



SHOTGUN GOLD

By W. C. Tuttle

www.saptarshee.in

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Phone:02188-299295

Email:saptarsheepublishan@gmail.com

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A New Hashknife and Sleepy Story

“And that’s how it comes that I’m sheriff of Black Horse—and may I be hung with horseshoes and rabbit-feet, et cettery.”

Roaring Rigby tilted back in an old swivel chair and looked disconsolately at the white-haired man who sat across the battered desk. The man had a long, deeply-lined face, slightly reddish nose, somber blue eyes beneath white eyebrows.

Roaring Rigby himself was long, lean, bony of face and figure, with the pouched eyes of a bloodhound. His nose was long too, and slightly out of line; his cheekbones were almost visible through the tightly stretched skin that covered them. His ears were of the hating variety, and his neutral-colored hair was thin, like foxtail grass on alkali flats.

The room in which these two men sat was the sheriff’s office in the town of Turquoise, the county-seat of Black Horse County. It was a small room, unpapered, except for an array of reward notices, a State map and a calendar of the previous year. A desk, several chairs and a gun-cabinet completed the furnishings. The floor was uncarpeted and had been scored deeply by years of high heel scraping.

Roaring Rigby lifted his feet and rasped one spurred heel across the top of the desk, as if to express his contempt for such a piece of furniture.

“And so Jim Randall, sheriff of this county, went away, did he?” sighed the old man.

“He did that.”

Roaring Rigby turned his sad-dog eyes upon the old man.

“Yea-a-ah, he went away, Jim Randall did. He wrote out his resignation, packed up his fambly, folded his tent, as you might say, and silently stole away. But I don’t blame him, Judge. He’s a married man. You’re as much to blame as he is. You two opined to make Turquoise sanitary. You ought to know better, Judge; you’re an old-timer. Jim Randall was born and raised in a cow-town, and he knew better. ’Sall right to set down upon crime. Oh, I ain’t sayin’ your motives ain’t right. Turquoise needs cleanin’. English Ed’s honkatonk ain’t noways a Sunday School, and that redlight district hadn’t ought to be there, but—”

“I know,” nodded Judge Beal.

“Yea-a-ah, you know now. You should have knowed before. Jim Randall got his warnin’ twice. They told him he’d get the third one in the dark, and Jim always was scared of the dark. You’ve got your first one, Judge.”

“Turquoise isn’t fit for a decent woman. Why, a—”

“It was before you two started yore crew—crew—”

“Crusade, Roaring.”

"Yeah, that's it. You posted your notices, and you didn't have nothin' to back 'em. Jim Randall posts his notice, demandin' that every puncher bring his gun to the sheriff's office when he got to town, or get arrested. Did they, I ask you, Judge? They did like hell! You told 'em in plain English that the honkatonk must go. Did it?"

"No," said the judge sadly. "I am obliged to admit that it is still there. I heard that Jim Randall had resigned, so I came to you, Roaring; you will be appointed sheriff, because you were Jim's deputy. Now, what are you going to do?"

"Me, huh?"

Roaring savagely rasped his spurred heel half-way across the desk top.

"I'm goin' to try and hold the job, Judge."

"Meaning that you are not in sympathy with my campaign?"

"Meanin' that I'm in sympathy with my own skin. Your campaign! Judge, if you'll take my friendly advice, you'll foller Jim Randall. The road is plenty wide. Why, doggone you, Judge, nobody takes you seriously. You drink more liquor than any single drinker in this town."

"Granted."

"And you're single."

"Fortunately."

"There you are, Judge. You want to clean up the town. Do you love the morals of your feller-men so much that you'd take a chance on gettin' shot? You've got no wife to be offended by the honkatonk girls, and it's a cinch you ain't temperate. Go back and set on your bench, Judge. Cleanin' up Turquoise ain't no single-handed job."

"They'll not run me out."

"Mm-m-m-m-mebby not, Judge. Damn it, I'm not any more stuck on things than you are! I don't like hornets, but I don't poke their nests."

"In other words, you are not going to enforce Randall's notices regarding carrying arms in town?"

"Well, I'm no fool, if that's what you mean, Judge."

The old judge nodded sadly. His was a forlorn cause, the cleaning up of Turquoise City. The sheriff, backed by a county judge, had made a half-hearted attempt to change conditions; but he had been virtually run out of town. He had resigned, taken his family and moved away, fearful of what might happen to him.

The old judge was sincere, drunkenly so most of the time, although in a dignified manner. That is, he was drunkenly dignified. Judge Beal had come of a good family and was well educated. He might have gone far in his chosen profession, except for his love of liquor; he had drifted into Turquoise City, when that place was in the throes of a mining fever, so he hung out his shingle and became the lawyer of Turquoise.

That was twenty years ago. His old shingle still hung outside of his office, but the lettering had long since faded. For five of those years he had been the county judge.

He had seen Turquoise City in boom days, when men scrambled for raw gold; he had seen it gradually change after the days of the big strikes to a commonplace cow-town. When the railroad came along it boomed again, in a way. The railroad made it the shipping point of the valley, the logical shopping city for the surrounding range and for the mining district northeast of Turquoise. It was a busy county seat.

It had also become the gambling center of the country—the flesh-pot of the cowmen and miners. Turquoise City was unmoral rather than immoral. It was a wide-open town; business was good. Even if painted women did flaunt themselves on the streets, and an occasional cowpuncher decided to make the main street a bucking-chute, or shot at some one's sign, it did not seem to hurt business. Many liked the wild excitement.

But to Judge Beal it was an offense to decent folks. He had persuaded Jim Randall, the sheriff, that something must be done, and they had started a two-handed crusade, which was doomed to fail, for Turquoise City did not want reform.

Jim Randall had received two warnings. The second one said:
There will be one more but you won't see it, because it will come out of the dark.

No name had been signed. The old judge had received one that read the same as the first one Randall had received.

The road is open. This is your first warning.

It was evident that the gambling element of Turquoise City did not desire the continued presence of Judge Beal, although he had accomplished nothing against it.

He left the sheriff's office and crossed the street to the front of the Black Horse Saloon, gambling-house and honkatonk, the largest building in Turquoise City. It was a huge, barn-like structure, not at all ornamental.

English Ed Holmes owned the place. He was an immaculate, cold-blooded gambler, a man of middle-age, and in a way very suave and handsome.

As the judge passed the Black Horse he met a cowboy, who flashed him a whitetoothed smile. It was Pete Conley, a half-breed cowboy, whose father, old Moses Conley, owned the Double Circle C, known as the Hot Creek ranch. Pete was about twenty-five years of age, more Indian than white.

"Hello, Peter," said the judge kindly.

"Very good," smiled Pete. "How you, Judge?"

"Nicely, thank you, Peter. Folks all well?"

"Pretty good; I buy you drink, Judge." The old judge shook his head.

"Thank you just the same, Peter."

He passed on down the street, turned through an alley and walked slowly out to his home. It was a little frame building, rather dilapidated, with an old picket-fence around part of it.

The old judge was a bachelor, but he afforded a cook, in the person of an old Chinese, who was crippled with rheumatism. The cook met him at the door and waited until the judge hung up his broad-brimmed hat and removed his soiled white collar.

"I flind him unda doo'," said the Chinese, producing a sealed envelope, unmarked except by contact of soiled hands.

The old judge's lips compressed firmly as he examined the envelope.

"Somebody leabe him," said the Chinese.

"Undoubtedly," replied the judge evenly.

He knew what it contained. The other envelope had been the same. After a few moments of indecision he tore open the envelope and quickly scanned the single sheet of paper it contained.

There will be one more but you won't see it. Go! ! !

Slowly he tore the envelope and paper to bits, his old face grim with determination. He walked to the door and threw the papers outside, while he looked casually up and down the street.

The Chinese watched him curiously, but the old judge made no comment as he slowly removed his boots and put on an old pair of carpet-slippers. Then he went to an old chest of drawers, from which he took a heavy Colt gun, carrying it over to the table, where he placed it beside a book. The Chinese turned and walked back to the kitchen.

"You didn't see anybody around here, did you?" asked the old judge.

The Chinese stopped and looked back toward the door.

"I no see," he said blankly.

"All right."

The judge sat down, sighed deeply and picked up his book.

The Hot Creek ranch was rather a bone of contention in the Black Horse country. In the days before the cattle business had grown to mean much, Moses Conley had homesteaded his legal amount of land and bought enough to make five hundred acres, in the center of which he had built his ranch-houses. Within this five hundred acres was Hot Spring Valley, a deep swale, protected from the north by a pile of old lava beds, and fairly well bordered on the other sides by cottonwood and live oaks.

In the bottom of this swale were warm springs, that never froze, even in the bitter winters, and they kept the temperature much above the average. The surrounding lava beds and trees broke the force of the north winds, and the little valley was of sufficient size for many cattle to find refuge from blizzard and heavy snow.

Moses Conley looked much like the usual conception of his Biblical namesake. He was a huge man, white-haired, white-bearded, with a stern cast of countenance. In his youth he had married a Nez Perce squaw named Minnie, who was still his wife. There

were two children, Pete and Dawn. Dawn was twenty, a tall, lithe girl, more white than Indian, and the prettiest girl in the valley.

Old Moses Conley's life had been one of strife. His ranch was midway between Turquoise City and the Big 4 ranch, the biggest cow outfit in the valley. Time after time the Big 4 had tried to buy out Moses Conley; but the old man had refused all of their offers.

He hated Franklyn Moran, who owned the Big 4 and lived in ease and luxury in Chicago. Men said that that was why Moses Conley refused to sell out to the Big 4. There was a story told about some trouble between Conley and Moran in the old mining days; Moran was alleged to have cheated Conley out of a piece of property.

The truth of the matter was that Moran had money, and by offering a bigger price than Conley could pay he had acquired the property after Conley had offered to take Moran in with him on the deal.

The Big 4 had made life rather hard for Conley, and he had retaliated by fencing in his five hundred acres with four strands of barbed-wire, almost impoverishing himself to buy the material to shut out the Big 4 cattle from Hot Spring Valley, or Hot Creek, as it was commonly known.

Moran had sent Conley a final offer of more than the ranch was worth; but the squaw-man refused flatly to consider any offer. He would keep his ranch; it was home to him, and a home meant more than money.

Moran had one son, Jimmy, who came from college to show the Big 4 how it should be run; but he got into trouble with "Slim" Regan, the foreman, and tried by telegraph to have the whole outfit fired. Failing in that, he drew every cent he had on deposit in a Chicago bank, his inheritance from his mother, who had died two years before he came to Black Horse Valley. He bought out the Stumbling K ranch, two miles east of Conley's ranch; it was known as the Busted ranch, because every owner had gone broke.

Jimmy Moran was going to show the world how to raise cows. He hired "Wind River" Jim, who had no other name, as far as he knew, and "Lovely" Lucas, who had been christened Ephriam, to punch cows for him, and "Horse-Collar" Fields to do the cooking.

Jimmy was of medium height, sandy-haired, freckled, with a streak of good and a streak of mean. He liked liquor and cards and was not averse to fighting occasionally. In fact Jimmy liked cards so well that everybody predicted no change in the name or fortunes of the Busted ranch. But their opinions meant little to Jimmy, as he went his joyful way, regardless of anything.

He had met and liked Dawn Conley, and he had also met Moses Conley, who told him to keep away from the Hot Creek ranch.

"He's afraid I'm after his daughter," said Jimmy, but he knew the real reason was because of the enmity Conley held against his father.

Pete Conley had always treated Jimmy civilly. But Pete was more like old Conley's wife—nearly all Indian. Dawn did not look or act like an Indian.

Apparently there was no law against selling liquor to a half-breed in Turquoise City, and Pete was a regular customer of the Black Horse Saloon and of the gambling tables. More often than not, he quit a winner. It may have been his proverbial luck and his rather insolent smile that caused Joe Mallette, one of English Ed's gamblers, to dislike him.

They had clashed several times, and Mallette had asked English Ed to bar the half-breed from the place; but the owner of the saloon refused. Mallette was a big man, with the cold, hard eyes of a professional gambler and the chin of a fighter. He hated to see Pete Conley buy chips in his game, and he did not conceal his dislike of the half-breed.

It was after dark that night when Pete took a chair in Mallette's stud-poker game. It was not Mallette's shift, but the other dealer had not put in an appearance. Mallette treated Pete civilly, for once; perhaps he thought that the other dealer would show up presently. Mallette had been drinking rather heavily and was just a bit clumsy in stacking up Pete's chips. Jimmy Moran was in the game, loser, as usual, but still smiling.

"I heard that Jim Randall pulled out," said one of the players casually.

"Time he did," growled Mallette, shoving the chips over to the young half-breed.

"Randall damn good man," said Pete slowly.

Mallette was too diplomatic to start an argument, so he said nothing. He played a close game, which was the natural thing for the dealer to do. He knew that Pete Conley had very little money, so he waited for a chance to break him; but the half-breed knew how Mallette played his cards. Pete was lucky, and his stacks of red and blue chips increased rapidly.

It was about nine o'clock, and the other dealer had come in, but Mallette was in a pot which he had opened. He was playing very coldly and had opened the pot for a substantial bet, thinking that the others would drop out; but Pete had raised him heavily. Jimmy Moran, sitting at Pete's left, had turned his cards in such a way that Pete got a flash of the king of hearts.

But it made no difference in the play, because Jimmy passed the opening bet and threw his hand in the discards. Mallette was dealing. After deliberating heavily, Mallette called Pete's raise. Pete drew one card, which he seemed to ignore; Mallette drew two. He dropped his cards one-handed from the top of the deck, and one of them skidded on top of some of the discards.

At the same time, Mallette upset a stack of chips in front of him and straightened them up carefully. He looked at his cards and checked the bet. Pete studied Mallette's face. Pete had four sevens in his hand. The best Mallette could have had before the draw would have been three of a kind, and with threes he would have drawn only one

card, masking the fact of his having threes. Or perhaps he had only one pair of jacks or better to open on, and had held up another card as a “kicker.” Pete felt safe. After a moment of deliberation he shoved all of his chips to the center. There was possibly two hundred dollars’ worth of chips.

“That’s all I got,” said Pete slowly. “I bet that.”

Mallette turned the edges of his cards slightly, a half-sneer on his lips, as he shoved out enough chips to cover the bet. Pete grinned, as he spread out the four sevens; but his grin faded when Mallette showed four kings and began raking in the pot.

Mallette nodded to the other dealer and started to slide his chair back from the table. Pete’s eyes were upon him; his lips twisted queerly.

“You—you thief!” choked the half-breed.

He jerked to his feet, reaching back for his gun. Jimmy Moran flung himself against Pete, blocking his draw, while another player twisted Pete’s gun from his hand. Mallette straightened up, his lips white.

“What’s that?” he snapped. “Who’s a thief?”

“You are!” rasped the enraged Pete. “Leave it to Jimmy Moran. He had that king of hearts in his hand. It was a dead card. You stole it, you thief!”

Mallette’s eyes shifted to Jimmy Moran, who was looking at him, his mouth half-open.

“By golly, I can’t remember,” said Jimmy. “Seems to me—no, I can’t say.”

“I reckon you can’t,” said Mallette dryly.

He turned and started toward the bar, when Pete tore away from Jimmy and started for Mallette.

“Give back that money!” demanded Pete. “You stole—”

Mallette whirled and met Pete, smashing him full in the face with a powerful right-hand swing. It knocked Pete flat on his back, almost under the feet of the men who come to see what it was all about. Mallette turned away and went out through the rear of the building.

Pete sat up, wiping the blood from his lips, looking around in a dazed way. English Ed shoved his way to Pete. He had heard what it was all about.

“Get up!” he exclaimed. “Pick up your hat and get out of here, you damned half-breed, and stay out! Don’t never come in here again.”

“Wait just a minute,” said Jimmy Moran.

He had secured Pete’s six-shooter and now he handed it to Pete.

“Wait for what?” asked English Ed.

“The trouble was caused by Mallette havin’ too many kings,” said Jimmy slowly. “I think I remember the king of hearts bein’ in my hand.”

“I see it,” nodded Pete. “When you lay hand down, I see it.”

“I don’t believe a word of it!” said English Ed.

Whap!

Jimmy Moran struck English Ed across the face with an open hand, and the sound of it could have been heard across the street. It caused the gambler to half-turn on his heels; and before he could recover his balance Jimmy swung a hard right fist against English Ed's jaw, knocking him backward into the deserted poker table, where he went down in a sitting position, his eyes set in a silly stare.

The room was in an uproar. A woman screamed, another laughed. Jimmy grinned widely and nudged Pete with his elbow.

"Better get out, Pete," he said. "If ye want Mallette, he'll be spendin' your money for dollar bottles of beer in one of our houses of ill fame."

Pete wiped the back of his hand across his bleeding lips and headed for the back door, still carrying the gun in his hand. No one made any attempt to molest him. Jimmy Moran backed against the wall and watched English Ed regain his senses.

The big gambler was punch-drunk. He slowly got to his feet, tried to smile, but merely grimaced. A gambler came with a wet towel; but he motioned it aside and went to the bar. Some of the men followed him. The gambler with the towel came in closer to Jimmy.

"Mallette was drunk," he said, as if excusing him for what he had done. "All day he's been drinking absinth with his whisky. Maybe he didn't know what he was doing."

"Yeah, I know," said Jimmy. "He was dead drunk. My, my, he was so drunk he could steal a card and none of us seen him. Drunk, hell! What're you tryin' to do, protect him?"

"Oh, no, I just thought—do you suppose the half-breed will try to get him?"

"Are you tryin' get a statement from me?" demanded Jimmy. "English got what was comin' to him. He backed a thief."

"I wouldn't say that to Mallette, if I was you, Moran."

"A-a-a-aw, go wrap that rag around your head! If English Ed is goin' to run a den of thieves, he can expect what a thief must expect. If Mallette had done that to me, he'd be in hell right now, ridin' on the hot end of a bullet! It was me that cramped the half-breed, and I'm sorry I did."

Jimmy jerked his hat down over his eyes and strode through the room, going straight past the bar, where English Ed and a crowd of men were having a drink. The big gambler knew now what it was all about and he turned his head to watch Jimmy leave the place.

"He got you when you wasn't lookin'," said a man.

English Ed nodded slowly.

"Did Mallette steal that card?" he asked.

One of the men from the poker game was at the bar, and it was to him that English directed the question.

"I don't know," said the man truthfully. "I wasn't in the pot, so I didn't pay any attention."

"Mallette is getting clumsy," said English slowly.

"It's a wonder he can keep his feet," said the bartender. "He's full of absinth and whisky. He won't know what it's all about tomorrow."

"How much did he win from the breed?"

"About two hundred dollars," said the dealer who was to take Mallette's place. "Goin' to give it back?"

"Not unless I get more proof than I've got. Don't let that half-breed ever come in here again. He's all through."

"How about Moran?"

"I'll handle Moran myself."

"Somebody ought to find Mallette and tell him to look out for Conley," said the gambler. "That breed will kill him, if he gets a chance—and he's huntin' him now."

A man came through the room and shoved his way up to the bar beside English Ed.

"The sheriff ain't in here, is he?" he asked nervously.

"What do you want him for?" asked English.

"Found a dead man. He's between here and the north end of the redlight district. It's Mallette, the gambler."

"Mallette!" English grasped the man by the arm. "When did you find him?"

"Who the hell do you think you're pinchin'?" demanded the man, yanking his arm away. "I just found him. I was comin' alone and almost fell over him. Oh, he's dead all right."

The man had spoken loud enough for every one to hear, and there was a general exodus to view the body. A lantern was secured, and the crowd went through the rear entrance. It was about four hundred feet from the rear of the saloon to the line of buildings that comprised the redlight district of Turquoise City.

The last house of this row, on the north end, was possibly two hundred yards from the rear of the saloon; and between that building and the Turquoise Hotel, which fronted on the main street, was Judge Beal's little house.

The crowd went past the rear of his building and found the body of Mallette. He had been shot squarely between the eyes. Indifferent to the fact that the sheriff and coroner might care to view the remains as found, they picked up the body and carried it back to the Black Horse Saloon and placed it on a cot in a rear room.

Some one found Roaring Rigby in a restaurant and told him what had happened. He left his meal and hurried to the saloon, shouldering his way into the little room. Rigby was mad; he knew his rights. He turned on English Ed, who leaned against the wall, his face a trifle more white than usual.

"Who the hell brought that body here?" demanded Roaring.

“We did,” said English. “There was a crowd of us.”

“You did, eh?” Roaring hooked his thumbs over his belt and glared at the gambler. “A crowd of you, eh? Tromped all over everythin’, eh? Picked him right up. Hell, a sheriff has a fat chance of findin’ out anythin’. Don’tcha suppose I’d like to have seen him where he laid?”

“What’s the use?” said English Ed coldly. “That half-breed Conley went out to get him.”

Roaring Rigby squinted closely at English Ed for a moment before turning to the crowd.

“Git out of here,” he ordered. “No, you stay here, Ed.”

He moved them all out, closed the door tightly and turned to the gambler.

“What about Pete Conley?”

In a few words the gambler told him about the trouble, but made no mention of his trouble with Jimmy Moran. Roaring listened closely.

“Did Mallette steal that card, English?” he asked.

The gambler shrugged his shoulders.

“I didn’t see the play. Jimmy Moran saw the play, but wasn’t sure. He was the one who was supposed to have discarded that king of hearts. Mallette was drinking and—”

“Had a right to steal a card, I suppose.”

“I didn’t say that!”

“You meant it. Did Mallette carry a gun?”

“I’ve never seen him with one. He had none on him when we found him. Conley murdered him.”

Roaring Rigby took a deep breath, rather a jerky one.

“Murder? Yeah, I reckon that’s right,” softly.

“The damn half-breed!” exclaimed English Ed under his breath.

“Blood don’t make no difference,” said Roaring quickly. “The law don’t draw no color line, English.”

“The law be damned! Mallette was murdered. Mallette was a gambler—one of my men. Judge Beal would turn Conley loose. He’d never hang a man for killing a gambler.”

“Old Judge Beal is a square-shooter, English. Nobody can say he ain’t honest. But he ain’t hangin’ nobody unless they need it.”

“Well, he better keep his nose out of my business.”

“Yeah, I s’pose. You better send somebody for a doctor. Old Doc Shelley is the coroner; so you better get him, not that he can do Mallette any good, but to make it legal.”

