behind him, into the front room. It was empty. The short end of Sandy's winnings still provided liquor. For a moment they were alone. Plimsoll had not followed them. Sandy

swiftly socketed the bolt on the inside of the front door, turned the key and slid that into his pocket.

"Now we'll go out the back way," he said. "I ain't strong fo' playin' crawfish, Sam, but I ain't keen on bein' potted in the dark. I'll bet what I got in my pocket Butch is huggin' the boards to one side of this shack. I got too much money on me to be a good insurance risk."

Sam chuckled. Plimsoll met them just inside the door.

"Makin' a short cut," said Sandy. "Good night."

As the pair went out at the rear, Plimsoll jumped into the front room. Sam, closing the back door behind them noiselessly, heard the gambler cursing at the bolted door. Silently as a cat, he covered the short distance between the house and the arroyo of the creek and disappeared, merged in its shadow. Sandy joined him and they made their way swiftly along the bottom, climbing the bank where the railroad bridge crossed it, striking off for the main street, lit by sputtery arc-lamps, making for their ponies, still standing patiently outside the all-night restaurant.

"No sense in runnin' our heads into a flyin' noose," said Sandy. "Plimsoll owns the sheriff. Married his sister. We'd be wrong whatever stahted. They'd frisk me of my roll an' we'd never see it ag'in, less we made a runnin' fight of it. Wondeh how much eddication costs nowadays, Sam? What you laffin' at?"

"Butch an' the rest of Plimsoll's gunmen holdin' up the shack, waitin' fo' us to come out, while Plim is huntin' that key."

"Don't laff too hard till we git home," said Sandy. "It's eleven

miles to the Three Star."

They mounted, swung their horses and loped off toward the bridge across the creek. There were two spans, one built since the advent of automobiles, the other ancient, little used. They headed for the latter. Passing the end of the street they saw nothing out of the ordinary. The door of the "Good Luck" was open, shown by a square of light. A group stood outside. Sandy and Sam rode off, the ponies' hoofs silent in the soft thick dust; moving shadows in the twilight, merging with the dark.

CHAPTER V
IN THE BED OF THE CREEK

The old bridge, utilized only by wheels with metal tires these days, and by riders, opened a short-cut to the road leading to the Three Star, a way hardly to be distinguished from the plain. Sandy was minded to get back to the ranch as soon as possible with his winnings. Five thousand for Molly, five thousand for the Three Star, that was the agreement, the custom, and he knew the girl's breed well enough to have no hesitation in making the split as he would with a man. The next thing to do was to pick out a school for her. There Sandy was at a loss. He mulled it over as he rode, his outer senses playing sentinels to his consciousness.

He had deliberately avoided trouble for reasons he considered quite sufficient, but annoyance pricked him that he had been forced to slide out the back way from Plimsoll's, for all the odds against him. If it had been his own money – a sudden flash of future responsibilities as Molly Casey's guardian illumined his thought – if the luck-piece had not been hers, the play for her future welfare, he would have set his own marvelous coordination against Butch and the others in a shooting match, as he had done other times, in other places. Sam, he knew, was wondering a little at their strategic retreat.

But the old days were going, law and order were beginning

to supersede the old methods of every man to his own judgment and action. Hereford had a sheriff who was not above suspicion, but the majority of the people had little use for him and this term of office would be his last.

Sandy could not quite gauge Plimsoll's actions in tamely paying over the winnings and he looked and listened, noting every movement of Pronto moving free-muscled beneath him, for some sign of alarm – perhaps a rifle-shot out of the mesquite. They were not the best of targets, Sam and he, riding fast in the thick dusk under the stars. The road was almost invisible, the plain unsubstantial, though the far-off mountain ranges showed plainly cut, with a curious trick of seeming always to shift back as the observer advanced. Little winds blew in their faces, cool and sweet from the desert, charged with spice of sage.

The ponies struck the loosened planks of the bridge clop-clop, springing forward into a gallop as their riders touched heels to flanks. The pinto was the quicker to get into his stride. Just past the center of the bridge Sam saw Sandy's mount jump like a startled cat into the air. He saw Sandy pliant in his seat; marked against the starry sky. Then came a spurt of red flame from the far bank – to the right – another – and another – from the left. A bullet hummed by him and his own horse slid stiff-legged, plowing the planks, hind feet flat from hoof-points to fetlocks as the pony whirled away from the yawning gap in the bridge, where boards had been pried away in the preparation, of the ambush.

Helpless for the moment until he got his bearings and his pony

gained solid footing, Sam automatically whipped out his gun, cursing as he saw Sandy slide from the saddle, clutch at the rim of the gap, drop down to the bed of the creek, while Pronto, frantic at the loss of his master, leaped the opening and fled with clatter of hoof and swinging stirrup into the desert.

Sam, wild with rage at the thought of Sandy shot, scrambling in bloody sand below him, flung himself from the roan as more bullets whined, whupping into the planks. One seared his upper arm, another struck the saddle tree as he vaulted off, slapping the roan on the flanks, yelling at it as it gathered, leaped the gap and followed Pronto.