They opened the door and walked out into the saloon. Business was at a standstill. A knot of girls stood near the honkatonk platform, talking in subdued voices, and a

crowd of cowboys and gamblers were at the bar. For once, the *whirr* of the roulette-wheel and the clatter of chips were stilled.

Roaring Rigby walked past the long bar, and a cowboy called to him:

“If you want to save that half-breed for trial, you better start travelin’, Rigby.”

It was Mark Clayton, of the Big 4 outfit. Roaring turned and looked at Clayton.

“And you better sober up and go home,” said Roaring. “This is a man’s job—and you ain’t dry behind the ears.”

Roaring walked straight across the street to a general store. He knew the crowd in the Black Horse would watch to see what he would do. Straight through the store he went, opened a back door and headed around to his stable, which was behind the sheriff’s office.

He knew the crowd in the saloon was planning either to go out to the Hot Creek ranch after Pete Conley, or to take Pete away from him when he brought him to jail. Roaring saddled his sorrel gelding, circled the town and headed for the Conley ranch, riding swiftly.

Jimmy Moran rode away from Turquoise City, a grin on his lips. His right hand ached a little, but he minded it not. He could still see the vacant stare in English Ed’s eyes; he chuckled to himself. There had been a certain satisfaction in hitting the big gambler.

“Mebby I can save a little money, if I get in bad with all the gamblers and rum sellers,” he told his horse.

He had championed the cause of the son of his father’s ancient enemy, and he wondered what his father would say if he knew about it. He realized that he had put himself in bad with English Ed and his gang, which meant that he would be none too safe in Turquoise City.

He forded the river that ran near the Hot Creek ranch and traveled along Moses Conley’s barbed-wire fence. About half-way along this side of the fence the road forked, turning to the left to Jimmy’s ranch. Only a short distance beyond the forks was Conley’s gate, where cottonwoods lined the road and grew along the fence.

As Jimmy turned into his road, he caught the flash of a white dress in the moonlight near the gate. He turned his horse back to the main road, and went slowly up to the gate. The wearer of the white dress was Dawn Conley. She was holding the reins of her horse and had swung the gate partly open.

“Well, bless my soul!” exclaimed Jimmy. “Dawn!”

“Hello, Jimmy,” said the girl simply.

Jimmy dismounted and dropped his reins, knowing that the chunky bay would stand as long as the reins hung down. Jimmy went close to her, his hat in his hand.

“I was waiting for Dad,” she said. “I—I thought it was him. He went over to the 7AL this afternoon.”

The 7AL was located about five miles east of Turquoise City.

"I see," said Jimmy. "You—you don't think anythin' has happened to him, do you, Dawn?"

"Oh, no; but I—I—"

"Uh-huh."

Jimmy swallowed heavily; he shifted uneasily. He wanted to put out a hand and touch her. Whenever he saw her he forgot that she was part Indian and daughter of his father's enemy. Standing there in the moonlight, within half an arm's reach of her, Jimmy hooked his thumbs over his belt and stared at her face.

"Dawn," he said hoarsely, "Dawn, you're beautiful."

"Jimmy Moran, you—why say that?" She moved slightly away.

"Don't go away," he said slowly. "It's all right, Dawn; I had to say that. It ain't wrong to say what you think. No, I'm not drunk; I never was more sober in my life. I've never seen you in my life when I didn't think you was the most beautiful girl I ever seen."

"You mustn't say that, Jimmy."

"Why not? It may not mean anythin' to you, but it does to me. Standin' here like a danged idiot, tellin' you things like that is like drinkin' liquor. It kinda makes me dizzy. Funny, ain't it? I'm scared to tell you things like that, and still I'm doin' it. It's like doin' things when you're drunk—mebby you hadn't ought to, but you do it just the same."

"Well," said Dawn vaguely, "I don't know."

"You wouldn't," said Jimmy softly. "You've got to love to feel that way, Dawn."

"To love?"

"Yes, Dawn—I love you."

"You love me?" slowly.

Neither of them saw Roaring Rigby. He came riding up the dusty road, his horse still dripping from the water of the ford, his horse's hoofs muffled in the dust. But he saw them, and turned his horse into the shadow of the cottonwood. He dismounted and came ahead on foot, keeping close to the trees.

"I swear I love you, Dawn," said Jimmy. "I've never had a chance to tell you before. Oh, I know our fathers hate each other; but what has that to do with us?"

"I'm Injun," she said.

"I'm Irish."

He did not try to go closer to her, and for a long time neither of them spoke. Then:

"I heard that you might marry Roarin' Rigby," said Jimmy. "They say he's been comin' out to see you, Dawn."

"He's a friend of Dad's."

"But comin' out to see you, Dawn."

"Perhaps; but he's too old, Jimmy. Dad likes him."

“Do you like him, Dawn?”

“He’s a nice man, but he is so homely, Jimmy—and old. No, I never could marry him. He looks funny.”

Jimmy was silent for several moments. A breeze rattled the dry leaves of the cottonwoods.

“Dawn, why were you anxious to meet your father?”

“It was Peter,” she said anxiously. “He came home awhile ago. He had been fighting, Jimmy. His lips are bleeding and he looks awful. He wouldn’t tell me what had happened, and I was afraid. I wanted to have Dad go to town and find out. Oh, I hope it isn’t anything serious. You know how they feel about—half-breeds.”

Jimmy laughed softly.

“Don’t worry, Dawn. I can tell you what happened.”

Without giving himself any credit, he told her about the poker game and about the stolen king of hearts.

“Oh, Jimmy, I’m glad you took his gun!” she exclaimed. “It would go hard with him if he used that gun. I’m glad that’s all there is to it.”

“That’s all, Dawn. Pete was right. Mallette stole that card.”

“English Ed came out here a few days ago,” she said.

“He did, eh?” Jimmy’s tone was belligerent. “What’d he want?”

“Nothing, I guess.”

“Nothin’?”

Dawn laughed.

“I didn’t meet him. Dad talked to him. He asked Dad about me. And he told Dad that you were almost broke.”

“What did your dad say, Dawn?”

“He said that was good.”

Jimmy laughed softly.

“I suppose they talked a lot about me, eh?”

“Quite a lot, Jimmy. Dad said that for a college-educated man, you were the biggest fool in the world; he said it was in your blood and that college brought it out.”

Jimmy laughed chokingly.

“College!” he exclaimed. “Good Lord, that’s a long time back, it seems. I’ve even forgotten how to talk English. I’m as much a part of this country as if I had been born and raised here. I think like a cowboy, Dawn. Mebby I am goin’ broke. I know now that English Ed’s games are crooked. That knowledge will save me money. I’ve been a fool, but I hope to outgrow it. I owe money, gosh! I owe money to the Turquoise City Bank and I owe money to English Ed; but I can pay it all back some day. Your father hates me, because I’m a son of my father. That’s a foolish hate, Dawn. He hates the Big 4. That’s nothin’—so do I. Dad owns the Big 4, and I ought to be loyal to the

darned place, but I can't. I don't like Slim Regan, the foreman. Dad thinks he's a wonder. And there you are. Will you marry me, Dawn?"

But before Dawn could answer they heard the *plop-plop-plop* of horse's hoofs, and turned to see the dark bulk of a horse and rider coming up to the gate. It was Roaring Rigby.

"Well, if it ain't Jimmy Moran and Dawn Conley," he exclaimed.

"Hello, Roarin'," said Jimmy quickly.

"Good evening, Mr. Rigby," said Dawn.

"Nice night," said Roaring. His voice sounded as if he had a bad cold. He cleared his throat harshly.

"Is Pete at home, Dawn?" he asked thickly.

"Pete? Why, yes, he's at home, Mr. Rigby."

"Uh-huh." He appeared miserable.

Roaring turned in his saddle and looked back toward the ford. He felt that it wouldn't be long before some of the Black Horse gang would be riding out that way.

"If it's any of my business—what do you want Pete for?" asked Jimmy.

"It's kinda tough," said Roaring slowly. "You know that I'm sheriff now, don'tcha?"

"I know Randall resigned," said Jimmy.

"And I'm sheriff now, Jimmy. You was in that poker game in the Black Horse tonight, wasn't you?"

"I was. If you mean the trouble between Pete and Mallette, I know all about it, Roaring."

"Mebby not, Jimmy. A while ago they found Mallette over near the end of redlight row, with a bullet square between his eyes."

"My God!" exclaimed Dawn.

Jimmy remained silent. He had seen Pete Conley go out the back door of the saloon, carrying that big Colt gun in his hand. Only a few moments before that, Mallette had gone out through the same door.

"So you see," said Roaring slowly, "you might not know it all, Jimmy."

"Mallette robbed him," declared Jimmy.

"English Ed said you wasn't sure about it, Jimmy."

"English Ed said that; but I'm sure, Roarin'. Right at the time I hesitated. You hate to be sure of a thing like that. I was confused, excited; but, as soon as I had a chance to think about it, I remembered turnin' my cards toward Pete, and I had that king of hearts. I threw my cards over toward Mallette. Mebbe one of 'em turned so he saw what it was. I remember he dealt one-handed, dropping the cards several inches, and one kinda skidded away. It was his way of gettin' that king. And he upsets his chips. That was done to draw our attention away while he got that card."

"I know," sighed Roaring, "it was crooked work; but Mallette didn't have a gun on him tonight."

"You mean they'll call it murder, Roarin'?"

"Looks that way, Jimmy. And Mallette was one of English Ed's men. That means they'll try to take the law in their own hands."

"Well, what's to be done, Roarin'?"

"Let's go and see Pete."

"Will you put him in jail?" asked Dawn anxiously.

"I wish I had him there now," said Roaring. "He'd be safe in jail. Let's go and have a talk with him. Where's your pa, Dawn?"

"He went to the 7AL this afternoon and hasn't come home yet."

"All right; let's see Pete."

Dawn and Jimmy mounted, and they rode to the ranch-house. Pete met them in the living-room. He had covered his split lips with court-plaster. He seemed to realize that something was wrong, and stepped back toward the entrance to the kitchen, as if preparing for a quick retreat.

"Better stay here, Pete," said the sheriff warningly, as he closed the door behind him.

"What do you want?" asked Pete warily.

"Mallette was shot and killed tonight. What do you know about it, Pete?"

Pete stiffened slightly and his eyes shifted from face to face.

"Mallette shot, eh?" He smiled crookedly. "I don't care; he was a thief. Jimmy Moran knows; he saw him steal."

"What do you know about the killin' of Mallette?" asked Roaring coldly.

"Not a damned thing!"

"Not a thing, eh?"

"How would I know?" demanded Pete.

"They told me you went out to get him."

Pete's left hand went to his sore lips and he scowled heavily.

"You come to get me for shootin' Mallette?"

Roaring nodded slowly.

"I'm sorry, Pete. They think you done it, you know."

Pete leaned back against the wall, his right hand swinging close to the butt of his gun. Roaring knew that Pete was fast with a gun. There was something of the trapped animal about this swarthy, bright-eyed young man.

"Peter!" said Dawn sharply. "Don't be foolish."

"You think I want go to jail?" he asked harshly.

"If English Ed and his gang get you, you'll wish you was in jail," warned Roaring. Pete flashed a snarling grin.

“They come too, eh?”

Jimmy Moran stepped back and opened the door. The hills were bathed in moonlight, making it possible to distinguish objects at quite a distance. He leaned forward for a moment, jerked back and closed the door.



“They’re comin’!” he snapped. “I saw two riders cuttin’ east down there. They’ve broken the fence, I’ll bet.”

“Surroundin’ us, eh?” said Roaring quickly. “Pete, you’ve got one chance. If they get you they’ll lynch you quick. Git out through the kitchen! C’mon, Jimmy!”

They ran outside. Their horses were on the dark side of the house. They saw a rider on a light-colored horse, moving along a ridge north of the stables.

It was evident that English Ed's gang was intending to surround the place. Roaring doubted if they knew that he was there.

"Is your bronc still saddled, Pete?" asked Roaring.

"Yeah," said Pete quickly. "I think I might go back to town tonight."

"You probably will," said Roaring dryly. "There's one chance in a dozen that you will—and we'll take that one chance."

English Ed had no trouble in getting up a lynching party. Slim Regan and three of his men were there from the Big 4; Kent Cutter, foreman of the 7AL, and two of his men, showed up in time to join the crowd. There was always a goodly crew of hangers-on at the Black Horse Saloon; always they would willingly ride to a killing.

English Ed did not go with them. He engineered the deal and then stayed at home. At least a dozen armed men rode out of Turquoise City with the avowed intention of making Pete Conley pay for his misdeeds. They rode fast, because they knew Roaring Rigby's horse was gone from his stable, and they knew Roaring had been courting Dawn Conley. They figured that Roaring might tip off Pete and give the half-breed a running start to freedom.

Old Moses Conley had ridden as far as the edge of town with Cutter and his men from the 7AL. They knew he would ride slowly to his ranch; so they rode swiftly to overtake the old man, because he was reputed to be a dangerous man with a Winchester and that he might, if things broke badly for the posse, cause them considerable suffering with that same gun.

They overtook the old man just at the ford of Black Horse river. Cutter knew that Conley was unarmed, so he did not hesitate to tell him what they were coming out there for. He did not tell the old man that they suspected Pete of the killing, but stated Pete's guilt as a fact.

The old man said nothing. The riders hemmed him in, as they crossed the ford. At the corner of the fence they stopped, while two of the men cut the fence wires. There they received their orders for circling the ranch.

"He'll be lookin' for us," said Slim Regan. "We've got to stop him from makin' a getaway. Four of you better go. Head for a point due east of the ranch-house. Some of us will go through the gate and hold the south line and kinda string around to the west and north. Move in fairly close and wait until I whistle. I don't look for the breed to make a break, but you never can tell."

"Where's the sheriff?" asked Moses Conley. "It seems to me that this is his affair."

"Oh, that damn fool!" snorted a cowboy.

"This don't require any law," said Regan coldly.

"It shore don't require the services of Judge Beal," laughed another.

"Stop all that noise!" snapped Regan. "Do you want to tell him we're comin'?"

"It seems to me it takes a lot of brave men to capture one half-breed," said the old man bitterly.

"It takes twelve men to hang one," retorted Cutter. "We want to make this thing legal."

"Stop talkin'!" warned Regan again.

They opened the gate and rode through, following along the cottonwoods until they came in sight of the house. Cutter took four of the men with him and headed north, with the intention of blocking all chance of escape to the north and west, while Regan led the rest of the men straight toward the ranch-house, where they could block the way to the south.

Regan rode knee to knee with Moses Conley.

Suddenly a shot rang out beyond the ranch-house, and the men jerked up their horses. There was no further need of concealment. They whirled and galloped straight toward the house. Another rifle shot rattled through the hills.

Regan caught a glimpse of a gray horse heading in their general direction, and he thought it was one of his own men, coming back from Cutter's crowd; but the horse swung further to the north and then headed straight for the gate. The light was not so good, but he seemed to remember that none of them was riding a gray horse.

"There he goes!" yelled a cowboy. "That gray horse! It's the one Pete rides! He's heading for the gate!"

There was no chance for Regan and his men to head off this running horse. In some way Pete had luckily ridden between Cutter's men and Regan's detachment. Regan threw up his revolver and emptied it at the horse and rider, knowing that the gun would not be effective at that distance. One of his men carried a rifle, but his horse was a little gun-shy, and the fusilade from Regan's gun had made the horse too jumpy for the rider to hope to hit anything. Cutter's men were coming back, riding swiftly, but the man on the gray horse reached the gate. Riders were coming from all directions and they joined Regan near the gate. Old Moses Conley was forgotten now.

"Damn it, he must have seen us comin'!" panted a cowboy. "He broke for the east, but I took a shot at him, and he cut back this way. How did he get past you, Regan?"

"Didn't see him in time," growled Regan. "That gray horse wasn't visible. Which way did he go from the gate?"

"North," said Cutter. "C'mon!"

They strung out through the gate and galloped north, spreading out like a skirmish line, driving their horses as fast as possible. But every man knew how impossible it would be to catch Pete Conley now. The half-breed knew every angle of the country better than any one else, and with that almost invisible gray horse he could ride into a clump of brush, wait until the riders passed him and then double back.

For thirty minutes they rode straight ahead, searching the country. Regan was about to call the men in and wait until morning, when they saw their quarry silhouetted

against the sky on a narrow ridge. He seemed to be waiting for them. Then he dropped off the ridge, seemingly unhurried.

All the men of the posse had seen him. But their horses were getting winded, the traveling was mostly up-hill. They reached the ridge and drew rein. Regan called them together and they held a parley. On the next ridge, not over two hundred yards away, appeared the rider again. He stopped and appeared to be watching them. Cutter borrowed a rifle and fired two shots, but neither seemed to have any effect.

“You can’t hit anythin’ in this light,” growled Cutter, giving back the rifle.

“That half-breed shore has a lot of gall,” snorted Regan. “If he wants to play hide-and-seek with us, we’ll play.

Let’s split up and see if we can’t get around him.”

The rider moved slowly off the ridge, as the dozen riders spurred ahead, circling from both ends of the line. They passed the ridge, with the end riders swinging farther out all the time.

They had gone about a mile beyond the spot where they had last seen their quarry, when the gray horse moved slowly out of a clump of brush near the crest of the ridge. The horse was led by its rider. They crossed the ridge beside a tangle of brush and rocks, where the man mounted and rode swiftly back toward Turquoise City.

It was Roaring Rigby, the sheriff of Black Horse, riding Pete Conley’s gray horse. He came in along the fence and followed it to where the posse had cut the wire near the corner; and there he found his own horse.

He dismounted, tied up the reins on the gray horse, gave it a slap with his hat; it went trotting back toward the Hot Creek ranch. Then he untied his own horse, mounted and rode on toward town.

“I may be old as hell, and funny to look at,” he said bitterly, “but I’m smarter ’n all the gamblers and horsethieves around here.”

It was about eight o’clock in the morning when the tired man hunters came back to Turquoise City, empty-handed. Regan had taken his men back to the Big 4, but Cutter brought his men to town for breakfast. All night they had combed the hills, hoping for another glimpse of Pete Conley. They were in a vile humor when they came back.

Cutter rode down to the sheriff’s office and found Roaring Rigby just getting ready to go to breakfast.

“When are you goin’ to git Pete Conley?” demanded Cutter.

“When?”

Roaring shut one eye and looked curiously at Cutter with the other. Cutter was a small man, slightly gray, with a ferret-like face and a none too pleasant disposition.

“Yeah—when?” snapped Cutter.

Roaring shook his head slowly.

“I ain’t goin’,” he said slowly.

“You ain’t, eh? I suppose murder don’t mean anythin’ to you, Rigby.”

"I dunno—" lazily—"never gave it much thought."

"Oh, you haven't!"

"No-o-o-o."

"Then yo're not goin' out after Pete Conley, eh?"

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"Because he's already in jail."

Cutter's jaw dropped and he looked at Roaring, with his mouth open, gasping.

"In jail!" he exploded. "When did you put him im jail?"

"Last night."

"Last night? Why, we—we—" Cutter spluttered helplessly. "Why, we chased him half the night."

"You did like hell," drawled Roaring. "You started out to foller a gray horse, but the gray horse doubled back on yuh. You're a hell of a man-hunter, you are."

Cutter was speechless. Roaring locked the door, put the key in his pocket and started up the street toward a restaurant, paying no attention to Cutter, who jerked his horse around and rode straight to the Chinese restaurant, where the posse had gone for breakfast.

A tall cowboy riding a bay horse swung into the upper end of the street, and rode toward the Black Horse Saloon, but he saw Roaring on the sidewalk and went over to him. It was "Wind River" Jim, one of Jimmy Moran's men.

He did not know what his right name was. The Arapaho Indians had raised him, his parentage being obscure; and they had named him Wind River Jim. He was tall, tow-headed, lean-faced, addicted to chewing tobacco and profanity, but withal possessed of a certain sense of humor.

"Hyah, Roarin'," he grinned, "Jimmy said fer me to come in and tell you he sent me. He kinda had the idea that you'd need a good deputy, so he picks me."

Roaring Rigby cuffed his hat on one side of his head, looked Wind River Jim over carefully. His face was puckered from an effort to think just what to do. Then he reached in his pocket, took out a deputy's badge and gave it to Wind River Jim.

"Pin 'er on you, cowboy; that's your license to git shot, and no damages asked."

"Do I swear to anythin'?" asked Wind River, as he pinned the badge on his vest, swelling his chest beneath the shining badge.

"Swear to nothin'," said Roarin'. "Make no promises, and you won't have anythin' to break. Here's the key to the office. I'm goin' to ham and egg m'self. See you later."

Wind River Jim rode down to the office, tied his horse to the little hitch-rack, spat vigorously, unlocked the door and went in. He sent his tall Stetson spinning toward a nail, missed it by three feet, sat down in the rickety swivel chair, hooked his feet over a corner of the desk, and yawned.

“Well, I’ve reached my height,” he said aloud. “Officer of the law, and I’ve got a badge to prove it. Next thing I know I’ll be a Senator or some other funny thing, and you never can tell where I’ll go from there. Hello, yourself!”

Jefferson Ryker, prosecuting attorney of Black Horse, stepped inside the office and looked curiously at Wind River. Ryker was above average height, but was very thin. He wore tall white collars and a stringy black bow tie. The collar was big enough to give ample play to his Adam’s apple. His suit was a rusty black and would have fitted him had he been fifty pounds heavier.

Ryker was rather an old-timer in the country. For a number of years he had operated an assay office in Turquoise City, but with the falling off of the mining industry he had devoted himself to the law, had been admitted to the state bar and was now serving his third term as prosecutor. “Mica” Jones, formerly assistant to Ryker in the assay business, was running the assay office for Ryker, and barely making a living.

Wind River Jim did not like Ryker. He took one look at him and groaned slightly; but otherwise he remained silent, after his first greeting, which had not been returned by Jefferson Ryker. The prosecutor stepped back to the doorway and looked up the street.

“Where’s the sheriff?” he asked.

“He’s eatin’ breakfast.”

Ryker leaned against the doorway and examined a cigar, which was rather badly unwrapped. He licked it gently in spots, trying to work the wrapper back into place. Finally he lighted it and puffed convulsively, but got no results.

“Anythin’ you want around here?” queried Wind River. “I’m doin’ the sheriffin’ while Roarin’ Rigby nourishes.”