"You damned, cowardly, murderin' pack of lousy coyotes!" swore Sam mechanically, as he knelt on the edge of the gap and tried to pierce the blackness, listening fearfully for a groan. He had not fired back. There was nothing to fire at but clumps of blurred growth. The shots had been too sudden, the shying of the horses too confusing for location.

He kneeled over the rim of the last plank, turned, caught with his hands, revolver thrust back into its holster, swung, dropped. A hand closed about his ankle, pulled him down sprawling on the soft sand.

"I'm O. K.," whispered Sandy, and Sam's heart leaped. "Only plugged the rim of my hat. I faked a fall to fool 'em. Snake erlong down the crick bed. Here's where we git even." Sam knew that ring in his partner's voice, low though it was, and his blood tingled. The high crumbly banks of the creek, gouged out by

winter rains and cloud-bursts, were set with brush. Immediately above the bridge were the stripped trunks of cottonwoods, stranded in a flood. Peering through the boughs, they saw stooping figures running along the bank. A man called from the lower side of the bridge, a shot was fired harmlessly. The hunters in view raced back.

"Think they saw us," whispered Sandy. "They'll hear from us, right soon." He led the way back, crossing to the town side beneath the bridge, keeping half-way up the bank, close under the stringers of the bridge, crawling between bushes on his belly, Sam with him. Now they could see no gunmen but occasionally they caught a whisper, the slight sound of moving brush.

There was only a trickle of water in the bed of the creek. Here and there were small bars of bleached shingle and larger boulders. Sandy found a stone imbedded in the bank, loosened it, squatted on his haunches and passed it to Sam, taking a gun in each hand.

"Chuck it into that sunflower patch," he said with his mouth close to Sam's ear. "Then fire at the flashes." Sam pitched the stone through the darkness. It fell with a rustle, chinked against a rock. Instantly there came a fusillade from the opposite bank, four streaks of fire, the bullets cutting through the dried stalks, the marksmen evidently hunting in couples.

Sandy, crouching, pulled triggers and the shots rattled out as if fired from an automatic. Beside him, Sam's gun barked. Each fired three times, Sandy shooting two-handed, flinging six bullets

with instinctive aim while the bed of the creek echoed to the roar of the guns and the air hung heavy with the reek of exploded gases. Then they rushed for the top of the bank, wriggling behind the cover of bushes, lying prone for the next chance.

One yell and a stream of curses came from across the arroyo. Two indistinct figures bent above a third, lifted it, hurrying back toward a clump of willows. The fourth man trailed the others, his oaths smothered, running beside the two bearers, his hand held curiously in front of him, dimly seen.

"They're through. That's enough," said Sandy. "We ain't killers."

"Got two of 'em," said Sam. "Good shootin', Sandy! I reckon I missed clean. I fired to the left."

"The man who's down is Butch," said Sandy. "I'd know his figger in a coal shaft. I've a hunch the other was Hahn. Hit him somewheres in the hand; spile his dealin' fo' a while. Let's git out of this. They've quit."

"Wonder if Plimsoll was with 'em. How about the hawsses? Can you whistle Pronto back?"

"Reckon so."

They walked toward the bridge and crossed it, passing the gap on the side timbers. Plimsoll's men had departed with their casualties. Sandy whistled shrilly through his teeth. After a minute he repeated the call.

"Sure hate to hoof it to the ranch," said Sam. "Mebbe the shots stampeded 'em. Better not try to borrow hawsses in town,

I figger."

"No. Pronto ain't fur. Yore roan'll stick with him. That pinto of mine is half human. I've sent him ahead before. Ef I'd yelled 'Home' he'd have gone. Shots w'udn't have scared him. Made him stand by – like Molly."

"Got yore money safe?"

"Yep."

There came a sound of pounding hoofs. Then that of others, coming from the town.

"Better load up, Sam," said Sandy grimly, "we ain't out of this yet. That'll be Jim Plimsoll's brother-in-law, likely."

"Here come our ponies."

As yet they could see nothing advancing, but a horse whinnied from the plain lying between them and the Three Star road.

"Pronto," said Sandy, shoving cartridges into his guns.

A body of mounted men had come out from town and ridden fast upon the bridge. The foremost stopped with an exclamation at the missing boards. All wheeled in some confusion and slid their horses down into the arroyo to scramble up the bank again and spur for Sam and Sandy just as the pinto and the roan, curveted up to their masters. The two cowmen leaped for their seats, Sandy temporarily sheathing one gun. They faced the townsmen who formed a half-circle about them.

"You, Sandy Bourke an' Sam Manning, stick up yore hands!"

"You got good eyesight," returned Sandy. "What's the idee? Ef you shoot, don't miss, I'm holdin' tol'able close ter-night."

His tone was almost good-humored, tolerant, full of confidence.

"You was shootin' in town limits. May have killed some one. Ag'in' the law to shoot inside the Herefo'd line. I'm goin' to take you in."

"You air?" Sandy's drawl was charged with mockery. "How about the Herefo'd men who stahted the fireworks? Ef you want our guns, Sheriff, come an' take 'em. First come, first served."

There was no forward movement. A man swore as his horse began to dance.

"You go back an' tell Jim Plimsoll to do his own dirty wo'k, if he's got any guts left fo' tryin'. Me, I'm goin' home."

The sheriff and his hastily gathered band of irregular deputies, working in the interests of Plimsoll, knew, with sufficient intimacy to endow them with caution, the general record of Sandy Bourke and Soda-Water Sam. None of them wanted to risk a shot – and miss. Sandy would not. Even a fatal wound might not prevent him taking toll. Sam was almost as dangerous. They were politicians rather than fighting men, every one of them. And they were tolerably certain that Plimsoll had ambushed the two from the Three Star. His methods were akin to their own. The sheriff blustered.

"I ain't through with you yit, Sandy Bourke. I know where to find you."

"You-all are goin' to have a mighty hard time findin' yo'se'f afteh election, Sheriff, as it is. The cowmen ain't crazy about you.

They might take a notion to escort you out of the county limits."

"You're inside the town line. I – "

"I won't be in two minutes. Git out of our road," said Sandy, his voice freezing in sudden contempt. He roweled Pronto and, with Sam even in the jump, they galloped through the half-ring without opposition. Horses were neck-reined aside to let them pass. The wind sang by them as they tangented off from the road. A shot or two announced the attempt of some to save their own faces, but no bullets came near the pair. The fusillade was sheer bravado.

Pronto and the roan went at full speed, bellies low to the plain that streamed past, the manes whipping the hands of their riders, springing on sinews of whalebone through soapweed and mesquite, spurning the soil with drumming hoofs, night-seeing, danger-dodging, jumping the little gullies, reveling in the rush. Sandy and Sam sat slightly forward, loose-seated, thigh-muscles and knees feeling the withers rather than pressing them, balancing their own limber bodies to every movement of the flying ponies.

A late moon climbed out of the east and scudded up the sky, silvering the distant peaks. For almost a mile they rode at top speed, then they settled down to a lope that ate up the miles – a walk at the end of three – then lope and walk again, until the giant cottonwoods of the Three Star rose from the plain, leaves shimmering in the moonlight, the ranch buildings blocked in purple pin-pointed with orange – the pin-points enlarging,

resolving into two lighted windows as they passed shack and barn and rode into the home corral at last, to unsaddle, wipe down the horses and dismiss them for the time with a smack on their lathery flanks, knowing they would be too wise to overdrink at the trough, promising them grain later.

Mormon tiptoed heavily out on the creaking porch with a husky, "Hush!"

"What fo'?"

"Molly's asleep. 'Sisted on waitin' up for you."

"Well, we're here, ain't we?" demanded Sam. "Me, I got a scrape in my arm an' some son of a wolf spiled my saddle. Sandy, he sorter evened up fo' it."

"Bleedin'?" asked Mormon.

"Nope. Tied my bandanner round it. Cold air fixed it. Shucks, it ain't nuthin'! Sandy's got a green kale plaster fo' it. Come to think of it, I got ninety bucks myse'f."

"You won?"

"Did we win? Wait till we show you."

Molly met them as they went in, her eyes wide open, all sleep banished.

"Was it a luck-piece?" she demanded.

Sandy produced the package of bills, divided it, shoved over part.

"Your half," he said. "Five thousand bucks. Bu'sted the bank. An' here's the 'riginal bet." He showed the gold eagle, put it into her palm.

"Served me, now you take it," he said. "I'll git you a chain fo' it. It's sure a mascot – same as you are – the Mascot of the Three Star."

She looked up, her eyes, cloudy with wonder at the sight of the money, shining at her new title. They rested on Sam's arm, bandaged with the bandanna.

"There's been shootin'," she said. "You're hit. Oh!"

"More of a miss than a hit," replied Sam.

Molly turned to Sandy. Anxiety, affection, something stronger that stirred him deeply, showed now in her gaze.

"*You* hurt?"

"Didn't hardly muss a ha'r of my head. Jest a li'l' excitement."

"Tell me all about it."

Sandy gave her a condensed and somewhat expurgated account to which she listened with her face aglow.

"I wisht I'd been there to see it," she said as he finished.

"It warn't jest the time nor place fo' a young lady," said Sandy. "Main p'int is we got the money for yo' eddication, like we planned."

The light faded from her face.

"Air you so dead set for me to go away?" she asked.

"See here, Molly." Sandy leaned forward in his chair, talking earnestly. "You've got the makin' of a mighty fine woman in you. An' paht of you is yore dad an' paht yore maw. Sabe? They handed you on down an', if you make the most of yo'se'f, you make the most of them. Me, I've allus been trubbled with the

saddle-itch an' I've wanted the out-of-doors. A chap writ a poem that hits me once. It stahts in,

> "I want free life an' I want free air,
> An' I sigh fo' the canter afteh the cattle,
> The crack of whips like shots in battle;
> The melly of horns an' hoofs an' heads
> That wars an' wrangles an' scatters an' spreads,
> The green beneath an' the blue above,
> An' dash an' danger an' life…

"Somethin' like that. I mayn't have got it jest right, but that's *me*. The chap that wrote that might have writ pahts of it jest fo' me. He sure knew what he was writin' erbout. It's called *In Texas, Down by the Rio Grande*. I've been there. Arizony ain't much differunt."