“You are?” Ryker looked curiously at Wind River, who gave him plenty of opportunity to see the nickel-plated badge.

“Oh, I see.” Ryker came back closer to Wind River. “All right, Wind River, I want to see the prisoner.”

“The prisoner?”

“Yes—Pete Conley.”

“Huh!” snorted Wind River. “Well, now, from where I set, you’ve got a fine chance, Ryker.”

“I have a right to see him!” snapped the lawyer.

“Yea-a-a-ah, the devil you have!”

Wind River jerked his feet off the desk and faced Ryker.

“Your rights and wrongs don’t mean nothin’ to me. If you keep your hat on until I let you see Pete Conley, they’ll have to saw it off when you’re dead.”

“I wonder how Roaring Rigby ever happened to appoint such an ignorant person,” said the lawyer.

“Because he couldn’t trust the smart ones, that’s why. The smarter they are the crookeder they are, Ryker, and I’ve heard that you’re the smartest man in this valley.”

Ryker walked back to the door, boiling with wrath.

“I’m going to find the sheriff,” he said hotly. “You can’t call me a crook and get away with it.”

“Well, you’re a friend of English Ed.”

“What has that got to do with it?”

“He’s crooked. You never see a lot of lambs hobnobbin’ with a coyote, do you?”

Ryker whirled on his heel and left the office.

Wind River Jim chuckled to himself as he uncoiled his length from the creaking old chair and walked over to a cracked mirror on the wall. He looked intently at himself.

“You don’t look crazy to me,” he told himself, “but you must be. Appearances are shore deceptive. But I don’t like that cat-eyed lawyer, and it was a good chance to let him know it. Anybody who didn’t know me would think I was mean as dirt.”

The jail adjoined the sheriff’s office, and there was no exit, except through the sheriff’s office. The front of the jail was a blank wall. At the side and rear were small barred windows, not large enough for a man to crawl through. It was not a well ventilated jail, it is true, but it was built to hold a prisoner.

Roaring Rigby came back a few minutes later, carrying a tray of food for Pete Conley.

“This is your job after this, Wind River,” he said, placing the tray on the desk. “What did you say to Ryker?”

“He wanted to see Pete,” grinned Wind River. “I told him to go to hell.”

Roaring grinned widely.

“I thought so. He shore was sore as a boil. Met me at the door of the restaurant and jumped all over me about you.”

“The devil he did! What did you say, Roarin’?”

“Me? I slapped his old face loose from his hat. Mebby that wasn’t exactly the right thing for a sheriff to do, but it’s all I could think of at the time. I never took no oath of office. Anyway, I don’t think there’s anythin’ in the oath about not slappin’ lawyers. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Let’s feed the animal.”

They unlocked the door into the jail and carried the tray in. There was a short hall, about six feet wide, across the room, at each side of which were barred doors. Pete Conley leaned against the bars of one cell, smoking a cigaret.

“Got you some ham and eggs, Pete,” said the sheriff cheerfully.

“Good!” said the half-breed. “What’s new?”

Roaring unlocked the door and put the tray on a chair.

“Nothin’ much. English Ed’s gang is pretty sore. They rode all night. Ha-haha-ha! Aw, they’ll cool off. Last night they was in a lynchin’ mood, tha’s all. Ryker wants to

see you, Pete. Jist remember he's the jigger that'll try to hang you. Don't tell him a thing, *sabe*? You don't have to talk."

Pete nodded quickly.

"I like see Judge Beal."

"You can't, Pete; he's the judge."

"He's good man."

"Uh-huh—shore, but he can't see you until you walk into his courtroom. You'll have to hire a lawyer, I reckon."

"What for?"

"To prove you didn't kill Mallette."

"What lawyer see who kill him?"

"Oh, hell, there you are, Wind River!" exploded Roaring. "Can you imagine that? What lawyer seen who shot him?"

"I dunno," said Wind River innocently. "Did any?"

Roaring stared open-mouthed at Wind River. Finally he closed his mouth and shook his head sadly.

"Well, I reckon it's all right," he said resignedly. "I hired you because you was honest, Wind River."

"My old man come town yet?" asked Pete, beginning to eat.

"Not yet."

"Huh! How soon they hang me?"

"Are you in any hurry, Pete?"

"Not much."

"Well, that's fine. They'll have to try you first, so you'll jist have to be patient. First they'll give you a hearin' and decide if yo're worth hangin'. Then they'll hold the trial and see when you git hung. It'll take quite a while."

"Nobody ask me if I kill Mallette," said Pete, his mouth filled with food. "I like kill him pretty good, but somebody kill him. He stole my money."

"You like to kill him, eh?"

"Sure."

"Uh-huh. You'll make a hell of a good witness for the State—as long as you last."

Roaring left Wind River Jim with Pete and went to see Dr. Shelley, the coroner, who had an office at the east end of the street. The old doctor was a short, fat, breathless man, with two double chins and no waist-line.

"Going to have an inquest, I suppose," puffed the doctor.

"Shore," nodded Roaring. "He won't keep a long while this kinda weather. You fix up about the inquest, Doc. That's somethin' I dunno anythin' about. Are you shore Mallette didn't kill himself?"

"Might have shot himself at long-range. No powder marks on his face, and the bullet went through his head."

"Uh-huh."

"Funny thing," said the doctor. "You know, Mallette wore boots—the short kind. Well, there was dirt in both boots."

"What about it?"

"I don't know; I just mentioned it."

"Uh-huh. Mallette didn't look to me like a man who had taken a bath very often. You fix up about that inquest, will yuh, Doc? You've held 'em before."

"All right, Roaring. Ryker was down to look at the corpse. He says there's no doubt in his mind that Pete Conley killed Mallette. They chased Conley all night last night."

"Yeah, I heard they did."

Roaring didn't bother to tell the doctor that he had Pete in jail. He went from the doctor's office to Judge Beal's home, where Wong Kee opened the door for him. The old judge was slumped down in an old rocker, half dressed, an uncorked bottle of whisky beside him on the table. On his lap was a much worn copy of the Bible.

"Come in, Roaring," he said softly. "Sit down and tell me all the news. We've only heard rumors here. Between Wong's rheumatism and my bottle of rye, we've not been able to get out and gather the news. Have a drink—it's good stuff. Wong, bring the gentleman a glass."

It was evident to Roaring that the judge was mellow with liquor. But that was as far as he ever got—mellow. No one had ever seen Judge Beal drunk—as a drunk is measured in Turquoise City.

Roaring took the drink and told the judge what had happened the night before. The old jurist chuckled over how Roaring drew the lynchers away from the ranch, while Jimmy Moran brought Pete safely to Turquoise.

"Oh, they'd have hung him, Judge," assured Roaring. "Pete wasn't stuck on comin' to jail, but he could see that it was the only safe place for him."

"That's very true, Roaring. I got my second warning yesterday."

"You did? Gosh! What are you goin' to do, Judge?"

The old judge smiled grimly.

"Die in a good cause," he said slowly. "Why run away? I've no place to go. After all, I am the judge of this district. English Ed and his cohorts fear justice, and it may be that English Ed has political influence enough to get a friendly judge elected, or rather appointed, in case he can frighten me into resigning."

"Mebby," nodded Roaring. "He scared Randall out."

"But you are not one of his men, Roaring."

"I hope to die if I am! I've got Wind River Jim for a deputy and I'll run that office as long as she's got a wheel to turn on—and when she ain't, I'll keep her draggin'. I dunno much about my office, Judge. Randall never did tell me much, so I've kinda

got to run her by ear. English Ed and his gang don't like me; but that ain't goin' to git me down. Well, I better go back and see how Wind River is makin' out. I plumb forgot to tell him that bein' a deputy sheriff don't give him a right to shoot anybody he happens to get sore at. See you later, Judge."

The inquest over the body of Mallette created quite a lot of interest, and the six jurors did not hesitate to bring in a verdict to the effect that Mallette had been killed by Peter Conley. Roaring Rigby refused to produce Pete in court.

"That half-breed is behind the bars, neck intact," he told the coroner, "and there he stays until he has to go into a reg'lar courtroom. There's too much iron among those present, I'll tell you that."

Jimmy Moran's testimony regarding the poker game in which Mallette stole a card was rather in favor of Pete; and the audience enjoyed Jimmy's story of how Roaring was chased by the posse. Jimmy admitted that it was he who brought Pete to jail that night.

Every one noticed that Jimmy showed Dawn marked attention during the trial, and Slim was foolish enough to mention this to Jimmy later on.

"Is it any of your damn business?" demanded Jimmy. "You may be in charge of my father's cattle, but you're not in charge of my father's son. And get this straight, Slim. If I want to marry—"

"Sure, sure," nodded Slim hastily. "Excuse me, Jimmy."

Slim subsided, but he hurried to the telegraph office and sent a long telegram to Franklyn Moran, explaining what had happened and mentioning that Jimmy might need a bit of fatherly advice regarding matrimony. Not that it mattered to Slim, except that he had orders to keep Moran informed on Jimmy's activities. Franklyn Moran loved Jimmy, in his own way, and he wanted Jimmy with the Big 4. According to his views of the matter, the sooner Jimmy went broke, the better, perhaps, for the relations between father and son.

Kent Cutter, owner of the 7AL, failed to see any humor in Jimmy's recital of the fruitless chase of Pete Conley. Kent went back to the Black Horse after the inquest, imbibed a sufficient number of drinks to make him free of speech and then proceeded to tell the world that he didn't care very much for Jimmy Moran.

Lovely Lucas, Jimmy's sole remaining cowboy, was in the Black Horse and heard Cutter's loud-voiced, profane opinion of Jimmy. Lovely was a huge figure of a man. In fact he was so big that his eight and one-half by six and one-half Stetson did not seem at all out of proportion on his head. He had a big nose and an enormous mouth. He had been born and raised in southern Texas, and he had an easy drawl. He sauntered over to the bar, rested one elbow lazily and considered Cutter.

"You jist kinda like to talk, don'tcha?" he said slowly.

Cutter turned his bloodshot eyes upon the bulky Lucas.

"Mebby," he said shortly, and turned his back.

“He-he-he-he-he!” chuckled Lovely. He had imbibed a few drinks himself.

“My talkin’ don’t ache you none, does it?” demanded Cutter frigidly.

“It ain’t got that far—yit,” smiled Lovely, “but you’ve done got to remember that Jimmy Moran is my boss, Cutter. He ain’t no damn angel, so anythin’ you feel like sayin’ about him might better be said to his face, ’cause I’ll shore tell him what you said, and I might make it sound a heap worse ’n you would.”

“Huh!” snorted Cutter. “That’s no dream!”

“I’d prob’ly lie,” said Lovely softly.

“You would,” admitted Cutter incautiously.

Lovely Lucas moved swiftly for a big man. One huge hand caught the back of Cutter’s muffler, while the other caught the back of his cartridge-belt and, with a heave, he swung Cutter off the floor.

“Comin’ up!” snorted Lovely, and he swung Cutter over the bar, letting loose of him in mid-air.

The bartender fell out of the way, giving Cutter plenty of room to catch his legs across the top of the back-bar, hooking his spurred heels behind stacks of polished glasses, and bringing everything down on top of him when he crashed to the floor.

Lovely whirled around and headed for the door, his mouth wide open in a chuckling laugh. No one tried to stop him. He crossed the street and went straight to the sheriff’s office, where he found Roaring Rigby and Wind River Jim. It was several moments before Lovely was able to tell them what had happened.

“I jist kinda valised him over,” laughed Lovely.

“Yeah, and you’ll wish you hadn’t,” said Roaring. “That whole 7AL gang will lay for you.”

“But he called me a liar,” protested Lovely. “He said somethin’ ought to be done about Jimmy Moran marryin’ Dawn Conley.”

Roaring Rigby shifted his eyes and looked down at his boots. Wind River Jim looked reprovingly at Lovely and shook his head. Wind River knew more about it than Lovely did. But Lovely didn’t understand.

“If Jimmy wants to wed with that half-breed girl, I reckon we’ll all step out and help make it a success, eh, Roarin’?”

Roaring rubbed a thumb along the edge of his boot-top.

“Yea-a-ah,” he said slowly. “I reckon you’ve got to stick up for your friends, Lovely.”

“Shore! That’s why I played ante-over with Cutter. He-he-he-he! I s’pose English Ed will send me a bill for damages. Cutter’s legs swept every glass off the back-bar.”

“And you better tell Jimmy to look out for Ed,” advised Roaring. “That gambler ain’t forgot that Jimmy cooled him off the night that Mallette was killed.”

“Oh, Jimmy ain’t asleep, Roarin’. Say, I’ll let you in on somethin’, if you’ll keep still about it. After the inquest, old Mose Conley told Jimmy to keep away from the

Hot Creek ranch; said he appreciated what Jimmy was doin' for 'em, but that Jimmy was to keep away from Dawn. I reckon it was because he hates Jimmy's pa. He didn't say that was the reason. Jimmy got kinda hot and told the old man he was aimin' to marry Dawn. He-he-he-he! The old man says Jimmy better think it over a long time, 'cause Dawn is a half-breed; and Jimmy asks him how long he took to think things over before he married Dawn's mother. He-he-he-he-he!

"He had the old man up a stump, but the old man stuck to it. Jimmy asks him what he'll do in case he decides to come to see Dawn. 'I told you not to,' says the old man. 'All men look pretty much the same in the dark, and I've got to protect myself.' And there you are. I didn't talk with Jimmy afterwards; he piled on his bronc and went home."

Some one stopped at the doorway of the office, and they turned to see English Ed. He looked coldly at Lovely.

"You owe me forty dollars, Lucas," said the gambler. "That is the amount of glassware you broke awhile ago."

"Forty dollars," said Lovely softly. "Lotta glasses, Ed."

"A month's salary," said Wind River Jim.

"And here's a letter to take to Jim Moran," said English Ed, handing Lovely an envelope. "You see that he gets it."

"Yea-a-a-ah? And I owe you forty dollars, eh?" Lovely sat up straight and glared at the gambler. "Say! You cold-jawed card-slicker, do you think I'll ever pay that? Pay you forty dollars for busted glasses! Why, I wouldn't give forty dollars for everythin' in your place, even if they'd throw in your hide and taller."

"You think you're runnin' this town, don'tcha? You runs Jim Randall out, but the rest of us has kinda got our heels braced, *sabe*? You've got a couple gunmen dealers over there. Mack Ort and Keno Smiley, I'm meanin'. You had three, until Mallette got hung on the hot end of a bullet."

"Well, you tell 'em to cut loose any old time. See if they can tear forty dollars' worth out of my hide, English; and that's the only way you'll ever collect. Yeah, I know all about the warnin' you sent to Jim Randall. You scared him out; but you ain't scared old Judge Beal out yet. And if I was you, I'd turn right around and go back to my little playmates, knowin' well that old man Lucas' little boy ain't never goin' to give you that forty dollars. What do you think?"

English Ed did not change expression, no matter what he felt. It was no place for him to protest Lovely's decision. These three hard-bitted cowboys were closer than brothers and, judging from their expressions, welcomed any argument he might start. So he merely nodded coldly, turned and walked away.

Lovely grinned widely and looked at the envelope. It was unsealed, and Lovely did not hesitate to open it and take out the enclosure. It read:

Jim Moran: Your I.O.U.'s, aggregating over twelve hundred dollars, are long past due. These must be met at once, or I shall be obliged to levy an attachment on the Stumbling K.

—EDWARD HOLMES

“Twelve hundred dollars!” exploded Lovely. “Jimmy shore played high and handsome, didn’t he! Whooee! Levy an attachment, eh? What kind of a thing is that, Roarin’?”

“Some law thing. I told you English Ed would shut down on Jimmy.”

“And Jimmy can’t pay it,” declared Wind River Jim. “Why, he ain’t got it. Every time pay-day came around he had to sell enough cows to pay us off. Betcha he ain’t got fifty head of stock left. The Black Horse Saloon has got rich off of Jimmy Moran. He owes the bank, too. They’ve got a mortgage for a couple thousand.”

“Yeah, it kinda looks as though Jimmy was about sunk,” agreed Lovely.

He walked back to the door and looked out. Cutter was crossing the street, looking down toward the office. He met Ryker in front of the post-office, and they went up the street together.

“Cutter and Ryker are pretty good friends, ain’t they?” asked Lovely.

“Always have been,” grunted Roaring.

“Cutter’s prob’ly fixin’ to have me arrested,” grinned Lovely. “Mebby I better go home while the way is clear. How soon do they have Pete’s trial?”

“Next week,” replied Roaring.

“Before Judge Beal?”

“If he lives that long.”

“Who—Pete?”

“No, Judge Beal.”

The overland train ground to a stop at the little station of Sibley Junction, unloaded one passenger and a couple of heavy valises, and then hurried on, as if glad to get away.

Sibley Junction consisted of the depot, a water-tank and a saloon. The depot and water-tank were on one side of the railroad; the saloon was on the other. The saloon was a weatherbeaten, false-fronted structure, one side of which still bore traces of having been decorated with a circus poster.

There was no sidewalk, no awning. The false-front leaned back, as if weary of it all. The surrounding hills were hazy with the afternoon heat, and the dust from the passing train seemed to hang suspended in the windless atmosphere. There was no sign of life, except two saddled horses dozing at the hitch-rack beside the saloon.

The lone passenger from the overland picked up his valises and walked heavily to the waiting-room of the depot, dropped the valises and mopped his red face. He was a big man, square-headed, heavy-jawed, well dressed. His baggage was of expensive

leather. He looked around sourly as the head and shoulders of a sleepy-eyed depot-agent appeared at the ticket window.

"Howdy, Mr. Moran," said the man with the sleepy eyes. "I kinda thought somebody got off Number Six."

"Yeah!" grunted Franklyn Moran.

"Goin' over to Turquoise City, eh?"

"Yeah. Train on time?"

"Might be here on time tomorrow—not today. They went in the ditch this side of Wiebold, and the report is that they won't move nothin' over this jerkwater line for at least twenty-four hours, Mr. Moran. I'm sorry."

Moran almost exploded. Slim Regan's telegram had caused him to drop everything and head for Turquoise City. And here he was, twenty-five miles away, with no hotel, no livery-stable, no way for him to travel that twenty-five miles, except on foot.

"That means I can't get a train to Turquoise until tomorrow, eh?"

"Probably about tomorrow even'."

"Anybody around here got a horse I could buy or rent?"

"I don't think so."

"I saw two horses over at the saloon rack."

"Couple of strange cowboys. They rode in today from the Outpost country. Been punching cows for the Muller outfit."

"I wonder if they're headin' for Turquoise City?"

"I don't think so. They asked about the Long Bend country."

"Maybe I better take a look at 'em. I'll leave my baggage here."

Moran mopped his face again and crossed the track to the saloon. It was a dusty, fly-specked place. The bartender was humped over in a chair, reading a paper-backed novel; a gray cat was curled up on the end of the bar, and at the one card table sat two dusty cowboys, eating canned salmon, peaches and crackers.

Moran stopped at the bar and looked around. The bartender showed mild interest, marking the page of his book by crimping a page. The two cowboys did not even show mild interest. One of them was very tall and thin, with a long, serious face, which just now he was stuffing with food. The other was of medium height, broad-shouldered, with very wide blue eyes and a deeply-lined face. Their well worn garb was typical of the cow-country.

"I'll buy a drink," invited Moran.

The tall cowboy swallowed heavily and shook his head.

"Thank you just the same," he said pleasantly. "We tried it."

"They don't know good liquor," said the bartender rather plaintively, and getting to his feet.

"I reckon that's right," nodded the tall one, digging into the salmon can with his pocket-knife.

"Beer?" queried Moran.

The tall one grimaced.

"Hot. There ain't been no ice here since the glacial period."

"What'll you have?" asked the bartender.

Moran considered.

"Anything cold?"

The bartender rubbed his chin ruefully.

"Not that I've seen. Been pretty hot lately."

"I guess I don't want anything, thank you."

"Uh-huh."

The bartender went back to his novel, and Moran sat down near the two cowboys.

"I'm Franklyn Moran," he told them, "from Chicago. I own the Big 4 ranch near Turquoise City."

"What former experience have you had, and why did you leave your last place?" queried the blue-eyed cowboy seriously.

"Eh?" said Moran.

"I was just thinkin' how I'd hate to live here," said the blue-eyed one seriously.

"Mm-m-m-m," muttered Moran. He knew that wasn't what the cowboy had said.

"It's all right, after you get used to it," said the bartending bookworm.

"That may be," smiled Moran. "I expected to catch that afternoon train to Turquoise City, and find that there's a wreck which will take twenty-four hours to clear. I'd give twenty-five dollars for a horse to ride to the Big 4 ranch."

"Twenty-five dollars for twenty-five miles?" queried the bartender.

"It's worth it to me," declared Moran. "If one of you boys will let me have a horse—"

"You must be in a hurry," observed the tall cowboy. He wiped his lips and prepared to roll a cigaret.

"I am. That's my offer. I'd even ride double."

"What kind of a place is this Turquoise City?"

"Wide open town. You boys lookin' for work?"

"No-o-o-o, lookin' for a job. We're too intelligent to look for work, pardner."

Moran smiled and offered them cigars, which were declined.

"How about my offer?" he asked anxiously.

The tall one elevated his eyebrows and looked at his companion.

"I'll tell you what we will do with you," said the short one. "You can ride my bronc, if you'll pay twenty-five dollars and give me a railroad ticket to that town. I'll wait for the train tomorrow afternoon."

“Cinch!” Moran dug in his pocket and drew out a ticket. “Here’s mine. How soon do we start?”

“Right now, if the bartender will let me have half of his bed tonight,” said the short one.

“Pleased to have you,” nodded the bartender. “I won’t have to talk to myself tonight.”

“I’ll leave my baggage with you,” said Moran.

“All right.”

They threw the empty cans outside and went to the horses. The cowboys helped Moran adjust the stirrups to the proper length.

“My name’s ‘Hashknife’ Hartley,” said the tall cowboy. “This pardner of mine is named Stevens. Folks call him ‘Sleepy,’ ’cause he ain’t.”

“Well, I’m both glad and lucky to meet you,” laughed Moran. “There’s some trouble over in Turquoise City, and I’m anxious to get over there.”

“Trouble, eh?” Hashknife Hartley’s long nose twitched.