"It's called *Lasca*," put in Sam. "I seen it in the movies. Had the po'try strung all through it. It was a love story. This Lasca, she – "

Mormon put a heavy foot over Sam's and he subsided.

"So you see I lost out on a heap," said Sandy. "An' I'm a man. I can git erlong with less. But fo' a gel, learnin's a grand thing. An' there's the big cities, an' theaters, fine clothes an' fine manners. Like livin' in another world."

"Where they wear suits like Sam's spiketail," said Mormon. "I mind me when I was to Chicago with a train of steers one time, the tall buildin's was higher than cañon cliffs. On'y full breath I

drawed was down on the lake front where they was a free picter show in a museum. Reg'lar storm there was out on the lake; big waves. Wind like to curl my tongue back down my throat an' choke me."

"Who's hornin' in now?" asked Sam. "Go on, Sandy."

"But," said Molly, wide-eyed, "that's the life *I* like. I mean out here. I don't want to be different."

"Shucks," said Sandy. "You won't be. Jest polished up. Skin slicked up, hair fixed to the style, nails trimmed an' shined. Culchured. Inside you'll be yore real self. You can't take the gold out of a bit of ore any more than you can change iron pyrites inter the reel stuff. But, if the gold's goin' to be put into proper circulation, it's got to be refined. Sabe?"

"I ain't refined, I reckon," said Molly with a sigh. "I don't know as I want to be. I can allus come back, can't I?"

"You sure can."

"An' there's Dad. He's where he wanted to be. I w'udn't want to go away from him."

"He'd want you to make this trip, sure," said Sandy. "An' that settles it. You go off to bed an' dream on it. We got to figger out where you go an' that'll take some time an' thinkin'. I'm some tired myse'f. I've been out of trainin' lately fo' excitement. Sam, I'm goin' to soak that place on yore arm with iodine. Good night, Molly."

She got up immediately, went to Mormon and to Sam and gravely shook hands, thanking them.

"You-all are damned good to me," she said. Opposite Sandy she hesitated, then threw her arms round his neck and kissed him before she ran from the room, with Grit leaping after her. Sandy's bronzed face glowed like reflecting copper.

"Some folks git all the luck," said Mormon.

"There you go," bantered Sam, stripping his arm for the iodine. "You been married three times, reg'lar magnet fo' the wimmin, an' you grudge Sandy pay fo' what he done. Me, I helped, but I ain't grudgin' him. Though I sure envy him."

"Yes, you helped an' left me to home to count fingers."

"Shucks! You matched for it, didn't you? An' didn't you have yore li'l' session with Plimsoll all to yorese'f. What's eatin' you? You want to be a five-ringed circus all to yorese'f an' have all the fun. Ef that stuff heals like it smahts, Sandy, I'll say I'm cured now."

"It don't amount to much, Sam," said Sandy. "Yore flesh allus closed up quick. What you goin' to do with yore ninety dollars?"

"I thought of buyin' me a new saddle. Mine's spiled. Couldn't trust that tree fo' ropin' now. But I figger I'll buy me a fine travelin' bag fo' Molly. Loan me yore catalogue, Mormon, so's I can choose one."

So, bantering one another, they bunked in.

CHAPTER VI
PASO CABRAS

They did not make butter on the Three Star.

Since the arrival of Molly an unwilling and refractory cow had been brought in from the range and half forced, half coaxed to give the fresh milk that Mormon insisted the girl needed. Until then evaporated milk had suited all hands. But butter – to go with hot cakes and sage-honey – was an imperative need for the riders. Riders demanded the best quality in the "found" part of their wages and the three partners supplied it. The butter came over weekly from the Bailey ranch to be kept under the spring cover for cooling. Usually the gangling young Ed Bailey brought it over in the crotchety flivver. When Sandy saw the sparsely fleshed figure of Miranda Bailey seated by the driver he winced in spirit. This second visitation looked like mere curiosity and gossip and offset the opinion he had begun to form of the spinster – that she was sound underneath her angularities and mannerisms.

It was twilight. The three partners and Molly were on the ranch-house porch after supper, and there was no escape. Sam slid his harmonica into his pocket silently and Mormon groaned aloud as the rattlebang car chugged up and was braked, shaking all over until the engine was shut off. Ed Bailey crossed his legs and rolled his cigarette. No one at the Three Star had ever seen

him alight from the car, Mormon insisted he ate and slept in it. Miranda nodded at the three partners, who rose as she came up the steps.

"You sure need some new clothes, child," she said to Molly. "You got to have 'em. I heard you was shot," she went on to Sam. "That sling ain't right. You should have it fixed so yore wrist is higher'n yore elbow. Who's tendin' it?"

"It's healin' fine," said Sam. "I'm pure-blooded an' my flesh allus heals quick."

Miranda sniffed.

"I reckon prohibition helps some," she retorted. "Now then, I come on business. Sandy Bourke, you ain't any of you the legal guardian of that child, air you?"

"Nothin' illegal in what we're doin', I reckon."