Moran mounted and picked up his reins. Sleepy Stevens was looking at Hashknife, a queer expression in his blue eyes.

“Seems there is,” nodded Moran. “Ready?”

“Yeah,” nodded Hashknife. He turned to Sleepy.

“Don’t miss that train, pardner; I’ll be lookin’ for you.”

Sleepy nodded solemnly and watched them ride away. Finally he cuffed his Stetson over on one side of his head, spat disgustedly and walked back toward the saloon.

“Trouble!” he snorted aloud. “By God, there wasn’t nothin’ but a depot and a saloon, a depot-agent and a bartender—and we found trouble jist the same.”

That same afternoon, which was two days after Lovely Lucas had tossed Kent Cutter over the Black Horse bar, Jeff Ryker, prosecuting attorney, rode out to Conley’s ranch, wearing a new mailorder suit and an extra large collar. Dawn saw him coming from afar. She had been expecting Jimmy to ignore her father’s warning, and at first she thought it might be Jimmy; but, when she saw who it was, she departed hurriedly, leaving her mother to do the talking.

The very fat, stolid old Indian woman filled the rocking-chair to creaking capacity. She wore an old print wrapper and moccasins, a very brassy necklace and an even more brassy bracelet. Minnie Conley had never become civilized, as far as apparel was concerned.

Ryker rode up to the porch, tipped his hat to Mrs. Conley and dismounted. She nodded coldly. Moses Conley had explained to her that Ryker was the man who would try to hang Peter.

“Rather hot today, Mrs. Conley,” he said pleasantly.

“Pretty damn hot,” she said forcibly.

"Yeah, it is," he sat down in the vacant chair and mopped his brow. "Hot in town today. I thought I'd take a ride and cool off. Where's Mr. Conley?"

"He not here."

"I see."

He craned his neck and glanced through the doorway.

"Dawn not here," said the woman.

"I see. Well, you're here, Mrs. Conley."

"I here," stolidly. "I mos' always here. Too fat to ride."

Ryker laughed cautiously.

"Well, you're good and healthy, Mrs. Conley."

"Pretty good. What you want?"

"That depends, Mrs. Conley. Peter's in jail, you know."

"I know very well."

"And they might hang him, Mrs. Conley," he said heartlessly.

The Indian woman's eyes flickered for a moment, as she shifted her gaze past Ryker. He watched her face closely, but beyond the flicker of her eyelids there was no emotion.

"And you don't want that to happen," he said softly.

"No," she said. "No want that to happen."

"He's your son," said Ryker.

"You right, my son."

"There's just me and you here, Mrs. Conley. I don't mind telling you, I love Dawn. I want to marry Dawn."

The woman's gaze came back to Ryker, and he shifted uneasily under the stare of those beady eyes.

"You want marry Dawn?" she asked.

"Yeah, that's the idea, Mrs. Conley. I'm a big man in Turquoise City, you understand. If I say they must hang Peter—they hang Peter. If I am going to marry Dawn, I not say for them to hang Peter. You *sabe* that?"

"Damn right!"

"Fine. When Dawn say she marry me, I get Peter loose. If she not marry me—" Ryker hesitated meaningly.

"You hang Peter," said the woman heavily.

"That's the idea, Mrs. Conley. We make a trade, eh?"

"S'pose Dawn no marry you?"

"She like to see Peter get hung?" countered Ryker.

"She not like."

"And there you are, Mrs. Conley. You tell her about it. You not need to tell Moses. He not need to know. Our secret, eh?"

"I not tell nobody."

"Good! Well, I'll be goin' on. Peter have trial next week. You let me know Monday."

Ryker mounted his horse and rode away, well pleased with himself. Once he turned in his saddle and waved back at the huddled figure on the old porch, which did not wave back at him.

After Ryker had passed from sight, Dawn came out. She halted near her mother and stared across the hills toward the Black Horse ford.

"I heard everything he said, mother."

"Good! Ryker *mamook hyas cultus wau-wau*."

Stress of emotion caused the old squaw to revert to the trade language of her people. Translated, it meant that Ryker made a very bad talk.

"How can he turn Peter loose?" demanded Dawn indignantly. "Is Ryker the law?"

"Crooked!" said the old lady.

"It surely is! If I marry him he'll turn Peter loose. Why, I wouldn't marry him."

"Peter hang, mebbby."

"Oh, I don't mean it that way, mother. I want Peter to go free. You know that, don't you? Why, he's my brother; but to marry Jeff Ryker—"

"Too much talk about marry," said the old lady. "Cutter talk to Mose. You don't know. He want marry you. Jimmy Moran want marry you."

"Kent Cutter want to marry me?"

"You right. Mose tell him go to hell."

Dawn laughed bitterly.

"I wonder what's got into 'em? Why don't they come to me, I wonder?"

"Jimmy come to you, eh?"

"Yes," softly.

"Roarin' come to you, Dawn?"

"No."

"He not come to nobody—jus' come. Good man."

"Yes, he's a good man, mother; but I don't want to marry him. Oh, I don't want to marry anybody."

Her mother looked at her keenly for several moments.

"I guess you marry man you want," she said slowly. "Peter have trial next week. Mose hire good lawyer. Mebbby I tell judge what Ryker say. Here come Mose now."

Moses Conley rode to the corral, unsaddled his horse and came up to the house.

"Was Ryker here?" he asked.

Mrs. Conley nodded.

"He jus' stop little while, Mose."

"What for?"

"Dawn."

"Dawn?" Mose Conley twisted his head and looked at Dawn. "Came to see you? What did he say to you?"

"I didn't talk with him."

"He want marry her," said Mrs. Conley.

"Huh!" The old man ran his fingers through his white beard, frowning heavily. "The prosecutin' attorney wants to marry Dawn. That's funny. There's Cutter, Rigby, English Ed, Moran, and now comes Ryker. How do you account for all this, Dawn?"

"I don't," said Dawn seriously.

"You're pretty," said Conley slowly.

"I'm a half-breed."

"You stop that! I hate that word, Dawn. If there's any mixed blood that you might be ashamed of, it's on my side. You mother is an American."

"You right!" said Mrs. Conley. "My father big chief."

"Well, I wouldn't rate him too high," said Conley. "If I hadn't tracked some horses he stole from me to his teepee, I wouldn't have met you; so that's all right."

"That was my grandfather," said Dawn bitterly. "A horsethief."

"Well," amended Conley, "he didn't really steal 'em, Dawn. Me and him made a deal. He kept six pintos and I took his daughter. That's the only time I ever cheated an Injun."

Conley looked fondly at his fat wife. She smiled. Dawn laughed and turned toward the door, going into the house.

A moment later came the sound of horses, and two riders swept around the corner of the house. They jerked to a stop, throwing a shower of gravel against the steps. Moses Conley sprang to his feet.

The men were Slim Regan and Mark Clayton of the Big 4. Regan whirled his horse against the side of the porch and at the same time, he covered Moses Conley with a six-shooter. Clayton dismounted.

"What's the matter with you?" demanded Conley.

"I'll show you what's the matter with me!" rasped Regan angrily. "Keep your hands above your waist, Conley."

"I'm not armed," said Conley. "What's gone wrong with you, Regan?"

Mark Clayton halted at the bottom of the steps. He held a gun in his right hand and seemed to wait for Regan to give him further orders.

"You know damn well what's wrong," declared Regan hotly. "We found where you cut your upper fence; so we rode down to see what it meant. Oh, we found out all right. There's eight white-faced, Big 4 steers dead at Hot Creek. You let 'em in and then shot 'em for trespassin', eh?"

Conley's right hand went to his beard, trembling slightly.

"Keep your hands still," warned Clayton.

"You don't need to deny anythin'," said Regan coldly. "We've got the deadwood on you, Conley. I reckon you'll claim they didn't have any right there, eh? Mebby not. But that won't help you any. Come off that porch and saddle your bronc. You go to jail, *sabe*?"

"To jail?" Conley shook his head slowly. "I don't know what you're talkin' about, Regan. Put up that gun and let's talk sensible."

"Like hell! Come off that porch."

Mark Clayton holstered his gun, as the old man started to obey Regan. It was evident that the old man carried no arms of any kind.

"Drop that gun, Regan!"

Regan's head jerked sidewise enough for him to see Dawn Conley and the muzzle of a double-barreled shotgun. She was not over a dozen feet away. He dropped his gun. Clayton stood perfectly still. Dawn had circled the house and come in almost behind them. Now she moved closer, holding the big gun easily in her two hands, the first finger of her right hand crooked around a trigger.

"Take their guns, Dad," she said huskily.

Clayton made no objection as Conley removed the gun from his holster. He knew what a shotgun would do at short range, and he had no desire to be picked up in chunks.

The old man took Regan's gun and stepped back to the edge of the porch. Dawn went slowly to him and laid the gun on the porch floor.

"Where do you keep the shells for this gun, Dad?" she asked. "I looked all over for them."

"There ain't any, Dawn," he said. "I've been goin' to buy some, but I put it off."

"Wasn't loaded, eh?" gritted Regan.

"Hasn't been for a week," said Conley.

"Pretty good bluff, at that," said Clayton. "It's all right with me. Any old time you point one of them twin tubes at my anatomy, I sag visibly."

"What's it goin' to get you?" demanded Regan. "Put down them guns. You're goin' to town with us."

"Not now, Regan. The Big 4 can't arrest me. If you've got a complaint to make, go to the sheriff."

"Oh, yes! And have him pull a deal with us like he did with Pete."

"Then go home and mind your own business. I'm not goin' to town with you, Regan. I don't care to see you two any longer than I have to. I fenced this place to keep all the Big 4's off my land; so you better pilgrim home."

Clayton mounted hurriedly.

"We'll come back, Conley," said Regan. "You've butchered eight of our steers on your land, and if the Big 4 don't wipe you off the earth, I'll miss my guess."

They whirled their horses and galloped off down the road. Regan was so mad he spurred his pet saddle horse unmercifully on the way to the gate. The sun was just going down. He wasn't certain just what to do. They drew rein at the gate.

"What are you laughin' about?" demanded Regan.

"I can't help it," chuckled Clayton. "The look on your face, when you saw that shotgun! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"Is that so! Well, I didn't see you do anythin', except reach for the sky."

"An empty gun, too! Whooee-e-e! Say, Slim, I never knowed how danged pretty that girl was until now. She's a bird."

"Yeah, and she needs her wings clipped. What had we better do, Mark? We can't let the old man destroy the evidence. It would be like him to drag every steer out of sight."

"Let's go and get Roarin' Rigby. We can come back with him and see that he does what we want him to do. I know I'd like to have my gun but it'll be dark pretty quick."

"That's the worst of it. Wonder who this is comin'."

Two horsemen were coming up the road from the ford, and the fading sunlight showed them to be riding a tall gray and a sorrel.

"Pretty tall man on that gray," observed Regan.

"Plenty big on the sorrel," Clayton. "I don't *sabe* that tall gray, Slim."

As the riders drew closer, the two men at the gate recognized Franklyn Moran as the rider of the sorrel.

"Well, I'll be danged!" snorted Regan.

"Hello, Moran!"

"Hello Slim," called Moran. "Howdy, Clayton."

He shook hands with the two cowboys and introduced them to Hashknife and, at the same time, he told them how it happened that he was riding to the ranch. Slim looked appraisingly at Hashknife. Slim was a cowman and a judge of cowboys. His practised eye noted the riding rig of the tall cowboy, the cut of his well worn chaps, the hang of his belt and gun. His eyes flashed back to Hashknife's serious face, and he half-smiled as he said:

"Boy, howdy! Your outfit never got to lookin' that way from ridin' now and then."

"I've been around," said Hashknife modestly.

"I'll betcha. Lookin' for work?"

Hashknife grinned at Moran.

"Must be a habit in this country, Moran—this 'work' idea."

Moran laughed and explained.

"I was just wonderin' if it was ag'in' the law to wear a gun around here," smiled Hashknife, indicating Regan's empty holster.

"Not unless they get the drop on you!" blurted Clayton. "You tell 'em, Slim."

Slim told them, while Moran swore explosively. Hashknife rolled a cigaret during the recital and tried to appear indifferent, but his eyes smiled when Regan told how Dawn Conley had stuck them up with an empty shotgun.

"That's the dirty old squaw-man I told you about, Hartley," said Moran. "That's how he gets even with me. I'll send him to the pen for that, if there's any law in the county."

"Well, there ain't," declared Clayton. "Roarin' Rigby is stuck on Dawn Conley and—"

"What about Jim Randall, the sheriff?"

"Gone. The Black Horse Saloon outfit scared him out of the country. Roarin' Rigby is sheriff, and he's hired Wind River Jim for a deputy."

"And that is the most ridiculous thing I ever heard," declared Moran. "This country needs a shake-up. What about Jimmy? Oh, you don't need to be afraid to talk in front of Hartley. I've told him all about things."

"Well, there's no secret about him goin' to marry Dawn Conley, I guess," said Slim. "I happen to know Jimmy borrowed money from the bank on a mortgage, and he owes English Ed quite a lot of money."

"You knew they had Pete Conley in jail for killin' Joe Mallette. Well, that same night, Jimmy had a fight with English Ed, and knocked Ed out. That caused bad blood. Then Jimmy and Roarin' Rigby foxed the gang that went out to hang Pete, and got Pete safe to jail. It put Jimmy in bad with a lot of folks. They held the inquest and indicted Pete. Kent Cutter got to talkin' kinda loud about Jimmy in the Black Horse, and Lovely Lucas pitched Kent over the bar, bustin' forty dollars' worth of glasses. Oh, we've had a lot of fun around here lately, but Joe Mallette is the only one that's been killed. You know, the same gang that scared Jim Randall out sent warnings to Judge Beal, but the old judge is still in evidence, although he sticks pretty close to home."

"And all this will lead to more killin'," said Moran. "I'll tell you what to do, Slim. You and Mark go to town and bring Roarin' Rigby out to the Big 4. Tell him I want to talk with him."

"All right. But in the meantime we ought to have a man over on Hot Creek, to see that Mose Conley don't destroy all that evidence."

"And get him shot into ribbons, eh? I know Conley."

"Yeah, I reckon that's true. Well, they're your steers; so you can do as you please. We'll bring Roarin' back with us."

Slim Regan was glad that Franklyn Moran arrived in time to take charge of the affair. It would take the responsibility off of his shoulders, and Slim didn't care for responsibility.

He and Clayton splashed through the ford at Black Horse Creek and, about a quarter of a mile beyond, they met Jimmy Moran. Jimmy was alone, singing at the top of his voice. He had a very good barytone, developed to a certain extent in a college glee club.

"Drunk ag'in," declared Mark.

But Jimmy wasn't drunk. He drew up beside them, grinning good-naturedly. Slim Regan scowled. Jimmy had a habit of getting on Slim's nerves.

"Your father just came in," said Slim.

"Yea-a-a-ah? Too much for you to handle, eh?"

"You don't need to let that bother you?" retorted Slim.

"Oh, I know all about it," grinned Jimmy. "You wired him. I got the depot agent drunk, and he told me about it."

"The dirty bum!" exploded Slim. "I'll fix him."

"Well, he told the truth, didn't he?"

"He didn't need to tell anythin'."

"Well, he didn't," laughed Jimmy. "I guessed it, and you bit like a hungry fish. I saw you head for the depot after the inquest; so the rest was a cinch. How's the old man lookin', and what's he goin' to do about it?"

Slim gnawed the corner of his lip.

"He'll do somethin'—that's a cinch," said Clayton. "Old Mose Conley cut his upper fence, herded eight Big 4 steers down into Hot Creek basin and shot 'em. I reckon that'll hold him for a while."

"A-a-a-aw, what are you talkin' about!" snorted Jimmy. "He never did any such a thing."

"Yes, he did," said Slim quickly. "We found 'em, Jimmy. We went down to bring the old man to town, and the girl got the drop on us with a shotgun. Oh, we all know how you feel about that girl—but I'm tellin' you the truth."

"Got the drop on you, Slim?"

"She shore did. Two-barrel shotgun."

"Empty," chuckled Clayton.

Jimmy took a deep breath and grinned widely.

"Well, can you beat that? What are you goin' to do?"

"That's up to your dad. He sent us to town after Roarin' Rigby."

"Well, I'll be darned! Are you sure about them steers?"

"We seen 'em. Eight white-faced steers, with the Big 4's pointin' skyward. No mistake, kid. And the fence was cut."

“Gosh, that’s bad, huh!”

“You headin’ up that way?” asked Clayton.

Jimmy shook his head quickly.

“Not me. I’ve been warned to keep away. This is gettin’ to be a great place for warnings. I got a tip today that the Black Horse Saloon wouldn’t be healthy for me. I suppose the bartender has his orders to put ground glass in my liquor. They tell me that Lovely Lucas mopped off the back-bar with Kent Cutter the other day and busted forty dollars’ worth of glasses. This Western country is gettin’ tough. Well, you boys better trot along and get the sheriff.”

“I reckon we better,” nodded Slim.

“So long!”

“Want to send any message to your dad?” asked Clayton.

“Yeah. Tell him to mind his own business, and to give Slim Regan orders to the same effect.”

Slim turned and glared at Jimmy in the gathering gloom, but Jimmy didn’t see the glare. He was riding on, lifting his voice in song.

“He’s a tough pup, that feller,” growled Slim. “Why, he didn’t know I sent that telegram.”

“Not until you admitted it.”

Clayton turned in his saddle and listened. Jimmy’s voice floated back to them. He was singing “The Message of the Violet” from the “Prince of Pilsen.” They drew up their horses and listened.

“I wish I had his voice,” said Clayton seriously.

“I wish I had his gall,” said Slim.

Hashknife Hartley instinctively liked Roaring Rigby. There was something pathetically earnest about this new sheriff of Black Horse County, who was willing to admit that he knew little about his duties and limitations.

Roaring had ridden back to the Big 4 ranch with Slim Regan and Mark Clayton. He shook hands gravely with Franklyn Moran and with Hashknife, and accepted Moran’s invitation to stay all night. Regan had told Roaring about the dead steers at the Hot Creek coulee.

“That’s Mose Conley’s idea of retaliation,” declared Moran, as they sat together in the main room of the Big 4 ranch-house, the air blue with tobacco smoke.

“Mm-m-m-m-m,” mused Roaring, “kinda funny thing t’ do. What head would that come under, Moran? It ain’t rustlin’. He didn’t steal your cattle.”

“Wanton destruction!” snapped Moran.

“They was inside his fence.”

“He cut the fence himself.”

“Mm-m-m-m-m. Hard to prove, Moran.”

"Even that doesn't need proof. He shot the animals. Any jury on earth would convict him."

"Any Black Horse jury would convict Mose Conley of anythin'. Just bring your charge."

"Well, he brought it on himself, Roarin', when he fenced in the only open winter water-hole in the country."

"It's his land."

"I can see where Conley's got one friend."

"Two," corrected Roaring. "Me and Jimmy Moran."

That was a body punch to Franklyn Moran. He got up from his chair and announced that he was going to bed.

"We'll see about those steers in the morning," he said.

Hashknife slept in the ranch-house that night. He tried not to work up any interest in the squabble. He did not care particularly for Franklyn Moran, who was half-Easterner, half-Westerner, and inclined to be proud of his own importance.

Moran had told Hashknife much of the story during their ride from Sibley Junction. He had admitted that he double-crossed Moses Conley in a mining deal, because he was unwilling to match his money against Conley's knowledge. He told Hashknife that he had bought up several prospects which turned out well. In fact, these prospects were responsible for his fortune.

He also explained to Hashknife his reasons for haste in coming to Turquoise City—to break off Jimmy's engagement to a half-breed girl, who happened to be Conley's daughter.

"That's another one of Conley's ideas of getting even with me," he told Hashknife.

"He must kinda hate you," observed Hashknife.

But Hashknife was really more interested in the fact that the sheriff of Black Horse had been frightened into resigning his office by the gambling element of Turquoise City; not that it made any difference to Hashknife, but it was in his blood to seek the reasons for things of this kind.

That was one of the reasons for Sleepy Stevens' outburst against trouble, when Hashknife and Moran rode away from him at Sibley Junction. Sleepy knew what this word "trouble" would mean to Hashknife.

It would mean that the lean-faced cowboy would not rest until it was all straightened out, regardless of the cost. Since the day when George Hartley had ridden in at the ranch that gave him his nickname, he and Sleepy Dave Stevens had been inseparable. They had cast their lots together and had become wanderers of the open places, going nowhere in particular, but always heading for the next hill, just to see what might be on the other side.

Hashknife had been born with an analytical mind. Having had little schooling and having been born in the cattle country, he naturally became a cowpuncher, a rider of

bad bronchos—a top hand with cattle. But there was always the urge to follow the trail of trouble, and when he found Sleepy Stevens, blue-eyed, grin-wrinkled, always looking beyond the distant ranges, they went away together, up and down the land, untangling the mysteries of range trouble, seeking no remuneration, asking no thanks.

In many places they were marked men, but this did not stop them from coming back. Life had made them confirmed fatalists, knowing that nothing could happen to them until their time came.

The West did not list them as gunmen; but strangely enough they had gone through many gun battles unscathed, when men faster with guns had gone down. Theirs was the psychology of being in the right.

“Run when you’re wrong; shoot when you’re right,” said Hashknife. “That’s why some of these fast gunmen get killed off—they shoot when they’re wrong.”

Sleepy Stevens did not analyze anything. He followed Hashknife dumbly, filled with arguments against getting into trouble, deriding Hashknife’s ability, vocally fearful of getting killed; and yet he inwardly delighted over it all, anxiously waiting for somebody to start shooting.

The following morning after breakfast, Moran, Regan, Roaring and Hashknife rode away from the Big 4 ranch. Hashknife led Sleepy’s horse, as he meant to meet the train at Turquoise City that afternoon.

Regan led the way down to the cut fence at the Conley ranch, and they rode through to Hot Creek. As they came out along the lava beds, high above the creek bottom, they could easily count the eight head of dead steers. Moran swore bitterly against Moses Conley and promised him plenty of trouble for this work.

They circled the lava beds and came down into the bottom. Moran had explained to Hashknife about this warm spring, and Hashknife could see the value of it as a winter shelter and watering place.

“We all used it,” said Slim Regan. “Why, you could run a thousand head of cattle in here ahead of a blizzard, and they’d stand it fine and dandy. This country is cold in the winter. The other streams freeze to the bottom.”

“Why don’tcha make some kind of a deal with Conley?” asked Hashknife.

“Can’t be done; he won’t sell out. Moran offered him more than it’s worth, but he won’t sell. The 7AL has tried to buy it, but didn’t have any luck. The old fool won’t listen to money.”

“Hey!” blurted Roaring. “Look at that animal!”

They had ridden up close to the nearest dead steer. On its shoulder was a spot about a foot square, where the hide had been stripped off.

“The dirty old pup!” wailed Moran. “He’s skinned out the brands. But that won’t help him. Everybody knows we brand on the left shoulder.”

“So does the Stumblin’ K,” said Roaring thoughtfully.

“Huh!” Moran stared at Roaring. “Is that so! I suppose that squirt of a kid will claim the carcasses, eh? Swear he owned ’em, eh? But you and Clayton saw ’em, Slim. You can swear they had Big 4’s, can’tcha?”

“Shore,” nodded Slim thoughtfully.

He remembered that he and Clayton had told Jimmy about it last night. Now he wished that he had kept his mouth shut.

“What are you thinkin’ about?” asked Moran.

Slim jerked slightly and adjusted his Stetson carefully.

“I was just thinkin’ how much gall some folks have.”

“Oh, Conley’s got plenty of it, Slim. He always did have. Well, what about it, Roarin’? Goin’ to arrest Conley?”

“When you swear out a warrant, Moran. Pers’nally, I don’t see anythin’ to arrest him for. Eight dead steers without any brands don’t mean nothin’ to me. Lotsa folks around here has white-faced cattle. If you swear out a warrant for Mose Conley, I can’t help servin’ it.”

“I can prove ownership of these dead steers.”

“You’ll have a hell of a time!”

“Maybe. Oh, let’s go to town. This makes me sore; but what I’d like to know is this: Why didn’t Conley cut the brands off before you and Clayton saw the animals?”

“That wouldn’t have been any revenge,” said Slim.

“No, that’s true. I’ve a notion to go over and have it out with Mose Conley right now.”

“Hop to it,” grinned Slim. “You can shore have my share of it. My gun and Mark’s gun are still there, so you might ask him for ’em.”

Moran spat out the stump of his cigar and picked up his reins.

“I reckon it can wait,” he said. “I’ll see him later.”

They rode back through the cut fence, instead of going down through Conley’s gate. They rode to Turquoise City.

Dawn and her father had been out to Hot Creek earlier in the morning, and they were just as surprized as the Big 4 men had been to find the brands skinned off.

“Mighty queer,” said Conley heavily. “I don’t understand it, Dawn.”

“No one would,” replied Dawn.

“The Big 4 is tryin’ hard to get me,” declared Conley.

He seemed years older today, and he mounted his horse with difficulty.

“Why don’t you sell out, Dad?” asked Dawn.

It was the first time she had ever suggested such a thing, and he looked queerly at her.

“I won’t be hounded out,” he said firmly. “I’ll never sell to the Big 4, Dawn.”

"Sell to some one else. It will give us enough to take us away from here, and we can start in a new country."

"Oh, I don't know. I feel old today; didn't sleep much last night. I kinda expected the sheriff out to get me, I guess. Don't know why he don't come. The Big 4 killed them steers, Dawn. They cut the fence and drove 'em down here. They want to railroad me out of the country.

"But I'm not goin'," he said, after a pause. "I never done anythin' wrong, and they can't take me. I'll shoot the first man that comes on my ranch."

"The first man might be a friend," said Dawn softly.

"I ain't got a friend. They're all ag'in' me, Dawn. They got Pete into a poker game and stole his money. They knocked him down after they robbed him, and now they'll try to hang him for killin' a thief. Well, they can come and get the old man any time they feel like it—but they'll know they've been to war."

They rode back to the house, where Dawn hitched a horse to the rickety old buggy and drove to town after groceries. She wanted to have a talk with Roaring Rigby about the dead steers and about her father. She knew her father meant what he had said about taking a shot at anybody who came after him.

Roaring was not at the office, but Wind River Jim was there. With him was Jeff Ryker, the attorney. They both knew about the dead steers and were waiting for Roaring to return and tell them the rest of the story.

Wind River told her that Roaring had ridden out to the Big 4 with Regan and Clayton the night before, and hadn't returned yet. Ryker was very pleasant. In fact he was so pleasant that Wind River snorted aloud.

Ryker did not know that Dawn's mother had told her; but he hoped his suit was being looked upon with favor. Neither of them mentioned the dead steers, but Wind River told her that Jimmy Moran's father was at the Big 4.

"He probably came back to try and buy your father out," said Ryker.

Dawn shook her head.

"He knows it's no use," she said. "Dad won't sell out to the Big 4. They've tried enough times."

"So I understand." Ryker rubbed his hands together, causing his celluloid cuffs to click. "Still," he said thoughtfully, "I think he'd be wise to sell the place. Cutter would pay a good price. In fact, I think he made your father an offer, Miss Dawn."

"I don't know," said Dawn. "Dad is queer about that old place. I wish he would sell. It isn't pleasant living the way we do. I know I'd be willing to sell out."

"How does your mother feel about it?"

"Mother doesn't seem to care; it isn't her nature."

They both knew what Dawn meant.

"With Peter in trouble, I don't think Dad would consider any offers," said Dawn.

"Yes, I understand that," said Ryker.

Dawn turned back to the door of the office.

"I believe I'll go out and have a talk with your father," decided Ryker.

Dawn shook her head quickly.

"I don't believe you better, Mr. Ryker. He said he'd kill the first man that comes on the ranch."

"But that is ridiculous, Miss Dawn!"

"Perhaps. But I wouldn't go out there to see how much truth there is in it, if I were you, Mr. Ryker."

Dawn left the office and went back up the street, while Wind River Jim leaned back in the old swivel chair and laughed at Ryker.

"That's a reg'lar family of home folks," laughed the deputy. "Girl sticks up two mad punchers with a shotgun and takes away their guns. Then the old gent declares war ag'in' the world. I only hope he don't decide to attack. As far as I'm concerned, he can jist set there on his porch until the stock rots off his Winchester. I've seen that old pelican throw lead from his old forty-five-seventy, and I don't want him to notch no sight on me."

"But that's a ridiculous situation," declared Ryker, waving his arms helplessly. "The man must be crazy."

"Put yourself in his place, Ryker. His son faces hangin'; they find a lot of Big 4 steers killed on his land, and they're goin' to try and git him for it. What would you do, eh? Wave your arms and talk about it bein' ridiculous? Huh! You make me sick!"

Ryker walked to the doorway and leaned a shoulder against the door-frame. Roaring Rigby, Franklyn Moran, Slim Regan and Hashknife Hartley were riding into the upper end of the street. Hartley and Regan rode in at the Black Horse Saloon hitch-rack, where they tied the three horses, while Moran and Regan came on down to the office. Moran shook hands with Ryker and Wind River Jim, and Ryker wanted to know all about the dead steers.

Moran told him exactly what they had found, and Ryker whistled softly.

"But you're going to have Conley arrested, are you not?" he asked.

"Haven't made up my mind."

"You should; he's out at his ranch, and he says he'll kill the first man that comes out there."

"Yeah? Well, I'll wait until somebody else takes the first chance."

Ryker grinned sourly as he walked away, going to the Black Horse Saloon. He found Hashknife and Regan at the bar. Regan invited him to have a drink; and he introduced Hashknife.

"Ryker is the prosecuting attorney," explained Regan.

"He's the jigger who proves they're guilty, whether they are or not, eh?" laughed Hashknife.

"Something like that," smiled Ryker, accepting the drink.

"You're not part of the law that's been ordered out of the county, are you?" asked Hashknife.

"Not yet. No, they're not on my trail, it seems."

Regan nudged Hashknife sharply. English Ed was coming up to them, and Regan didn't want any arguments started. The gambler looked sharply at Hashknife, when Regan introduced him.

"Holmes owns this place," explained Regan.

"Uh-huh. Quite a place you got, Holmes," observed Hashknife. "Lot nicer than bootleggin' hooch to the Flatheads, eh?"

Holmes started quickly, and for once he forgot to use his poker-face. But he recovered quickly and stared at Hashknife.

"I didn't quite get that," he said.

Hashknife looked at him keenly, his level gray eyes boring into the gambler's face.

"Mebby I'm mistaken," he said slowly. "There was a Holmes that bootlegged hooch to the Flatheads up in Montana a few years ago. He was a remittance man from Canada. Yeah, his name was Ed Holmes. I guess you're not the man."

"I know I'm not," denied Holmes. "I never was up in Montana. I'm not sure I got your name."

"Hartley. My friends call me Hashknife."

"I see, you're a stranger here. Going to stay long?"

"I dunno. I'll buy a drink."

"No; this is my treat," said the gambler, motioning the bartender. They drank a "good luck" to the house, and Holmes excused himself.

"Glad to see you any time," he told Hashknife. "Make this your headquarters."

"Thanks," grinned Hashknife; he watched the gambler cross the big room to a poker table.

"Jist how near right was you about that Flathead deal?" queried Regan.

Hashknife laughed, but did not reply.

"You are probably mistaken," said Ryker softly.

"Is that a legal opinion, or man to man?" asked Hashknife.

"Merely my opinion," said Ryker seriously. "Now, I'll buy."

Hashknife shook his head quickly.

"Nope, I've had enough, pardner. Knowin' when to quit is a failin' I've always had."

They left the bar and went to the sidewalk, where they met Kent Cutter and two of his men. Regan introduced Hashknife to them, and Cutter offered to buy a drink, but Hashknife and Slim declined. Not so Ryker. He went in with them, while Hashknife and Regan walked to the depot to see whether the train would be in on time.

The few drinks had made Ryker expansive. He wanted to tell Cutter what Hartley had said to English Ed, but English Ed joined them before Ryker had a chance to do much talking.

“Where did that fellow come from?” demanded English Ed.

“He brought Frank Moran from Sibley Junction,” explained Ryker. “His partner rented his horse to Moran, and the partner will be in on the train today.”

“Looks kinda forked,” observed Cutter indifferently.

“He is,” said English Ed. “That’s Hashknife Hartley. He’s a cattle detective.”

“Oh-ho-o-o!” grunted Cutter. “Association man, eh?”

Ryker grinned half-drunkenly.

“He knew you, didn’t he, Holmes?”

“That’s my business. You keep out of it.”

“That’s all right,” grinned Ryker.

“What’s he doin’ here?” wondered Cutter.

“Maybe Franklyn Moran knows.”

“There’s been no rustlin’ around here, Ed.”

“What about those dead steers at Conley’s?”

“Pshaw! They were killed yesterday. I think he just happened to come here. Mebby he—” Cutter hesitated— “Mebby he came here to investigate the killin’ of Joe Mallette.”

English Ed squinted at himself in the back-bar mirror.

“I don’t know who would hire him to investigate that.”

“Conley might,” suggested Ryker.

“That’s true enough,” agreed Cutter. “If Hartley is an Association detective, like you say, Ed, he’d have a slick way of comin’ into a place, wouldn’t he? Detectives don’t usually have a brass band and a lot of banners.”

“I suppose that’s true,” nodded the gambler.

Ryker laughed outright and reached for the bottle on the bar.

“I wonder if Hartley has seen Conley. The old man is out at his house with a Winchester in his hands, and he swears he’ll kill the first man that comes on the place.”

“How do you know?” demanded Cutter.

“His own daughter told me awhile ago.”

“Yeah, and he’ll do it, too,” said Cutter. “I’m shore glad I don’t owe him any visit.”

Mack Ort, one of English Ed’s gamblers, came up to the bar, nodding to the three men. Ort was a slim, dark-faced man of about thirty-five, reputed to be a gunman. Little was known of him in Turquoise City, except that he had cold, hard nerve, and very little sense of humor.

English Ed's other gunman was Keno Smiley, a tall, tow-headed person, with a huge nose and a long, lean jaw. It was rumored that Smiley had left the mining camps of the Cœur d'Alenes just two jumps ahead of a United States marshal; but this rumor had never been confirmed.

Smiley had been picking out a tune on the piano with his long, lean fingers, but now he sauntered up to the bar beside Ort.

"Who was that puncher with Regan, Mack?" he asked.

"I dunno," replied Ort. He turned to Cutter.

"Know who he is, Cutter?"

"That tall feller? Yea-a-ah. They tell me he's a detective from Northern Idaho, Mack."

Cutter seemed serious, but Smiley saw the grin on Ryker's lips. He flushed slightly.

"You tryin' to be funny, Cutter?" he asked.

"Not a bit, Keno. Go ask English Ed."

"Does English know him?" asked Ort.

"To his everlasting sorrow," grinned Ryker.

"What does he want here?" demanded Smiley.

"Give him enough time and he'll probably show you," said Ryker.

"Well, he's got nothin' on me," declared Smiley.

"Nor me," echoed Ort. "Let's all have a drink."

The train was late that afternoon. It had taken a long time to clear away the wreck. Hashknife was alone at the depot, when Sleepy climbed off the train, a wide grin on his face. He had Moran's two valises, but Moran had told Hashknife to leave them at the depot, because he and Regan were going back to the Big 4.

"I was sure glad to see this train pull in at Sibley," grinned Sleepy. "That bartender drove me wild. When he ran out of talk about himself, he read out loud from his book. Where's the horses?"

"Tied to a hitch-rack up the street, Sleepy."

"Uh-huh," Sleepy's blue eyes studied Hashknife seriously.

"How soon do we pull out, Hashknife?"

"Most any time, I reckon."

"Oh!" he exclaimed in surprise.

Sleepy was rather taken aback. Hashknife lighted a cigaret and sat down on the rear platform of the depot.

"Remember Ed Holmes, the remittance man, who bootlegged hooch to the Flatheads, Sleepy?" he asked.

"Holmes? Lemme see—Holmes. Remittance man, oh yeah."

"He's top hand in a big honkatonk here. Owns the place. I sprung the bootleg thing on him and he flinched; but he shook out of the loop pretty quick and denied

everythin'. I admitted I might be mistaken; but he knows I ain't, and he knows I know it. Got a few gunmen workin' for him. Somebody has scared the sheriff out of the country, and tried to scare the county judge, but he don't scare. Tin-horn gambler got shot by a half-breed a few days ago, but they got the breed. Old Man Moran owns the Big 4, and his wayward son is in love with this half-breed's sister. Yesterday they found eight Big 4 steers dead on this squaw-man's place, but before they got the sheriff out to see the evidence, somebody skinned out the brands. And that's about all there is, Sleepy."

Sleepy sighed deeply and rolled a cigaret.

"I'm shore glad," he said slowly. "I tell you I was scared there might be trouble over here, and that you'd get your long nose into it. Didja get the twenty-five from Moran?"

"Y'betcha."

Sleepy smoked slowly, eyeing the main street of Turquoise City.

"Didja meet young Moran?" he asked.

"Nope. Regan, the foreman of the Big 4, told me a lot about him. Wild young Irishman, I reckon. Busted with his father, they say. Took the money his mother left him and bought a ranch here. Too much liquor and cards have put him on the rocks, but he's still a wild go-devil. Sent word to his father to mind his own damn business.

"The sheriff is a character, Sleepy. You'll like him. He ain't got a brain in his head, and he's got a deputy that don't know there ever was a Civil War—and don't care. This sheriff was a deputy just long enough to learn how to pin his badge on right side up. There's nobody to show 'em what to do. I met the prosecuting attorney. Queer looking jigger, named Ryker. Wears celluloid cuffs and a collar two sizes too big. Ex-assayer. Still owns the assay office here.

"They tell me that the judge is an old-timer here. Lives alone, with a crippled Chinese cook. Square as a dollar, drinks like a fish and thinks the town needs cleanin'."

"What about this half-breed girl?" asked Sleepy.

Hashknife smiled softly over his cigaret.

"I haven't seen her, Sleepy. Regan says she's as pretty as a picture. She stuck Regan and one of the cowboys up with a shotgun and took away their guns last night."

"Um-m-m-m-ha-a-ah!" grunted Sleepy. "Beauty is as beauty does. I'll say she ain't no frail lily. And it's her brother they've got in jail, eh?"

"And the sheriff is also in love with her," smiled Hashknife. "I dunno how many others. And her old man sits on the porch with a great big .45-70 Winchester in his hands and swears he'll kill the first man that shows up on his land."

Sleepy stretched wearily and threw away his cigaret.

"I shore didn't sleep much last night. Every time I turned over I knocked the bartender out of bed, and every time he turned over he knocked me out. I ate more

cheese, crackers and salmon for supper, salmon, cheese and crackers for breakfast, and I ain't had no dinner today. Let's put on a feed-bag."

They went to a restaurant next door to the Black Horse Saloon, where they found Roaring Rigby and Wind River Jim, sitting at a table with Jimmy Moran. Roaring waved a fork at them, inviting them to sit at his table. He introduced Hashknife, after which Hashknife introduced Sleepy to all of them.

"This is Frank Moran's son," explained Roaring. "Owns the Stumblin' K, and is master of his own soul, ain'tcha, Jimmy?"

"To my own sorrow most of the time," grinned Jimmy. "Dad probably painted a scarlet picture of me, didn't he?"

"He said outside of bein' a proper damn fool, you was all right," replied Hashknife seriously.

"Well, that's kinda soft language for him," laughed Jimmy. "He hates me because I'm such a success. Right now I'm just one jump ahead of the sheriff. Ain't that right, Roarin'?"

"Yeah, that's right, Jimmy."

Jimmy was facing the door. Suddenly he slid away from the table, grabbed his hat from a nail on the wall and headed for the door. Roaring twisted his head around and looked toward the front window in time to see Dawn Conley ride past in the rickety old buggy. Jimmy was already outside.

"Bet she came back to see you, Roarin'," said Wind River. "She was at the office this mornin', and she told Ryker her old man was gunnin' for anybody that showed up on his ranch. I reckon she was a little nervous."

Wind River walked to the window and looked out, but he came right back, nodding his head.

"Her and Jimmy are in front of the office, talkin'."

Roaring was staring at his plate; his lips shut tightly. Hashknife watched the expression of his face, as he lifted his eyes slowly and cleared his throat.

"That's all right," he said, trying to make his tone indifferent. "They've prob'ly got things to talk about."

The men resumed their meal, but something had caused the conversation to lag. It was possibly ten minutes later when Jimmy came in. He sat down across the table from the sheriff, his elbows on the table, his chin in his hands.

"Roarin'," he said slowly, "Dawn wants to see you."

"To see me? What for, Jimmy?"

"It made me laugh," said Jimmy seriously. "You probably won't see anythin' funny about it. When Dad and Slim Regan left here this mornin', Dad got the idea of goin' to see Conley. I suppose he was goin' to tell Conley what he thought of him. Dad would, you know. He hasn't any sense of humor, I guess. And Slim's a sort of a fool,

too. He'd back any play that Dad started. So they went over to see Conley—or rather that seems to have been their idea. It—”

“Say!” blurted Roaring anxiously.

“Who got killed?”

“Oh, it wasn't that bad, Roarin'. They got in reach of Conley's Winchester, and Dad's horse got killed. He piled on behind Slim, and they high-tailed it for the ranch. Dawn has the idea that you might be able to do somethin'. Might go out and explain to the old man that—”

“Me? Me go out there and—and— yea-a-a-ah! Like hell!”

“Well, go down and talk with her, Roarin'. She's upset.”

“So was your pa,” grinned Wind River Jim.

“But I can't do a thing,” protested Roaring.

“Is the old man crazy?” asked Hashknife.

“He is not,” declared Jimmy. “He's mad. He thinks they're all pickin' on him. He hates Dad. He gave me orders to keep away. His son is in jail charged with murder and he thinks everybody is against him. And,” sighed Jimmy, “he may be right about it, at that.”

Roaring got heavily to his feet, yanked his Stetson down over his ears and went scuffling toward the door. Wind River Jim choked on his coffee and wiped the tears out of his eyes.

“He's a great sheriff, that feller,” said Wind River.

Roaring found Dawn waiting for him in front of the office. She looked searchingly at him and he grinned rather foolishly.

“You know what happened, don't you?” she asked.

“Y-yes, Jimmy told me. I dunno.” Roaring shoved his hat on the back of his head and rubbed his chin with the palm of his right hand. “I dunno what to do,” he said.

“I don't either,” she said. “Dad's stubborn. It will mean a killing, I'm afraid. But it was wrong for Slim Regan and Mr. Moran to come. Slim knew how Dad feels. Oh, it was lucky that only the horse was killed.”

“Lot of luck depends on your aim, when you shoot as well as your dad does, Dawn. Did he shoot more 'n once?”

“No, just once.”

“Makes it look better,” said Roaring, “but what can I do?”

“Can't you come out and have a talk with him?”

“And git my earthly envelope all gummed up?”

“I don't believe he—if he knew you were just coming to talk with him, he wouldn't harm you.”

“Talk to him about what, Dawn?”

“Oh, about everything. Try to make him understand. He’s bitter. Sometimes I think he’s losing his mind. He hasn’t hired a lawyer for Peter. I asked him why he don’t, and he says it’s no use. He says that the Big 4 and the Black Horse Saloon are running the country and that they’ll hang Peter in spite of any lawyer.”

“Pshaw, that ain’t no way to feel,” said Roaring slowly. “Old Judge Beal ain’t against your dad.”

“No, he’s honest. Dad knows he is; but Dad says they’ll kill him before the trial.”

“Uh-huh,” Roaring caressed his chin thoughtfully. “Well, I dunno; mebbey they will.”

“And what chance has an honest judge, if a crooked jury brings in a verdict of guilty?”

“Shore, that’s the worst of it. I tell you what you do. You tell your dad I’ll be out this evenin’, and we’ll see what we can figure out. Pers’nally, I think he had a right to hoodie Moran and Regan off the ranch. They had plenty of warnin’.”

“I’ll tell him,” said Dawn wearily. “He likes you. But I hope nobody else comes.”

“I hope to gosh he don’t mistake me for anybody else.”

Dawn climbed into the buggy, while Roaring untied the horse.

“Why did Jimmy Moran’s father come here?” she asked.

Roaring tied up the rope carefully, looked the patched harness over and stepped aside.

“Don’t you know?” she asked.

“You better ask Jimmy,” he said. “He knows more ’n I do about it.”