"I didn't ask you that. You-all ain't got papers?"

With the question she wriggled her eyebrows, shifted her glance and generally twisted her features in what Sandy interpreted plainly enough as a suggestion that Molly should be eliminated from the talk. He did not agree with the spinster. It was Molly's prime affair and he knew that she would resent being treated too childishly in regard to her own concerns. Sandy had gentled too many high-spirited fillies and colts not to have found out that methods that apply to well-bred quadrupeds are generally coefficient with humans. He shook his head slightly at Miss Bailey's signaling.

"Jest what's the idea?" he asked. "Some one figgerin' on

makin' her stay at the Three Star unpleasant? Fur as jest gossip is concerned, it don't have any weight with none of us an' there ain't no sense in mentionin' it."

"'Pears you ain't givin' me over an' above credit for sense," said Miranda, a bit grimly. "This ain't gossip. Ef you're bound the gel is to sit in with her elders I'll go right ahead. I got a lot of chores to do yet, deliverin' butter, an' the car's actin' up uncertain. Here 'tis. I got it direct from my brother who's heard the talk that's goin' round. You've run foul of Jim Plimsoll – or he foul of you, which is more likely. Plimsoll an' Eke Jordan, the sheriff, are like two peas in a pod. The sheriff's got the inside of local politicks, so fur. When we wimmen git to votin' this fall things is goin' to be different. Right now, he's in. He an' the courts of this county are all striped the same way. Reg'lar zebras. Penitentiary pattern 'ud match their skins. Mebbe some of 'em ought to be wearin' it.

"Now for the meat of the nut. They're figgerin' on gettin' control of the gel away from you-all. They'll use argymints for the general public that she's too young to be keepin' house for three unmarried men, leastwise three men who ain't livin' with their wives." She looked pointedly at Mormon. "They'll rouse up opinion enough for a change. They'd like to app'int a guardian of their own kidney. Mebbe we can block that if one of us comes out an' offers to take her. I'd be glad to, for one, an' do the right thing by her."

Molly walked over to Sandy's chair and stood behind it, her eyes widening, her breath beginning to come quickly.

"There's some talk about her father's claims over to Dynamite lookin' up. Party of easterners over that way lately, nosin' around to find out owners, lookin' up assessment work an' so on. Talk of a boom. I reckon Plimsoll's twigged that. Lawyer Feeder, who run for state senator an' whose record's none too dainty, is in cahoots with Jordan an' Plimsoll. Ed heard they figger on goin' before Judge Vanniman, one of their crowd, to get an order of court. She's a minor. They can git her away from you. If we crowd them too hard for them to app'int one of their own ring – an' they're figgerin' on Plimsoll, he claimin' to be her father's partner – they'll likely have her put in some institution. An' it's goin' to be done right sudden. I w'udn't wonder, from all I hear, but what they're over here ter-morrer with a court order. An' you can't fight the courts 's long as they're in authority, the way you fought Jim Plimsoll."

Molly stepped out, eyes flashing, fists clenched, talking passionately. "I won't go with 'em. I'll run away. They can't take me. Jim Plimsoll is a damned liar. You won't let 'em take me?" She turned to Sandy, her arms stretched in appeal.

"No, Molly, I won't. Will we, boys?"

"You can bet everything you got an' ever hope to own we won't," said Sam.

"That goes for me," echoed Mormon, but he scratched his fringe of hair in some perplexity.

"Talk don't beat an order of the court," said Miranda Bailey. "Mebbe I seem sort of vinegary to you, child, but I'm not a bad

sort. My brother Ed has got somethin' to say in this community an' I'm likely to control a few votes this fall myself. I figger if you came home with me to-day we c'ud manage to git you placed with us. There's been tattle about you stoppin' here. You're fifteen – an'…"

"Some folks is jest plumb rotten," flared Molly. "I'm no kid. I … *oh, if* Dad was alive!"

Sandy stood up and slid an arm about her shaking shoulders. She wheeled and buried her head on his shoulder, sobbing.

"We're powerful obliged to you, Miss Bailey, for what you told us," said Sandy. "I'm right sure you'd give Molly a fine home, but we got other plans an' we aim to carry 'em out. Plimsoll's a skunk an' I'll block his game about the mines ef they amount to anything. Molly's goin' east for her eddication. She's got plenty money to git the best that's goin' an' she's goin' to have it."

"Then you better git her 'cross the county line before many hours are over." Miranda Bailey recognized something better than mere decision in Sandy's voice, she was not the leading suffragist of the county for lack of brains. But there was true regret in her voice as she went on. "I'm sorry she don't cotton to the idee of comin' over to our place. A woman needs a woman's company." At the diplomatic concession to her maturity Molly gave the spinster a mollified glance. Miss Bailey climbed into the machine.

"You aim on takin' her out of the county to the railroad ter-morrer?" she asked. "What school is she goin' to?"

"We ain't settled all the details," said Sandy. "But we'll do that all right. We'll git ready soon's we can. Meantime, we'll keep our eyes peeled ter-morrer against any order from Hereford."

"Want to use this car? I'll bring it over early. Ed can drive it."