“Was it about me, Roaring?”

Roaring leaned back against a porchpost and looked at the horse.

“Don’t let that git you down,” he said softly. “Lotsa parents are like that; they prob’ly didn’t pick so well themselves and they want to try and help the kids.”

Dawn drove away from the hitch-rack, and Roaring watched until she disappeared. The men were coming from the restaurant, so he went to meet them. But he didn’t tell them that he was going out to talk with Moses Conley.

Hashknife and Sleepy got a room at the Turquoise Hotel and put their horses in the livery-stable. Jimmy Moran had taken a liking to them and had introduced them to every one they met.

It was about an hour after dark when Lovely Lucas came into the Ranger saloon, where Hashknife, Sleepy and Jimmy were playing seven-up, and announced that the Big 4 outfit had come to town in force.

“The whole works, I tell you,” declared Lovely. “Old Man Moran, Slim Regan, Clayton, Allard, Creswell and Pitts. They’re all in the Black Horse, except Slim. He went down to see the sheriff.”

The game broke up immediately, and the four men trailed up the street past the sheriff's office, where they found Wind River Jim alone.

"Yeah, it was about that shootin' today," said Wind River. "The whole Big 4 is b'ilin' mad. They hopped all over Roarin' when he said there wasn't anythin' to be done about it. He's over in the Black Horse, arguin' about it with 'em right now."

"Pretty sore, eh?" said Lovely.

"Right to a head."

Jimmy touched Hashknife on the arm.

"I'll see you later, Hartley," he said.

"Yeah, all right," replied Hashknife, and Jimmy hurried up the street.

They listened to Wind River Jim's opinion of the case, and then they moved over to the Black Horse. Lovely demurred about going in.

"I owe 'em forty dollars for busted glass," he said. "If I go in there I might have to kill somebody. You boys go ahead and hear what's bein' said."

Hashknife and Sleepy strolled in unnoticed. The Big 4 gang was at the bar with Roaring Rigby; Slim Regan seemed to have the floor.

"It jist means that there ain't no law here," decided Slim, "and when there ain't no law, it's up to the citizens to make a little."

"When you jiggers git through runnin' off at the neck, I'll speak my piece," said Roaring. "Through yet? Can't think of another thing to say? Fine. You've talked a lot and ain't said anything. In the first place, Old Man Conley owns that land. He's got it fenced. You know he fenced that to keep the Big 4 off his land. There's been bad blood between him and Frank Moran for twenty-five years. You and Moran both know that Conley said he'd shoot the first man to come on his place. And yet you went on, didn't you? Trespassed, didn't you?"

"Started over there with the intention of givin' him the devil over them steers. And all he done was to make good his promise. You got off easy. That old pelican can hit a gnat in the eye at fifty feet. All you lose is one horse. What you ought to do is to write him a letter tellin' him you're much obliged."

It was a long speech for Roaring Rigby.

"If Conley didn't have a pretty girl, you'd talk different," said one of the men farther back in the room.

Roaring whirled quickly, but he did not know who had made the remark.

"Will the dirty bum who made that remark say it once more?" he asked coldly.

But no one spoke. They knew the temper of that sad-eyed, bat-eared sheriff, whose shoulders hunched as his eyes swept the faces under the hanging lamps.

"Your arguments hardly do justice to your office," said Franklyn Moran. "We have demanded the arrest of Moses Conley on a charge of assault with a deadly weapon. I didn't know that this county paid you a salary as a debater."

"You've got all the argument you'll git from me," said Roaring.

He turned his back on them and stalked from the room. Several people laughed, but he did not turn his head. Nor did he hurry as he crossed the street. They could see him from the lighted windows, as he went slowly toward his office. But once inside that office he did not move so slowly. Wind River Jim stared at him, as he sprang to the gun-rack, grabbed down a rifle and a belt of ammunition.

"You stay here, Wind River," he ordered, and ran out through the back door.

Wind River walked to the front door, where he leaned out, chewing his tobacco violently. It was possibly five minutes later that Hank Pitts and Mark Clayton strolled past.

"Hyah, Wind River," greeted Hank. "Howsa job?"

"Swell, elegant, Hank; beats punchin' cows."

"I s'pose it does," agreed Hank. He craned his neck past Wind River and looked into the office.

"Roarin' ain't home, eh?"

"No-o-o-o, he ain't exactly home jist now; he's out."

"Where'd he go?"

"Well, he didn't leave no address," grinned Wind River. "Didn't say nothin' much. He ain't much of a hand to talk. Pers'nally I think he went huntin' bear."

"Bear!" blurted Clayton.

"Prob'ly." Wind River spat across the sidewalk. "Anyway, I'd say he was heeled for bear. Took a thirty-thirty and a full belt of shells along, and he went out that back door like somethin' was bitin' his heels."

"By golly, I told Slim!" snorted Pitts and, without waiting for any more information, they started on a run for the Black Horse Saloon.

"Well, that's shore queer," observed Wind River. "Jist like I'd touched a match to 'em."

Pitts and Clayton ran to the doorway of the saloon, where they met Regan and Moran, who were coming out.

"Gone!" exclaimed Pitts. "Took a thirty-thirty along. He's gone out to the Hot Creek ranch."

"Yeah, and we're goin' along," said Regan. "Get the boys."

Hashknife and Sleepy came out and Regan saw them.

"Want to ride out and see the fun, Hartley?" he asked.

"What fun?" asked Hashknife.

"Out at the Conley place. Old man's crazy. When we finish up tonight he'll be in jail and we'll strip every strand of wire off his fence. This half-witted sheriff has beat us to it, he thinks. But if he won't enforce the law, we'll have to. Better come along and see the fun."

Hashknife shook his head slowly.

"No-o-o-o, I reckon not, Regan. My sense of humor don't run to laughin' at folks who make mistakes."

"Well, he's made his last mistake," laughed Regan.

"I wasn't thinkin' about old man Conley," said Hashknife.

The men were mounting at the hitch-rack, and one of them called to Regan.

"I didn't quite get what you meant, Hartley," he said.

"Better think it over on your way out, Regan."

Regan turned and went to the rack.

"Thank the Lord it's none of our business," said Sleepy, as the men rode away.

"Don't lie," cautioned Hashknife. "Your knees itch for the feel of a saddle right now. You're dyin' to ride with 'em, and you know it."

"So are you, Hashknife."

"I didn't thank the Lord for anythin', did I? Let's play three games of pool and then go to bed. I'm tired."

"Will we play in here?"

"Nope, down at the Ranger. This Black Horse ain't safe."

Jimmy Moran lost no time in leaving Turquoise City. He knew the temper of the men from the Big 4, and that they would take the matter in their own hands if his father was willing.

If his father had led them to town to talk with the sheriff, it was a sure thing that the Big 4 intended to do something. Jimmy realized that their intentions might be merely to capture Conley and put him in jail; but the capture might result in bloodshed. Conley was a fighter.

Jimmy intended to ride to the Hot Creek ranch, warn Conley and give him plenty of time to get away. He felt sure that Conley would be sensible enough to hide out until the wrath of the Big 4 cooled off a little.

He ran his horse all the way to the ford and found that the fence had not been repaired; so, instead of going around the road, he cut across the ranch. He wanted all the time he could get to present his argument to Conley. He would invite Conley to come to the Stumbling K. That would be the last place they would ever look for him.

There was no moon, but Jimmy was familiar with the lay of the land. He thought at first that the ranch-house was in darkness, but a thin thread of light peeped out from beside a curtain.

Jimmy dismounted a hundred feet away from the house and dropped his reins. It was ticklish business, he decided. He did not know that Conley was expecting Roaring Rigby. Jimmy sneaked in like an Indian; he meant to announce himself to Conley from a safe position.

A huge wild-rose bush grew at one corner of the porch, and just to the left of the corner of the house grew a twisted cottonwood that nearly covered the side of the house. There was a window just beyond the cottonwood, almost hidden behind the

tangle of foliage. Jimmy sneaked in close to the cottonwood and picked up a handful of small pebbles, which he flung against the window with considerable force. For several moments there was no sound. Then came Conley's voice, muffled—

"Who's there?"

"Jimmy Moran," called Jimmy. "I've got to talk with you, Mr. Conley; and we better make it fast, too."

Conley did not reply. Jimmy waited, wondering what Conley was going to do. He thought he could hear the sound of a running horse. From where Jimmy crouched he could not see the doorway, but he did see the lamplight streak across the corner of the porch when the door opened.

The galloping horse was closer now. As Jimmy turned his head, looking down the stretch of road which led to the gate, a gun-shot crashed out so close to him that he sprang back, throwing up one arm, as if to protect his eyes. There was the dull thud of a falling body; a woman screamed.

Jimmy sprang forward, drawing his gun. He thought he saw a man just beyond the rose bush and instinctively he fired his gun at whatever it was. Then he stumbled across the porch and found himself looking down at Moses Conley, who was stretched full length on the porch.

The door was open behind him, the lamplight falling full on Jimmy, and he saw Dawn, white-faced, staring at him. The horse jerked to a stop behind him, but Jimmy did not turn until Roaring Rigby stepped in behind him, putting his hand on Jimmy's shoulder. Dawn came closer, and her eyes were wide with horror. Roaring shook Jimmy slightly.

"How did it happen, Jimmy?" he asked huskily.

Jimmy shook his head.

"I don't know," he said. "I—I—"

He saw Dawn's staring eyes. Roaring was taking the gun away from him. Jimmy stepped back.

"You think I shot him?" he asked hoarsely.

"He told you to keep away, you know," said Roaring sadly. "Don't try to run away, Jimmy. Help me take him inside."

"Run away?" Jimmy's voice was strained. "Oh, my God!"

Together they carried Moses Conley into the living-room and laid him out on the floor. Dawn dropped to her knees beside him.

"He isn't dead!" she exclaimed. "Somebody get the doctor—quick!"

"Floor no good," grunted Mrs. Conley. "Put on bed."

No one had noticed her before. They placed him on a bed.

"I better go for the doctor," said Jimmy anxiously.

Roaring looked at Jimmy and shook his head slowly.

“Better wait, Jimmy; we’ll go together.”

“You mean I’m under arrest?”

“Somethin’ like that, Jimmy. Good Lord, I’m sorry. I—”

Roaring took Jimmy’s gun from inside his belt and examined the cylinder. One chamber was empty, and the barrel smelled strongly of burned powder.

Roaring turned to Dawn and put a hand on her shoulder.

“Tell me what happened,” he said.

“Oh, I don’t know. Dad was expecting you. Some one threw something against a window, and Dad asked who it was. I—I heard Jimmy answer. He told who he was. I don’t think Dad wanted to open the door, but I—oh, I asked him to. And when he opened the door—”

“Yeah,” said Roaring miserably. “He wasn’t armed either.”

“Yes, he was,” said Dawn. “I—I think his gun flew out of his hand. There were two shots fired.”

“I shot one of ’em,” said Jimmy quickly. “I thought I saw somebody.”

“Somebody come,” said Mrs. Conley.

The front door was wide open, and when they looked out the yard was full of men and horses. Roaring met them at the doorway.

“Smart, eh?” growled Regan. “Sneaked out on us, eh? Where’s old Moses Conley?”

“Don’t yell,” said Roaring. “Send one of your men after the doctor; Moses Conley has been shot.”

Franklyn Moran crowded in past Roaring and met Jimmy face to face.

“What are you doing here, Jimmy?” he asked harshly.

Jimmy’s lips were tightly shut and his face seemed pale in the yellow light.

“You let him alone,” said Roaring. “He’s my prisoner.”

“Your prisoner?” Franklyn Moran’s eyes opened wide. “What do you mean, Rigby?”

“Will one of your men go after the doctor?” asked Roaring. “If we don’t git medical help it might mean murder.”

“Do you mean to say that my son shot Moses Conley?”

“Mark,” said Regan, “you and Hank go and get Doc Shelley. Tell him to come as fast as he can.”

Franklyn Moran went to Roaring and grasped him by the arm, repeating his question.

“Oh, hell, don’t paw me!” growled Roaring. “What if he did? You led your men out here to do the same thing.”

Franklyn Moran turned and looked at his men. None of them met his gaze.

"I'm not goin' to run away," said Jimmy. "See if you can't do somethin' for the old man before the doctor gets here. If you can't, I can. I know something about first aid."

"Hop to it," said Roaring.

Jimmy started to go into the bedroom but Dawn stepped in front of him.

"Mother knows what to do," she said evenly.

Jimmy stared at her and his face twisted painfully.

"Can't I help her, Dawn?" he asked.

"I'm helping her," she said and turned away.

Jimmy walked across the room and stared out through the branch-covered window against which he had thrown the gravel. The men were silent. Some of them rolled smokes, but went out on the porch to light them. They could hear the drip of water, as the old Indian woman squeezed out a towel; they heard a whispered conversation between Dawn and her mother.

Roaring went outside and hunted in the grass just off the porch, where he found Moses Conley's revolver. It was an old, single-action Colt .45, and in one of the cylinders was an empty cartridge. He brought it into the house to examine it. Franklyn Moran saw the empty shell.

"How many shots were fired?" he asked softly.

"Two," said Roaring. "I heard 'em both. There's a chance for him to prove self-defense. Moran must have fired first."

"That's good," whispered Moran. "I'm glad there's a chance."

"Oh, as far as that's concerned, Conley was lookin' for it," said Regan coldly. "A Black Horse jury will look at it right."

"Oh, damn you all!" gritted Jimmy. "That's all you think about! Beatin' the law. Damn you and your Black Horse juries! I never shot Conley."

"That's all right, Jimmy," said Roaring. "Don't yell."

"Why would I?" Jimmy turned appealingly to them. "Don't you understand? I—I—" he choked—"I'm goin' to marry Dawn, if she'll marry me. Would I harm her father?"

"Any man will shoot in self-defense," said Regan.

Jimmy groaned and turned away. Roaring went into the bedroom, and Jimmy saw Bill Creswell signal him cautiously to make a getaway, indicating that there was plenty of room to pass between him and the door. Jimmy liked Creswell and he realized that Bill meant it all for the best. But Jimmy shook his head firmly and turned back to the window. Creswell shrugged his shoulders. When Jimmy looked back at Creswell, he pantomimed that Jimmy could take his gun, as he went out. Perhaps he thought that Jimmy didn't want to go unarmed. But Jimmy declined, and Creswell sighed deeply. He had done the best he could for a friend.

It seemed ages to Jimmy before the doctor arrived, but in reality Hank Pitts and Mark Clayton had broken all speed records in getting old Doctor Shelley from

Turquoise City to the ranch. They had taken him through the ford so fast that all three of them were drenched, and the old doctor was as mad as a hornet.

Roaring went into the bedroom with him while he made an examination and, in a few minutes, Roaring came back to the men, advising them all to go home.

"The doctor says he's got a slim chance," said Roaring.

"That bullet missed his heart about three inches."

He turned to Jimmy Moran.

"Where's your bronc, Jimmy?"

Jimmy told him where he had left it, and Roaring sent one of the Big 4 cowboys to git it. Franklyn Moran went up to the sheriff.

"You going to put him in jail?" he asked.

Roaring cuffed his hat on the side of his head and looked quizzically at Moran. "What do you think?" he asked. "Ain't there a law ag'in callin' men to their own door at night and shootin' 'em down?"

"But—but if Conley shot at him?" spluttered Moran.

"Jimmy ain't claimed that he did, has he?"

Moran turned to his son.

"He did, didn't he, Jimmy?" anxiously.

"No," replied Jimmy wearily. "He didn't even see me."

"Don't be a fool," growled Regan angrily.

"That's enough," said Roaring firmly. "The doctor don't need you, and I'm sure I don't, so you might as well go home. C'mon, Jimmy."

Hashknife and Sleepy knew nothing about the shooting until the next morning, when they found Roaring Rigby and several men in the restaurant, eating breakfast. The Black Horse had had a big play, and two of the dealers, Mack Ort and Keno Smiley, were eating breakfast before going to bed. Lovely Lucas was there, still half-drunk and inclined to be a bit belligerent.

As Hashknife and Sleepy came in, Lovely was at the height of an impassioned defense of Jimmy Moran. It did not take long for Hashknife and Sleepy to gather the gist of what had happened at the Hot Creek ranch. Ort and Smiley eyed Hashknife coldly, and it was evident to him that English Ed had told them who he was.

"I been wonderin' where you boys were," said Roaring. He turned to Lovely Lucas. "If you don't shut up, I'll put you in jail, Lucas," he declared.

"By golly, I'll be with honest men, if you do. Jimmy Moran never shot Old Man Conley. Why, I tell you, he was aimin' to marry Dawn Conley. He wouldn't shoot his father-in-law."

"A-a-aw, what can you do?" wailed Roaring. "To hell with this kind of a job! Business is too good. Set down, boys. I'm glad there's somebody around here that ain't got no opinion. Ask me all the questions you like, but don't offer any advice."

"This is a free country, ain't it?" demanded Lovely. "I ask you if it ain't. You can't put a man in jail for talkin', can you, Roarin'? You can't—"

"Men have been put in the graveyard for talkin'," said Roaring seriously.

"Is that so? Huh!" Lovely got to his feet. "I'm goin' home and tell Horse-Collar Fields about Jimmy. Horse-Collar gits some awful good ideas. Jimmy's our boss, you know. Oh, I'll be back, Roarin'. All hell can't stop me, I'll tell you that."

Lovely went weaving toward the door, slammed it behind him and headed for the hitch-rack. Ort and Smiley paid for their breakfast and went out. Sleepy grinned widely. He could understand Lovely Lucas.

"Just what happened out there last night?" asked Hashknife.

Roaring placed his knife and fork carefully on his plate and told Hashknife just what he knew about it. Roaring wasn't sure about the two shots being fired, but he thought that he had heard two. He was riding pretty fast; but there was no doubt that two shots had been fired. Jimmy admitted that there had been, and Dawn spoke of the two shots.

"Jimmy was a fool," declared Roaring.

"He knew what would happen."

"You say Jimmy threw somethin' against the window to attract Conley, and then called to Conley, telling him that it was Jimmy Moran outside?"

"That's what Dawn said; Jimmy didn't deny it."

"And when Conley came to the door he took a shot at Jimmy and Jimmy shot him."

"Looks thataway. Conley must have shot first. I don't think he could have fired after Jimmy shot him, unless he happened to have the gun cocked and it went off as he was fallin'."

"How long was it between the shots?"

"I dunno how long; I didn't ask. I'm goin' out there in a little while. Why don't you ride out with me?"

Sleepy groaned when Hashknife assented.

"What's the matter with you," asked Roaring.

"Somethin' you can't prescribe for," grunted Sleepy.

"He groans thataway often," said Hashknife seriously. "It sounds like he was in pain, but he ain't; it's a joy-groan."

Anyway, Sleepy went along. They found Franklyn Moran, Slim Regan, Kent Cutter and Henry Miller on the porch. The doctor was still there. He had been there all night.

These four men had been waiting for him to report Conley's condition, which he did shortly after the others arrived. Conley was still alive, but unconscious. And that was about all there was to report; so the men from the Big 4 and the 7AL went to town.

Dawn heard Roaring talking with the doctor and she came out to the porch. It was the first time Hashknife and Sleepy had seen her. She had spent a sleepless night, but in spite of that she was a very pretty girl. Roaring introduced them, and left her with Hashknife and Sleepy while he went in to see the patient.

"You weren't out here last night, were you?" she asked.

Hashknife shook his head.

"We're strangers, Miss Conley."

"I know. I heard your name mentioned. Mr. Moran and Mr. Cutter were talking about you a while ago."

"That so?" smiled Hashknife. "What about?"

"I just heard a little of it. Cutter said he heard you were a cattle detective. Moran said he didn't know anything about you. Regan laughed and said you accused English Ed Holmes of being a former bootlegger to the Indians."

"That last part is true enough," nodded Hashknife. "Do you know Holmes very well?"

"Not very well."

"His outfit is responsible for your brother bein' in jail, I understand."

"They cheated Peter," she said quickly.

"Yeah, I know. Miss Conley, what is your honest opinion of what happened last night? Did Jimmy Moran shoot your father?"

Dawn turned and walked to the railing of the porch; she leaned a shoulder against a post.

"I didn't mean to hurt you," said Hashknife kindly.

"Oh, I know," she said softly. "I don't want to answer that question."

"All right, this one is different. Did you hear two shots?"

"Yes."

"How far apart?"

"Possibly—oh, I don't know."

"Right together?"

"Oh, no. There was one shot just after Dad opened the door. I—I think I ran almost across the room before the other one was fired."

"Did your father shoot the first one?"

"I don't know. Just after the last shot was fired I got to the door, and there stood Jimmy with a gun in his hand. And then Roaring Rigby was on the porch, taking Jimmy's gun away from him."

"Uh-huh. What did Jimmy say?"

"He said he didn't know what happened."

"Didn't know, eh?"

“And then they brought Dad into the house. Roaring looked at Jimmy’s gun and asked me what happened. I told about the two shots being fired, and Jimmy said he shot one of them. He said he shot at somebody.”

“Admitted shooting, eh? Miss Conley, is there any reason for Jimmy to have shot your father?”

Dawn turned from the post and came back to Hashknife.

“Dad told him to keep away,” she said wearily. “He hates Jimmy’s father.”

“I know. You heard Jimmy call to your father and tell him who was out there?”

“Yes, I think Jimmy threw some gravel against the window to attract us. Then when Dad asked who it was, Jimmy told him.”

“Was your father mad when he went to the door?”

Dawn flushed a little.

“I think he was, Mr. Hartley. He was expecting the sheriff to come out here.”

“Was he goin’ to shoot the sheriff?”

“Oh, no; they were just going to talk things over. You heard about the dead steers, didn’t you?”

“Saw ’em; I was with Moran when the Big 4 found that the brands had been skinned out.”

“The Big 4 did that themselves.”

“Skinned out the brands?”

“No, cut the fence and killed their own steers. They hate Dad for fencing in Hot Creek, and they want to ruin him.”

“Moran wants to buy this place, don’t he?”

“Yes, he has made Dad a good offer. The 7AL wants it, too.”

“Yeah? That’s Cutter’s outfit, ain’t it?”

“Yes, but Dad won’t sell to the Big 4.”

“I see. Miss Conley, I’m goin’ to get personal.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m goin’ to ask questions that you might not care to answer; but I want you to understand that it ain’t because I want to embarrass you in any way. Did Ed Holmes ever come to see you?”

Dawn flushed, but smiled at Hashknife.

“Once, I think. I wasn’t home.”

“Any of the Big 4 boys?”

“I should say not!” said Dawn emphatically.

“Cutter?”

Dawn smiled.

“Oh, he has been out here. Perhaps he came to see me.”

“The sheriff?”

Dawn sobered quickly and glanced toward the closed door.

"You don't need to answer that," said Hashknife softly. "He's all right."

"Yes; he's all right," said Dawn. "But what's the use of these questions, Mr. Hartley?"

"Were there any others?" queried Hashknife. "Honest, I want to know."

Dawn bit her lip reflectively.

"Well, there was Jeff Ryker."

"The prosecuting attorney?"

"Yes."

"Since your brother has been in jail?"

"Yes."

Hashknife took a deep breath and his wide lips twisted in a faint smile. Ryker was the man with the big collar and the celluloid cuffs.

"Did you talk with him?" he asked.

Dawn shook her head quickly.

"I stayed in the house," she smiled. "He talked to my mother."

"And you heard what he said?"

"Some of it."

"Uh-huh," Hashknife took a deep breath. "Did he say anything about—uh—goin' easy on your brother?"

Dawn flashed Hashknife a quick glance of interrogation.

"How did you know that?" she asked wonderingly.

"Guessed it. He could go easy at the trial, you know, and he might make promises to your mother. Does your father like him?"

"No, I don't think he does. Dad doesn't like many folks."

"Is the judge a friend of your father?"

"Judge Beal—I think Dad likes him."

"Miss Conley, how long has the Big 4 been tryin' to buy your dad out?"

"For about two years."

"Ever since he fenced Hot Creek?"

"Yes."

"How long has the 7AL wanted it?"

Dawn frowned thoughtfully.

"Oh, I think it was about three or four months ago that Mr. Cutter made his first offer. After that Jeff Ryker came out and talked with Dad about selling out."

"What did Ryker want with it?"

"He was trying to buy it for Cutter."

"Oh, I see; he was Cutter's agent."

Roaring and the doctor came from the living-room.

"You better lie down awhile and get some sleep, Miss Conley," said the old doctor kindly. "There isn't anything you can do. The sheriff is going to send some of my things out for me; so I'll stay on the job."

"Didja get the bullet?" asked Hashknife.

"It went all the way through," said Roaring. He took the bullet from his pocket and gave it to Hashknife. "We found it on the floor in there."

The piece of lead was slightly battered, but not too much so to prove the caliber.

"Forty-five," said Hashknife.

Roaring nodded and put the bullet back in his pocket.

"We're goin' back, Dawn," he said. "Is there anythin' you need out here? No, don't bother about it now. I'll send Wind River Jim out with the doctor's stuff, and he can find out what you need."

"That's mighty nice of you," said Dawn.

"Pshaw!" Roaring cuffed his hat over one ear. "I wish I knowed what to do. Tomorrow is Sunday and the next day court starts. I dunno what cases are ahead of Pete's. Your dad never hired no lawyer for Pete, did he? Thought he didn't. I'll have a talk with the judge. He'll know what to do. Well, so long."

Hashknife held out his hand to Dawn; she shook hands with him.

For a long while after the men had left the ranch Dawn wondered why Hashknife had asked all those questions. Why would an absolute stranger quiz her like that, she wondered? What was behind those level gray eyes, and that smile that seemed to drive her sorrows away for a moment? She was so sleepy and weary that she could hardly remember just what he looked like; but she remembered his eyes. And he seemed just an ordinary cowboy; the other man seemed to be one continuous grin and blue eyes.

Her mother, wearied from the all-night vigil, came out to her on the porch and they sat down together.

"Mose pretty bad hurt," she said dully. "He talk long time ago. Long time ago he friend to Frank Moran."

"I know," said Dawn.

"Two strange men come," said Mrs. Conley.

"With the sheriff," said Dawn.

"What they want?"

Dawn shook her head slowly.

"I don't know, mother. I think they want to find out who shot Dad."

"Easy find out, Dawn. Everybody know."

"I suppose."

"Funny life," said the old Indian woman. "Frank Moran hate Mose Conley; Mose Conley hate Frank Moran. Now both have son in jail for same thing."

"I told that man what Ryker said to you, mother?"

Mrs. Conley looked curiously at Dawn.

"I told him that Ryker came to see me and talked with you," said Dawn. "This man knew what Ryker said."

"You tell him what Ryker say about turn Pete loose if you marry him?"

"I didn't tell him all about it; he seemed to know."

"Ryker tell him, Dawn?"

"No."

Dawn got to her feet and looked down the road. Some one was riding up along the road. It was Ryker. Dawn knew who it was as soon as she saw him, even at that distance.

"Ryker is coming now," she said. "I won't talk to him."

"I talk to him," said her mother, and Dawn went into the house.

The prosecuting attorney guided his horse up to the porch and smiled a greeting to Mrs. Conley, who gave a short nod of her head in acknowledgment. He dismounted and came to the corner of the porch. Perhaps he wasn't exactly sure of his reception.

"I heard about the trouble," he told her.

"Pretty damn bad," she said inelegantly.

Ryker mopped his brow with a clean handkerchief and came up on the porch.

"Met the sheriff and two men," he said jerkily. "Out here, wasn't they?"

Mrs. Conley nodded. Ryker cleared his throat harshly.

"I thought so. Know who those two men are?"

"Pretty smart," she said. "Tall man tell Dawn what you tell me."

"Eh?" Ryker blinked rapidly. "What do you mean?"

"Tall man tell Dawn you turn Peter loose if she marry you."

"The tall man said!" Ryker stopped, staring at her. "Who told you this, Mrs. Conley?"

"Dawn tell me."

"Who told the tall man?"

"Nobody."

Ryker scowled heavily at the Indian woman.

"You told him," he declared.

"You lie. I never talk to man."

"You told Dawn and she told him."

"Nother lie. He tell Dawn. Pretty damn smart."

"Too damn smart," growled Ryker. "What did Dawn say when you told her?"

"I can answer that, Mr. Ryker."

The prosecuting attorney turned quickly to see Dawn in the doorway.

"Why!" he began breathlessly.

"I heard what was said," continued Dawn. "The other time you were here I heard what you said, Mr. Ryker. Are you the law?"

"The law?" faltered Ryker.

"Yes, the law. They say Peter may hang for the murder of Mallette. Can you trade Peter's life for a marriage? Is that what the law is for—trade goods?"

Ryker flushed angrily.

"You don't understand," he said huskily. "It isn't a case of trading, Dawn. I—I want you."

"And I don't want you," she said evenly. "Go home."

"Oh, all right," Ryker turned angrily and walked to his horse. He started to get on, but hesitated and turned to Dawn. "I suppose you know your father hasn't hired a lawyer to defend Pete. The trial starts Monday."

He mounted and rode away, cursing his own luck and wondering how Hashknife Hartley knew about the proposition he had made to Mrs. Conley. English Ed had said that Hartley was a dangerous man, and Ryker was inclined to believe him.

Hashknife and Sleepy rode back to Turquoise City with the sheriff. They had not met Ryker, for the simple reason that Ryker had seen them coming and had avoided the meeting. They went to the sheriff's office, where several men had gathered with Wind River Jim, waiting for word of Conley's condition. They went away after the sheriff had reported no change in the patient, and the four men sat down in the office.

"Pete and Jimmy shore ain't lost no appetite," laughed Wind River. "I shore packed plenty ham and eggs."

"What did Pete say about his father?" asked Roaring.

"He didn't say much. I saw Judge Beal this mornin'. He was cold sober, too. Looked awful white and was kinda shaky, but he stopped long enough to ask about things. He ain't been out of his own house for several days, and I'll bet he's been on a big drunk."

"Gettin' ready for the openin' of court," said Roaring.

"What's your private opinion of those warnings?" asked Hashknife.

"Search me. They scared Jim Randall out of his job. They sent the old judge two. The last one was the day before Mallette was killed. Mebbe it was the same day. Anyway, it was their final warnin'—and the judge ignored it."

"And he's still alive," smiled Hashknife. "It proves that the gang are four-flushers."

"Yeah, it looks that way," admitted Roaring. "But he's been stayin' in the house pretty close."

Lovely Lucas was as good as his word. He came back to Turquoise City with Horse-Collar Fields, who came willingly. It was not often that Horse-Collar left the Stumbling K. He was a small, thin person, about fifty years of age, as bald as the proverbial billiard-ball. He had a slight cast in his left eye. He did the cooking for the Stumbling K.

Just now he wore a pair of misfit chaps. They belonged to Wind River Jim, whose waist measure was several inches larger than that which Horse-Collar boasted. He also wore a cartridge-belt and a holstered gun. Lovely led the way to the Ranger Saloon, with Horse-Collar swaggering along behind him.

"Hello, Horse-Collar," grinned the bartender, a short, fat person, with a moonlike face and a damp curl of hair gracing his expansive brow.

"Boy, howdy," said Horse-Collar seriously. "How's chances to git drunk?"

"Best you ever seen. Ain't seen you in a long time."

"No, and you wouldn't see me now, if it wasn't that I'm needed here. Cities don't appeal to me. I jist feel all cramped up in a city. What'll you have, Lovely?"

"Some of that there corrosive sublimate which is designated as liquor. But before we salivate our lungs, liver and lights, I want to explain to you ag'in, for about the seventh time, Horse-Collar—we ain't goin' to git drunk."

"And for seven times I replies to same," said Horse-Collar. "When I takes the law in my two hands, I'm goin' to have m' stummick in shape to handle m' brains. Gimme that bottle!"

"You takin' the law?" asked the bartender.

Horse-Collar cocked one eye wisely, as he poured out a big drink.

"Right by the slack of the pants," he declared. "They've got Jimmy Moran in jail, ain't they? Here's how. Well, well, well! 'F here ain't one of them officers of the law!"

Wind River Jim had come in and was standing near the bar, considering them gravely.

"What about Jimmy Moran bein' in jail?" asked Wind River.

"That's what we're here to find out," grunted Lovely.

"Grab a glass," invited Horse-Collar.

"I'm purchasin'."

"I hadn't ort to," said Wind River sadly. "I'm deputy sheriff, you know."

"What difference does that make?"

"Well, I might gargle one with you, boys." But they didn't stop at one drink.

Lovely bought the next one, the bartender stood a treat and then it was Wind River's turn. By this time Horse-Collar was in the right mood to buy again, which caused the others to treat in turn. Eight drinks of Ranger whisky were guaranteed to either bring out all the latent forces within a human being, or to put him flat on his back.

Horse-Collar surveyed the world through rose-colored glasses; he essayed a song.

"Don't shing," advised Lovely.

"Tha's the worsht of friends," sighed Horse-Collar. "They try to run your business. What'll you do if I try to shing?"

"I'm shorry, but if you shing I mus' has'en your demise. Know what a demise is, Horsh-Collar? Tha's the end of you."

"Whish end?"

"Now, don' drink no more, Horsh-Collar. Ain't that verdict, Wind River? Horsh-Collar mus' not drink no more. We've got p'tic'lar work to do. Win' River's goin' help us, Horsh-Collar. We're goin' down and deman' releash of Jimmy. Whoo-ee-e-e!"

Lovely cuffed his hat off his head and laughed deliriously.

"Thish is a lovely day," he declared. "Win' River Jim, yo're triplets! H'rah, f'r your fambly. Let's go up to the s'preme palace of vice and visit our old friend English Ed."

"He—he'll mashacree you," choked Wind River.

Horse-Collar shook his head so violently that he fell against the bar and sat down heavily on the bar-rail.

"Havin' a chill?" queried Lovely. "My Lord, you shore can shake. Havin' fits, Horsh-Collar?"

"Ain't nobody goin' mashacree nobody," declared Horse-Collar. "Let's go and fin' Jimmy. Poor old Jimmy. Oh, poor old Jimmy!"

"Can yuh beat that?" demanded Lovely. "Cryin'!"

"Git up," begged Wind River. "You make me shick. Let's have one more drink, and then we'll go down and have it out with Roarin' Rigby. C'mon, Horsh-Collar. A-a-a-aw, dry up!"

"You fellers start monkeyin' with the law, and you'll get hurt," said the bartender.

"Will, eh?" grunted Wind River. "Well, I'm about half of the law around here, and I know what I can do."

Hashknife and Sleepy came from the restaurant near the Black Horse Saloon and saw Franklyn Moran and English Ed, sitting together in a buggy, the team of which was tied to the Black Horse hitch-rack.

Moran called to Hashknife, who went over to them. Sleepy sat down on the edge of the sidewalk and rolled a smoke.

"You've met Holmes, haven't you, Hartley?" asked Moran.

Hashknife nodded quickly. Holmes laughed shortly.

"Yes, we've met before, Moran. Hartley recognized me. He's got a good memory, it seems."

Hashknife studied the gambler. It seemed rather odd that the man was admitting all this, and Hashknife wondered what his reason might be.

"I'm putting my cards on the table, Hartley," said Holmes. "I knew you. At first you had me puzzled, but I remembered."

"And then what?" asked Hashknife coldly.

"I've been telling Moran about you, Hartley. I've got nothing to conceal. I'm just as anxious to have things cleared up as he is. You heard about the warnings sent to Jim Randall and Judge Beal? Well, I didn't send 'em."

"No?" Hashknife smiled curiously. "Why tell me, Holmes?"

"Because I know you are not here for your health."

"That's true; my health never worries me."

English Ed shook his head.

"Still suspicious, eh? Don't blame you. Do you believe Jimmy Moran shot Moses Conley?"

"Don't you?"

"I'd like your opinion."

"Haven't any. None of my business, Holmes. Must have been enough evidence to satisfy the sheriff."

"It's not hard to satisfy a sheriff," said Moran slowly. "Holmes tells me that you have cleared up a lot of hard cases, Hartley. I didn't know I was hiring a horse from a detective when I met you at Sibley Junction. I hired your horse and now I'd like to hire you. How about it?"

"I'm more or less of a cowpuncher," said Hashknife. "I'm not a detective, Moran. Never pretended to be one."

"Will you take this case?"

"What case?"

"Jimmy's case."

"Oh, yeah, Jimmy's case. You mean—to try and prove he didn't shoot Conley?"

"If it's possible—yes, I'll pay well." Hashknife shook his head quickly.

"You've got the wrong dope on me, Moran. My skin is worth quite a lot to me. Even if I was able to solve a mystery, I'd have no chance here. Somebody would fill me full of lead before I got started."

English Ed laughed shortly.

"Which proves that you don't think Jimmy is guilty. If he was, why would you be afraid of getting shot?"

Hashknife shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't think Jimmy killed those Big 4 steers at Hot Creek, do you?"

"I don't know anything about it," said Holmes flatly.

"Somebody does," smiled Hashknife. "Nope, I don't want any finger in this pie; I might get it hurt."

He nodded and turned back to Sleepy, who joined him. They saw Wind River Jim, Lovely Lucas and Horse-Collar Fields coming from the Ranger Saloon, and the sidewalk was not wide enough for them to walk in single file.

"What did they want?" asked Sleepy.

“Wanted me to clear Jimmy Moran. English Ed had filled Moran up with a lot of stuff. I wouldn’t trust Holmes as far as I could throw a prize bull by the tail.”

“You didn’t take the case, did you, Hashknife?”

“Not so much you’d notice it.”

“Boy, howdy! Now we can high-tail out of here, eh?”

“Mm-m-m-m. Let’s go down and see how Roarin’ is gettin’ along.”

They found Roaring Rigby sitting on the edge of the cot that he had moved into the office. His eyes were blurred with sleep, but he grinned a welcome.

“Took a little shut-eye,” he said. “Fixed me up pretty good, too. Ho-o-o-o-hum-m-m-m-m! Gosh, I shore was sleepy! What’s new in the world?”

“Nothin’ much,” replied Hashknife. “Roarin’, what kind of a gun did Jimmy Moran use?”

Roaring yawned heavily.

“Colt. I’ve got it here.”

He went to his desk, sat down heavily and opened one of the drawers. There were three guns in the drawer, and he placed them side by side on the desk top.

“This is Jimmy’s,” he said. “The middle one belongs to Moses Conley and the other is the one Pete killed Mallette with.”

Hashknife examined Jimmy’s gun. The hammer was still down on the exploded shell. It was a .45 caliber. He picked up Pete’s gun, a .45, single-action Colt. It was fully loaded and fairly clean.

“He had plenty of time to reload and clean it,” said the sheriff.

Hashknife nodded and put the gun back on the desk.

“There wasn’t any bullet in Mallette, eh?”

“Nope; went plumb through.”

Hashknife picked up Moses Conley’s gun. It was of the same model as Pete’s. There was an empty shell in one of the chambers. Hashknife slid it out and looked it over. Some one was coming down the sidewalk toward the office. Hashknife replaced the shell. He was half sitting on a corner of the desk.

Roaring Rigby was rolling a cigaret and Sleepy was busily examining a reward notice. Some one stopped at the open door, but Hashknife didn’t look up. His long fingers gripped the heavy revolver, a thumb drew back the hammer almost to full cock and let it slip.

Wham!

The big gun roared like a cannon in that small room. Hashknife had the muzzle pointed at the floor and, as the gun jerked in his hands, he glanced toward the door in time to see Wind River Jim, Lovely Lucas and Horse-Collar Fields.

Wham!

Horse-Collar Fields had yanked out his gun and fired so quickly that the report of his gun was a thudding echo of Hashknife's shot.

Wham!

Lovely Lucas' gun went off before it was out of the holster.

"You-u-u-u-u-u damn fools!" howled Roaring. He went over backward, clawing at his face.

Hashknife sprang sidewise, collided with Sleepy, and they went sprawling together, while the three drunken cow-punchers backed out, fell off the sidewalk and proceeded to empty their guns at anything and everything in sight. Hashknife and Sleepy sat up, staring at each other; while Roaring crawled to his feet and peeked over the top of his upset chair.

"My Lord!" exploded Sleepy.

"Where'd the nigger come from?"

Roaring's face, except for the tip-end of his nose, was as black as ebony. He spat disgustedly and wiped the back of a hand across his lips.

"Ink!" he snorted. "Damn fool busted the ink-bottle and I got it all in the face. What in the devil is goin' on around here, anyway?"

Wham!

A bullet came through the window and splatted against the end of the room.

"Shoot at me, will you?" It was Horse-Collar's voice, filled with righteous indignation. "Show yourself, you murderer! Give 'em hell if they rush you, Wind River!"

Roaring wiped some more ink off his face and got to his feet.

"Don't go near the door," advised Hashknife.

"I'm not goin' to. What started this here war?"

Hashknife grinned sheepishly.

"Mebby I'm to blame. I accidentally fired this gun, and them three men must have thought I was shootin' at them."

"Hunh!" grunted Roaring disgustedly.

"One was Lovely Lucas," grinned Sleepy. "He said he was goin' to get help and come back, didn't he? Wasn't he goin' to get a jigger named Horse-Collar?"

"That's right! Why, the dirty bum! And they've got my deputy along with 'em. See if you can find out where they are, Sleepy."

"Is that so!" snorted Sleepy. "Take a look and grab a harp. Not me, brother."

"Hunh! Well, they won't shoot at me, I'll betcha."

Roaring strode over to the doorway, ducked convulsively when a bullet thudded into the wall behind him, and whirled in against the wall.

"I lose," he said quickly.

The shooting had caused considerable excitement in the main street, but none of the three men went to the door until Hank Pitts, of the Big 4, came down to the doorway as a committee of one to find out what caused it.

"They're over in the Ranger Saloon," he told Roaring. "Anybody—my Lord, you shore got painted! Ink?"

"Ink! Nobody got hurt. Hartley accidentally fired Moses Conley's gun, and them drunken fools thought we were shootin' at them. Got a darn good notion to jail all three of 'em."

"I wouldn't; they're drunk," laughed Hashknife. "Nobody hurt."

"I suppose that's right. The darn fools might have killed somebody. Hank, if you see Wind River, will you tell him to sober up and get back on the job?"

Hank promised and went back to the Black Horse. Hashknife examined the shell he had fired, and a faint smile twisted his wide lips. He handed the gun back to Roaring, who was scrubbing his face with a handkerchief, trying to remove the ink, which had already dried in.

"Put that gun in a safe place, will you?" asked Hashknife.

"You're right I will!" spluttered Roaring. "How'd you ever come to fire it thataway?"

"Slipped," grinned Hashknife. "Mind if I talk with Jimmy Moran?"

"I reckon not. I'll bet they're wonderin' what all the shootin' was about."

They opened the jail door and went in. Pete was frightened. He thought there had been an attempt to take him from the jail. Jimmy laughed joyfully at Roaring's description of how Lovely and Horse-Collar and Wind River had got drunk and had come down to get him out of jail.

"They're a wild bunch," laughed Jimmy. "All heart and no brains."

"I want you to tell me about Conley's shootin'," said Hashknife. "I've got Miss Conley's story."

"What's the idea?" asked Jimmy cautiously.

"Just curious, Jimmy. Tell me about it."

And Jimmy told him everything as he had seen it.

"You shot at a man, eh?" queried Hashknife.

"There was somebody behind that bush," declared Jimmy. "I was kinda excited, you see. No, I didn't see where the shot came from; I was too far around the corner. But I didn't see anybody after I shot."

Hashknife continued to question—

"Was there more than two shots fired?"

"That's all, and I fired one of 'em."

"You went out there to warn Conley that the Big 4 outfit were comin' out, didn't you?"

Jimmy nodded quickly.

“What else could I do?”

“Did you skin out them brands, Jimmy?”

Jimmy shifted his eyes and a ghost of a smile passed his lips.

“You’re just guessin’, Hartley,” he said.

Hashknife smiled.

“Good guesser?” he asked.

“Mebby you think you are.”

“By golly, I never thought of that!” exploded Roaring.

“I’m just tryin’ to help you, Jimmy,” reminded Hashknife.

“I need little help,” said Pete.

Hashknife turned his head and looked at the half-breed. Pete was leaning against the bars, a wistful expression in his dark eyes.

“I reckon you do,” agreed Hashknife.

“Pete ain’t even got a lawyer,” said Roaring.

“Don’t need none,” said Pete quickly. “Damn lawyer don’t know who kill Joe Mallette.”

Hashknife laughed softly.