The gangling youth for the first time showed an intelligent interest in anything outside of his cigarette.

"Fo' time's sake, aunt," he said, "'twouldn't be no manner of good if it come down to a runnin' chase. Nearest depot's fifty mile' across the county line. Racin' this car ag'in' the sheriff's 'ud be like matchin' a flea ag'in' a grasshopper. Dern it, she's balked ag'in." He wrestled with the crank, conquered it and the machine shivered like a hunting dog while his aunt adjusted spark and gas. She nodded to him to start and they moved off, Miranda waving a farewell as she called out, "Good luck!"

"Some sport!" announced Sam. "That's the kind of woman you sh'ud have married, Mormon."

Molly, excited now, demanded audience.

"When do we start?" she asked eagerly. "Will you wait till they come out from Hereford?"

"I got to think out things a bit, Molly," said Sandy. "I figger we'll git a start on 'em, ef you can git ready. In the mornin'."

"I haven't got much to take."

"We'll buy you an outfit."

"Horseback?"

Sandy looked at her with puckered eyes.

"Can't tell you what I ain't sure of myse'f," he drawled. "One

thing is sure, you got to tuhn in an' git a good rest. Ef we slide out it won't be all a pleasure trip. I reckon Plimsoll means business. An' he's sure got the county machinery behind him right now."

"I can take Grit?"

"W'udn't want to leave us somethin' to remember you by?" asked Sandy. "Somethin' to help make sure you'll come back?"

"I'd allus come back, to visit Dad," she said. "But Grit…? I don't want to leave Grit."

"It 'ud be a hard trip fo' him this way, Molly. I ain't sure about the regulations at them schools. I reckon the best way w'ud be fo' you to make arrangements fo' him to come on afteh you git there."

Molly regarded Sandy soberly, her fingers twining through the dog's mane.

"You'd be good to him – same as you air to me? Oh, I'm jest plumb mean to ask you that. I know you w'ud. He's goin' to be jest as lonesome as me for a bit, ain't you, Grit? He allus slep' with me, cuddlin' up, an' – " She gulped, straightened.

"Good night," she said. "Come, Grit."

The three men sat silent for a moment or two after she left.

"She's sure a stem-winder," said Mormon presently. "How you goin' to fix to git her away, Sandy? Plimsoll'll be hotter'n a bug on a hot griddle."

"I got a plan warmin' up," said Sandy. "Nearest to the county line is west through the Cabezas Range. Only two gaps, Paso Cabras, an' the Bolsa."

"But the Bolsa…" started Sam.

Sandy checked him.

"I know. Listen! I aim to git to the railroad an' then me an' Molly'll make for New Mexico."

"Huh!"

"You guessed it, Mormon. For the Pecos River an' Boville an' the Redding Ranch. I reckon Barbara Redding'll handle the thing. She'll git Molly her outfit an' she'll know all about the right schools."

Mormon brought his hand down on Sam's thigh with a sounding whack.

"Dern me, ef he ain't the wise ol' son of a gun," he cried delightedly. "Sure!"

"It's the thing," assented Sam, rubbing himself, "but you don't have to break my laig over it. Sandy, you sure use yo' brains."

Barbara Redding, once Barbara Barton of the celebrated Curly O, was a bright star in the mutual firmament of the Three Star partners. They had all worked together on the Curly O in the old days. Sandy had been foreman there. Once he had rescued Barbara Barton from horse rustlers with a grudge against her father and once again he had rendered her even greater service when members of the same crowd kidnapped her two-year-old son whom Barbara Redding had brought on a visit to his grandfather. Sandy had trailed alone and brought in the "li'l' son of a gun," as he styled the youngster. There was little that Barbara Redding and her husband, wealthy rancher, would not do for

Sandy.

"I've got an itch to give Plimsoll an' his pals a run fo' their money," went on Sandy. "An' here's the way I figger to do it, in the rough. See what you all think of it."

Subdued guffaws rose from the porch in through the open window of the room where Molly Casey lay wide awake, the dog beside her. Presently she heard the martial strains of Sam's harmonica, cuddled under his big mustache, played one-handed. He was playing an air that he had dedicated to Sandy. Vaguely it comforted her.

"They're *good*," she said to Grit. "An' they've figgered out something or they w'udn't be actin' thataway. You an' me got to be game."

Sandy smoked his cigarette and Mormon lolled in his chair, while Sam breathed out his melody into the night that was very still and very quiet, with the great white stars burning rayless. The tune swelled triumphantly.

> Behold El Capitan,
> Notice his misanthropic stare,
> Look at his independent air;
> And match him if you can,
> He is the champion beyond compare.

It was a tribute to the strategy of Sandy Bourke, the D'Artagnan of the Three Musketeers of the Range, whereof Mormon was surely Porthos, if Sam was hard to recognize as

Aramis. "One for all and all for one" was their motto, and neither Mormon nor Sam doubted for an instant that Sandy would win. Sandy, smoking cigarette after cigarette, was not so sure but equally complacent.

Next morning, breakfast over before the sun was well above the peaks, while desert birds were still rising, twittering shrill welcome to the dawn, Sandy went about humming snatches of cowboy songs just above his breath as he oversaw the arrangements for the exodus that was to be; not so much a flight, as a deliberately calculated laying of a trail for the pursuit. So might an old dog fox, sure of his speed and wisdom, trot leisurely across a field in full sight of the pack. Sandy had no intention of waiting until the lawhounds arrived, he needed a start against the handicap of high-powered cars. He was in high humor as the buckboard was greased, a team of buckskins given a special feed and a rub-down, and various articles gathered for transportation. Among these were a spool of barbed wire and a dozen fence posts.

"I'm a rollickin', rovin' son of a gun
Of a roamin' gambolier;"

sang Sandy, lights dancing in his gray eyes. Sandy was not old – a little short of thirty – but he was generally mature, suggesting deliberation of mind if not of action. This morning youth was his, rollicking, devil-may-care youth that showed in his walk, the

set of his shoulders, his smile.

His spirit was infectious. Four riders, jumping to his orders, tossed badinage among one another like a ball. Mormon and Sam, seated on the top rail of the corral fence, openly admired their partner.

"Like old times, Mormon?" suggested Sam.

"Sure is. I reckon we'll have some fun 'fore the day's out. Sandy can cert'nly scheme out the scenarios."

"The what?"

"The scenarios," repeated Mormon loftily. "I got that out of a moving pitcher magazine down to Hereford. It's the word fo' the plot of the story. Sabe?"

"Huh! I reckon them movin' pitcher shooters 'ud have to move some to git all that's movin' this trip. Got yore gun oiled up, Mormon? Here's Molly."

Molly came out on the porch carrying a small grip packed with her few belongings, Grit beside her. Sandy nodded to her, busy giving instructions to two riders. Mormon and Sam waved and she went over to them, swinging up to the rail beside them.

"Jim," said Sandy, "I want you should ride out to'ards Hereford an' hide out atop of Bald Butte. You don't need to stay there any later than noon. Take a flash-glass with you. If any of the sheriff's crowd comes erlong, any one who looks like he might be servin' papers, sabe, you flash in a message. Make it a five-flash fo' anything suspicious, a three-flash fo' any one shackin' this way, even if you figger they're plumb harmless."

"Seguro, Miguel." With the slang phrase, Jim, an upstanding young chap, despite his horse-bowed legs, walked over to the bunk-house for flash-mirror and gun, came back to his already caught-up and saddled horse, turned stirrup and set foot in it, caught hold of mane and horn, beat the quick swirl of his pony sidewise with the fling of leg over cantle and went streaming off for the Bald Butte in a cloud of dust. Sandy called to Buck Perches, oldest of his riders, whose exposed skin matched the leather of his saddle.

"Buck, ef any visitors arrives while we're gone, you entertain 'em same as I w'ud. I w'udn't be surprised but what Jim Plimsoll 'ud be moseyin' erlong, with Sheriff Jordan an' mebbe one or two mo'. Mo' the merrier. They'll be lookin' fo' me an' Miss Molly with some readin' matter that's got a seal to the bottom of it. We won't be to home. You'll be the only one to home 'cept Pedro an' Joe. They've got their instructions to know nothin'. They ain't supposed to know nothin'. You – you've stayed to the ranch to do some fixin' of yore saddle. Started, but come back when yore cinch bu'sted. Sabe? All the rest of the riders is on the range 'tendin' business. When they left, an' when you left with 'em, me an' Mormon an' Sam, with Miss Molly, was all here. So you supposed. Don't let 'em think yo're planted to feed 'em info'mation."

Buck nodded, solemn as an image, his dark eyes twinkling a little.

"I'm real pleasant to the sheriff an' sort of indifferent to this

here Plimsoll person?" he suggested.

"Let 'em size up the thing fo' themselves. They'll find Pronto in the corral, also Sam's roan, which they know is our usual mounts. If they don't sabe the buckboard's gone, which they probably will, knowin' this outfit fairly well, an' the sheriff not bein' a dumbhead; lead up to it. Then you might horn it out of Pedro that he thinks we started erbout ten o'clock an' leave it to them to foller trail. It'll be plain enough. We'll take care of the rest. Up to you, Buck, to act natcherul."

"I'll sure do that. I sabe the play."

"Then we'll light out soon's we're packed. Mormon, git the grub an' water aboard. Sam, help me with the rest of the truck. Got yore war-bag, Molly?"

"I haven't said good-by to Dad, or Grit," she said.

Sandy nodded. "Reckon you'd like to do that alone. Suppose you take Grit with you to the spring an' then leave him up in yore room."

"He knows I'm goin'. I told him last night, but he knew it 'thout that." Molly spoke in a monotone. She was pale and her eyes showed lack of sleep but she had fought the thing out with herself and she was going to be game. She gave Sandy her grip and walked off toward the cottonwoods. Grit nosed along in her shadow, his muzzle touching her skirt.

It was a big load for the buckboard with Mormon and Sam in the back seat crowded by the piled-up baggage, with Sandy driving and Molly beside him, flushed a little with growing

excitement. But the buckskins were sinewed with whalebone and used to desert work. They surged forward at the word, tightening the tugs in an eager leap and settled down to a fast trot, out across the prairie. The riders, with the exception of Buck, and Jim, who was already close to the butte, which was midway between the ranch and Hereford, loped off, two and two, to their work, not to return until sun-down.

It was still cool, the dust rose about them in eddies as they crossed the slowly descending slope of the sink that presently mounted again toward the far-off range. There was no apparent road, but Sandy chose a compass course between the sage for the first few miles, then skirted the mesquite. Sam leaned forward once when the buckskins had been pulled down to a walk and spoke to Molly.

"See that notch in the range?" he asked, "oveh to the no'th, where the shadder's blue. That's Paso Cabras, the Pass of the Goats. Some says it's named 'cause the cliffs is fair lousy with goats, some 'cause on'y a goat can make the climb. County line's five mile' out on the plain beyond the pass. Railroad two mo', at Caroca."

"Are we goin' through the pass?" she asked Sandy.

"Well, I'll tell you this much, Molly. If we sh'ud decide to go that way an' strike the pass afore the sheriff catches up with us, he'll have to foller afoot or go clean round the mesa. The Goat's Pass ain't no place fo' an automobeel, nor an airyplane neither. Don't believe there's a level spot wider'n five foot or bigger than

that much square."

Either Mormon or Sam sat always with neck twisted, watching for a flash-signal from the butte that stood up clearly in the crystal atmosphere, sometimes distorted, changing hue from chocolate to indigo, never seeming to get any farther away, just as the mesa range never seemed to get any closer. Sometimes Molly relieved them as lookout, but hour after hour passed without sign.

Close to noon they reached a watering hole, with water none too cool or sweet, but still welcome. There the buckskins were unhitched, rubbed down and, after they had cooled off, given water and grain. Save for sweat marks, they showed little sign of the grueling trip through the soft dirt. A strip of lava, half a mile of ancient flow, lay between them and the long up-slope of the desert to the mesa. As they ate lunch in the shadow of some barrel cactus, Sandy suddenly gave a grunt of satisfaction, pointing with outstretched forefinger to the butte. Five flashes had flickered up. They were repeated. Jim had signaled a suspicious party on their way to Three Star. The sheriff was out with his papers.

"We got five hours' staht," said Sandy. "Made close to thirty mile'. They've got thirty-five to make. Take 'em mo'n two hours, countin' questions with Buck. Good enough. See anything of the boys, Sam? They ought to be showin' up. I told 'em noon."

"On time," announced Sam. The two riders who had last talked with Sandy rode out of a straggling thicket of cactus and skirted the lava flow. Each led a spare horse, unsaddled.

CHAPTER VII
BOLSA GAP

Sheriff Jordan had a high-powered car purchased, not so much from the fees of his office as with his perquisites, a word covering a wide range of possibilities, all of which the sheriff made the most of. He was proud of his car and proud of his ability to run it anywhere at record-breaking speed. It carried an extra water container that could be mounted on the running board for desert work, an extra gasoline and oil supply, there were always extra tires strapped on, extra spark plugs handy and his batteries were always well charged.

"I aim to make her efficient," said Jordan, "bein' she represents my office. That's me. If I needed me an airyplane, I'd get me one to hunt the outlaws out of cover, an' I'd run it myself, an' run it right. That's me, Bill Jordan!"

Boaster though he was, there was little doubt as to Jordan's efficiency or his courage. He brought in the criminals he went out to get, some alive, some dead; prosecuted the first with zeal and collected the rewards with alacrity. The trouble was that he did *not* always go out after certain individuals, who were outside the law, as interpreted by the people, but inside it, as protected by the political ring to which Jordan, with other prominent officials, belonged.

Jordan had taken up his brother-in-law's grievance with the greater zest since he had a half-interest in Plimsoll's Good Luck Pool Parlors, a share that had cost him good money. On top of that had come Sandy's flouting of him on the bridge in front of the sheriff's own followers. He had to save his face, politically as well as personally.

To secure papers bringing Molly Casey within the jurisdiction of the court was not a difficult matter, but it was not so easy to get them at an early hour, since court was not in session and the judge none too eager to arise of a morning. But Jordan knew nothing of the visit of Miranda Bailey to the Three Star and he pressed matters with no special expedition, though he characteristically wasted no time.

Armed with the necessary warrant, backed by an assurance that, unless some extraordinary howl went up, the girl would be given into the custody of Jim Plimsoll as guardian, by virtue of his claim to partnership with her father, the sheriff, Plimsoll and two others, all three deputized for the occasion, started the car from Hereford at a quarter of twelve, after an early lunch. They passed the butte where Jim lay prone atop without noticing the flashes he shot into the sky. At a few minutes after twelve they reached Three Star where Buck, seated on the porch, his saddle astride a sawhorse, stitched away at a cinch.

Buck played his part well, allowing Jordan to ferret out information to his own satisfaction. It appeared plain that all three partners had taken flight with the girl in the buckboard.

Sandy's pinto and Sam's roan were in the corral. Jordan overlooked one thing, the counting of saddles, though that would not have been an easy determination.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.