“That’s very true, Pete.”

They left the jail and, while Roaring went on a hunt for Wind River Jim and his two wild-shooting companions, Hashknife and Sleepy got their horses and rode out of town, heading toward Hot Creek.

Quite a crowd collected in the Ranger Saloon, trying to get a firsthand account of the gun battle, and they got it in three distinct versions.

“They repulsed us,” said Horse-Collar dismally. “Oh, the loss was terrific. There was bodies stewed—stewed all over the street. In one plash—jus’ in one plash, mind you—I shaw twelve dead men in one pile. An’ if that ain’t the truth, you can cut off Lovely’s ears.”

“Whozeers?” demanded Lovely. “Horsh-Collar’s a liar. That long-gear’d Hartley shot d’liber’tly at my heart; that’s what happened. Jus’ lifted his six-shooter and shez t’ me, ‘I’ve gotcha faded, Misser Lucas.’ Jus’ like that. And then he pulled the trigger. It was the mean-esht thing I ever beheld. That feller’s a murderer—jus’ a common murderer.”

“A-a-a-a-aw, hell!” snorted Wind River. “You and Horsh-Collar are drunk. Here’s what act’ally happened, gents. Me and Lovely and Horsh-Collar went down to pay our reshpects to Roarin’ Rigby. We was jus’ as innohent as a unborn sheep—three of ’em. Hartley and Stevens was there with Roarin’, you shee. Well, they mus’ ’a’ thought we was makin’ an attack, because they armed themshelves with Winchester

rifles, you shee. And when we came in, p'lite as hell, and shed good-afternoon, they opened fire on us, jus' like that. *Bing! Bang! Boom! Bim!*"

Wind River struck the bar three times, emphasizing his vocal imitation of a shot, but the fourth time he missed the bar and hit his chin on the edge of it.

"They must be drunk," declared the bartender, grinning.

"I'll shay they are," agreed Horse-Collar.

"Didja kill any of 'em?" asked Hank Pitts.

"All five," said Horse-Collar solemnly. "Let's all have a drink. My conscience bothers me. It's the firsh time I ever missed a shot. Gittin' old. Any old time I have to take three shots to kill two men, I'm all wrong. Whatcha drinkin'?"

It was about ten minutes later when Roaring Rigby came into the Ranger Saloon. He leaned against the bar and looked sadly at Wind River Jim, who goggled at him owlshly.

"H'lo corpsh," said Wind River.

"Go stick your head in a horse-trough," advised Roaring. "Drown some of the liquor out of you and then go back to the office where you belong. You're a hell of a deputy!"

"Deputy?" Wind River's eyes opened widely. He turned and hit Horse-Collar a resounding whack between the shoulders, the force of the blow knocking Horse-Collar against the bar, from which he rebounded and sat down on the floor.

"You quit knockin' Horsh-Collar 'round," ordered Lovely. "Who do you think you are, anyway. Git up and pile him, Horsh-Collar. Don't let'm knock you 'round, the big bully."

"Who in the devil got hit?" wailed Horse-Collar in a thin voice. "Lemme alone, will you, Lovely? Keep your nose out of my business, will yu-u-u-uh? 'F I want to pile Wind River, I don't need no advice from you. Gittin' so a man can't even git knocked down, without somebody advisin' him."

"Give 'm hell!" grunted Wind River. "'S' all right, Roarin'. I'm shober."

Wind River cuffed his wide hat almost over his eyes, got his bearings and headed out through the doorway.

"Have a li'l drink, Roarin'?" asked Lovely.

"You boys better go home, Lovely."

"Tha' so? Huh! Whaffor? Nothin' to do. We ain't goin' home until—whatcha shay, Horsh-Collar?"

"Drunken idiots," said Roaring, and he went out.

Hashknife and Sleepy circled the Hot Creek ranch fence to where the wire had been cut at the north side and then they came down to the coulee where the Big 4 steers had been killed. Luckily they had been killed far enough away so as not to pollute the water. A coyote sneaked away from one of them, and a flock of magpies went

chattering into the trees. Nature's scavengers were swiftly obliterating the Big 4 losses.

Hashknife examined one of the steers. It had been shot in the head.

"Funny they didn't hear the shootin' down at Conley's," said Sleepy.

"A twenty-two don't make much noise, Sleepy."

"F'r gosh sake! No wonder. Probably used longs; them little guns are beef killers. Looks as though the killers didn't want to be heard, eh?"

"Looks thataway," agreed Hashknife, mounting his horse. "Let's ride down and see how Conley is feelin'."

The doctor had gone to town a short time before they arrived. Conley was conscious, but the doctor had left orders with Dawn that he was to see no one. She came outside to talk with them.

"What did he have to say?" asked Hashknife. "Did he know who shot him?"

Dawn nodded, her eyes filled quickly with tears.

"Jimmy, eh?" said Hashknife softly.

"Yes. The doctor wouldn't let him talk much."

"Of course not; but the doctor thinks he'll get well, don't he?"

"He thinks Dad has a good chance now."

"Well, that's great."

Hashknife sat down on the steps and rolled a smoke.

"Is there much deer huntin' around here in the fall?" he asked.

"Not very close," said Dawn. "The boys go back about fifteen miles. They get quite a lot."

"Plenty grouse, eh?"

"Quite a few; Peter kills lots of them."

"It's a lot of fun, if you've got a shotgun," said Hashknife.

"Peter uses a twenty-two rifle," said Dawn.

"Uh-huh." Hashknife did not look at Sleepy. He had found out that the Conley family owned a .22.

They did not stay long. Mrs. Conley was sleeping, and Hashknife realized that Dawn wanted to be with her father.

"How much longer are we goin' to stick around here?" asked Sleepy, as they rode back toward Turquoise City.

"Not long, I reckon. It kinda looks as though the Conley family killed those steers."

"Well, that's what everybody else thinks; so why not you?"

"I hoped they hadn't, Sleepy, that's all."

"As far as ownin' a twenty-two is concerned—there must be more twenty-twos in this country."

Hashknife grinned at Sleepy.

"You do have an idea once in a while, cowboy. But how much easier it would have been if Conley didn't."

"I suppose it would. But what do we care? Let's figure on pullin' out tomorrow."

Hashknife frowned thoughtfully. There were still things that puzzled him greatly, and he hated to leave things unsolved. The jury would find Pete guilty, and he would be sentenced to hang; that was almost a certainty. If Conley died, Jimmy Moran might get off with a sentence. It would all depend on the jury, and a Black Horse jury would give Jimmy the benefit of a doubt.

But Jimmy wanted to marry Dawn Conley, and nothing except complete vindication would ever give him that chance. Hashknife did not believe English Ed Holmes. He had a feeling that Holmes merely wanted to know whether Hashknife was going to work on the case.

It was rather hard for Hashknife to believe that old Moses Conley had cut the fence, herded in those Big 4 steers and shot them down just for revenge. Revenge for what? For something that had happened twenty-five years before. That would be ridiculous presumption. No doubt Conley had fenced in Hot Creek against the Big 4; but that was no crime. He owned the land.

Had some of the Big 4 cut that fence and killed the steers merely to have a reason for starting trouble with Conley? Possible but hardly probable, he decided. Slim Regan was a hard-bitted sort of person, but Hashknife could hardly believe that Slim would do that.

"You're doin' a lot of thinkin'," observed Sleepy.

"Am I?" grinned Hashknife. "It ain't doin' me much good. I'm kinda stuck."

"Glad to hear it. Mebby you'll quit."

"I might," grinned Hashknife.

About a mile out of Turquoise City they met the old doctor, heading back to the Conley place, driving his old sway-backed gray. The two cowboys drew rein beside the road, and the doctor stopped.

"Hyah, Doctor," smiled Hashknife. "Hear your patient is comin' along fine."

"Good enough," answered the doctor gruffly. "Didn't talk to him, did you?"

"The little lady wouldn't let me."

"Good for her. Smart girl; nice girl, too. Obeys orders. Feel sorry for her. Conley says Moran shot him. Lucky thing I'm pulling Conley out of it. Hate to see the kid strung up."

The old doctor talked jerkily.

"Conley didn't say he saw Moran, did he?"

"Didn't say; suppose he did. Kind of hot today."

"Little warm," agreed Hashknife. "You're the coroner, ain't you, Doc?"

"Yes, who's dead this time?"

Hashknife laughed and shook his head.

“Nothin’ like that, Doc. You handled this Mallette, didn’t you?”

“Naturally, bein’ a murder case.”

“Didn’t find any bullet?”

“No; shot in the head; bullet went on. You’re not trying to find out who killed him, are you?”

“Why not?”

“No question about Pete Conley, is there?”

“Might be, Doc. Tell me about how Mallette looked. Was he shot at close range?”

“Guess not. Not close enough to get burned. They said he had been drinking heavily. Drank absinth with his liquor. Darn bad combination. Wore cowboy boots. Funny thing about his boots. When I took them off I found a lot of gravel in them. I told the sheriff about it.” The doctor laughed heartily. “He said Mallette wasn’t very clean.”

“Gravel in his boots, eh?” mused Hashknife. “Man would have to go without a bath a long time to acquire gravel.”

“He would,” laughed the doctor, picking up his lines. “I’ve got to be going on, boys.”

They told him good-by and rode on. Hashknife’s eyes were keen now and his lips shut tightly. Sleepy looked closely at him, groaned and yanked his hat down viciously.

Sleepy and Hashknife stabled their horses and went to the sheriff’s office, where they found Roaring and Wind River Jim. The deputy was asleep on the cot, sleeping off his jag.

“What do you know?” asked Roaring.

“Not very much,” replied Hashknife. “I wish you’d take me to the spot where they found Joe Mallette.”

“Yea-a-ah? What for, Hashknife?”

“Curiosity, I suppose.”

“Uh-huh. Will you stay here, Sleepy? Got to keep somebody around here. Wind River ain’t much use right now.”

“Go ahead,” laughed Sleepy.

Roaring led Hashknife through the alley between the Black Horse Saloon and the restaurant, out past the rear of the judge’s home, to a spot between there and the end house of the redlight district.

“This is the spot,” said Roaring. “I wasn’t here that night, but several of the boys showed me the place.”

Hashknife studied the spot for a while, while the sheriff watched him curiously.

“Mallette was drunk, wasn’t he?” asked Hashknife.

“They say he was. Drank absinth. Some of the boys said they wondered how he was able to walk.”

“Powerful stuff.”

They walked part way back to the alley, where Hashknife stopped and looked back.

“Mallette came from the rear of the Black Horse Saloon,” said Hashknife. “He was headin’ for them redlight houses and he was loaded with absinth and whisky. Uh-huh.”

“That’s the right dope on it, Hashknife. What have you got in your mind?”

“How long was it before Pete Conley went out on his trail?”

“Prob’ly not much more than five minutes.”

“Long enough.”

They walked back through the alley, where Hashknife excused himself and went over to a general merchandise store. He bought a box of cartridges for his revolver, and engaged the proprietor in conversation. Their selection of ammunition was limited to a few sizes. Hashknife noticed a few boxes of .22 caliber shells.

“Yuh don’t sell many twenty-twos, do you?” he asked.

“Not many,” grinned the proprietor. “Pretty small ammunition. Pete Conley used to buy quite a lot.”

“Some places they’re popular,” observed Hashknife. “Is Pete the only twenty-two shooter around here?”

“Guess he is. Don’t remember any others.”

Hashknife bought some tobacco, and went out. It seemed to have narrowed down to the one twenty-two rifle. As he came from the store he met Kent Cutter, the boss of the 7AL. They nodded and went on. Cutter entered the store, singing out a greeting to the proprietor, who had seen Cutter and Hashknife exchange nods.

“Who is that tall cowboy?” asked the merchant.

“Name’s Hartley. Came here with Frank Moran. Heard he’s a cattle detective, but don’t know anythin’ about him myself.”

“He’s a level-eyed son-of-a-rooster.”

“Sure is. Gimme a box of thirty-thirties, Al.”

The merchant slid a box across the counter.

“This Hartley seemed to be interested in twenty-twos.”

“In twenty-twos? Don’t pack one, does he?”

“Bought forty-fives. Mentioned that I probably didn’t sell many twenty-twos. I told him Pete Conley had the only twenty-two in this part of the country.”

“Yeah, he’s got one,” said Cutter. “I need a pair of overalls, Al. Give ’em to me big enough. This cowboy idea of tight pants don’t appeal to me. So he’s interested in twenty-twos, is he? Pretty small gun for a grown man; me, I like a thirty-thirty.”

Hashknife went back to the office and asked Roaring to let him speak a word with Pete Conley. Roaring was willing. Hashknife told Pete that his father was conscious, and the half-breed seemed pleased. Jimmy Moran danced a jig on the cell floor and wanted to know all the details.

“What did he say?” asked Jimmy anxiously. “Did he have any idea who shot him, Hashknife?”

“He said you did, Jimmy.”

“My God!” Jimmy turned around and sat down.

“I want to ask you a question, Pete,” said Hashknife.

“Sure.”

“You’ve got a twenty-two rifle, Pete?”

“Sure,” Pete grinned widely. “I got little gun. Pretty damn good gun, too.”

“Fine. Who else in Black Horse valley has a twenty-two rifle?”

“Mm-m-m-m,” Pete scratched his head thoughtfully. “By golly, I dunno. Nobody, I guess. I not know any one. You want use mine? You tell Dawn—”

“I don’t want it, Pete—thanks.”

“She shoot good.”

“Yeah,” sighed Hashknife.

“What about a twenty-two rifle?” asked Roaring.

“You don’t know anybody who owns one, do you?”

“I don’t; didn’t even know Pete owned one.”

“You’re a lot of help to me,” sighed Hashknife. “Much obliged to you, Pete.”

They went back into the office and sat down. Hashknife knew that Roaring was itching to know; so he told him that the Big 4 steers had been killed with a twenty-two rifle.

“The hell!” exploded Roaring. “Do you know, I never even thought to see what had killed ’em? I’ll betcha Mose Conley killed ’em with Pete’s gun. Yes, sir, that’s jist what happened.”

“Why would he, Roaring?”

“Why would he? Why, the old man has hated the Big 4—”

“For twenty-five years—yeah.”

“Well, mebbby it was to show Frank Moran—”

“Conley didn’t even know Frank Moran was comin’. That fence was cut. If Conley wanted to kill Big 4 steers for revenge, would he kill ’em down in that Hot Creek coulee, where the Big 4 couldn’t find ’em? He’d have to take a chance that some puncher would find that cut fence, and investigate. If Conley wanted to make the Big 4 mad, he’d kill them steers inside the fence and near the road.”

“Yeah, that’s true. I never thought of that, Hartley. You kinda reason things out.”

“And if Pete owned the only twenty-two in the country, do you suppose they’d kill them steers and then deny it? They did deny it, Roarin’. And if Conley killed ’em for revenge, would it be any revenge to deny it to the Big 4? It would not. He’d merely tell ’em to keep their stock off his ranch. And another thing, Roarin’; Moses Conley wouldn’t wantonly butcher eight big, fat steers in that manner. He’s an old cowman. He might kill a man, but I don’t think he’d kill steers.”

“Well, somebody did,” said Roaring foolishly. “Mebby the Big 4 killed ’em themselves.”

“Probably borrowed Pete’s twenty-two,” said Hashknife.

“Uh-huh. Anyway, I’m not interested in them steers. So old man Conley says Jimmy shot him, eh? That makes it tough for Jimmy; but old Frank Moran will shore hire a good lawyer for Jimmy. English Ed tells me that the old man paid Jimmy’s gamblin’ debt. English was down here a while ago. Asked about you. I told him I didn’t know where you’d gone. He asked me if you was interested in Jimmy’s case, and I said you prob’ly was. He said he heard that you took a shot at Horse-Collar Fields, and I told him what had happened. Ryker heard about it too, and he came down. You can’t keep a lawyer’s nose out of things. He asked quite a lot; but that’s natural.”

“He’s a queer lookin’ jigger,” smiled Hashknife.

“He shore is,” laughed Roaring. “Ryker is an old old-timer, Hashknife. He had that assay office for years. Knows minerals, y’betcha. But when the minin’ boom died out and his business wasn’t so much, he took to law. I reckon he had studied it before he came here. Knew quite a lot about minin’ law. He’s done pretty good. Got himself elected to office, and this is his third term. Makes me itch. I want to cinch up his collar. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! And them danged cuffs! Him and Judge Beal never got along. The old judge knows law, and the prosecutor never slips anythin’ over on him. I heard old Ryker make the crack one day that he was aimin’ to be judge of this county one of these days. Could, I reckon—if the voters would elect him.”

“Was Jim Randall a good sheriff?” asked Hashknife.

“Best in the world! Why, Jim Randall would shoot a man as quick as he’d look at him. Good? I’ll tell you he was.”

Hashknife grinned to himself. That was Roaring Rigby’s idea of an efficient officer.

“Strict, eh?”

“You’re danged right. That’s why they ran him out. He was a fighter in the open, but—but he had a wife and kids, Hartley. I don’t blame him. If they ever send me a warnin’, my own skin will be my only alibi for high-tailin’ it out of here. I’d rather be a runnin’ coward than a reclinin’ hero.”

“Somethin’ to that, too,” smiled Hashknife.

“Yeah, and you better think about it,” said Sleepy.

Saturday night, as was usual in a cow-town, was a gala night in Turquoise City. Every cowboy in the country came to town, thirsty, full of song and looking for excitement. Wind River had sobered and was repentant; but Horse-Collar Fields and Lovely Lucas were still having a wonderful time.

They had forgotten Jimmy Moran and their escapade at the sheriff's office; but they had never gone near the Black Horse Saloon. The Ranger was their happy hunting ground. Both of them had long since run out of money and were spending their credit with great prodigality.

"We s'licit your votes, gen'lemen," said Horse-Collar expansively. "Lovely's runnin' f'r gov'ner and I'm sheekin' nomina-shun for pup-president. Long may she wave. How's all your li'l' cowlets and bullets? Have a drink on the bartender; he ain't treated since Sittin' Bull stood up."

"Lemme 'lone;" pleaded Lovely, "Lemme 'tirely 'lone. I'm tryin' to think why I came to town."

"Tha's right; be intelligent, 'f you can. 'F that bartender would only think, he'd know it's his turn.

"O-o-o-oh, I feel as fresh as a big sunflower
That bends and nods in the bree-e-e-e-zus;
My heart's as light as a drop of dew
That lays in the road and free-e-e-e-zus."

"My word, what a shong!" exploded Lovely. "Lissen, mockin'-bird, I know what we came here for."

"I crave to know," said Horse-Collar seriously. "Yes sir, I ahnos' deman' to know. Don't keep me in shuspense."

"We came here to liberate Jimmy Moran."

"My God! We did? Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! That was yesserday."

"That was t'day."

"My, my! Thasso? How time does fly. Was it only t'day that we had the battle? Don' tell me. Where's Wind River Jim?"

"Roarin' came and got him long time ago."

"Can that be possible? Ain't Roarin' Rigby dead? Ain't he? My, my, I mus' practise up. Shay! Let's me and you go down and c'ngratulate Roarin'. He's lucky. As shoos as the bartender dechides that it's his turn, we'll have one more li'l' snifter and then go down to shee Roarin'."

"I'd do that just to get you jiggers out of here," said the bartender. "But if you ask me, I'd tell you to go easy on Roarin' Rigby. He'll salivate both of you."

"Yesh, he will not!" snorted Horse-Collar. "He'll eat out of my good right hand, tha's what, eh, Lovely?"

“Oh, pos’tively; well, here’s a stiff rope and a short drop, bartender. May you eat well on your last mornin’.”

They took their drink, locked arms and tried to go through the narrow doorway, arm in arm. Failing in that, they went out sidewise and fell flat on the sidewalk.

“Thank heaven, they’re out of here!” said the bartender. “They’re the craziest pair of punchers I ever seen, and I’ve seen ’em all. Lie and prove it by each other. Owe me ten dollars apiece, and won’t remember it. Well, I won’t lose an awful lot. I filled up a half-empty bar-bottle with water, and they’ve drank it all; so I only lose fifty per-cent on ’em.”

But they didn’t find Roaring at the office. Hashknife was there, talking with Wind River Jim, and Horse-Collar looked hin over rather dubiously. Lovely sat down on the floor against the wall and tried to roll a cigaret. Wind River Jim didn’t feel very well.

“We came peacefully,” declared Horse-collar. “Kinda like a fam’ly re-e-union, you shee.”

“You don’t feel so good, do you, Wind River?” asked Lovely, spilling the contents of his tobacco sack over his knees. “I think you’ve got stummick complaint.”

“Ne’ mind my stummick,” growled Wind River.

“Don’ mind his stummick,” advised Horse-Collar Fields owlishly, and then to Hashknife he said—

“Wheresh Roarin’ Rigby?”

“I dunno,” grinned Hashknife.

“Ain’t dead, is he?”

“He wasn’t dead fifteen minutes ago.”

“Then I mus’ ’a’ missed him,” sadly.

“Gittin’ old.”

“You’re drunk,” declared Wind River heavily.

“Thasso? Huh! Not a speck. Lemins tell you—”

From somewhere on the street came the sharp snap of a revolver shot. Hashknife stepped quickly to the door. There was nothing unusual about a revolver shot on the main street of Turquoise City, especially on a Saturday night.

The only lights on the street were from the windows of the saloons and business houses. Hashknife stepped outside, and Wind River Jim came to the doorway behind him.

Hashknife was looking toward the Black Horse Saloon, where there seemed to be considerable activity, and Wind River Jim stepped past him to the edge of the sidewalk, when a spurt of flame seemed to lash out at them from the alley between the office and a store building next door.

Almost before his ears registered the report of the gun, Hashknife felt the bullet sear the side of his neck, like the touch of a red-hot iron. Hashknife instinctively threw himself sidewise, drawing his gun. He heard Wind River drop to the sidewalk, but he

thought that he merely did it for protection, never thinking that the bullet might have hit him.

He heard the scrape of running feet. He darted into the dark alley, regardless of the fact that he might be running into an ambush. He blundered around behind the store, falling over an old packing-box; finally he ended his run at the corner of the sheriff's little stable.

For several moments he remained silent, but he could hear nothing. He circled the rear of the store and came back to the street between the store and post-office, where he met Roaring Rigby.

"What was that shootin'?" asked Roaring.

"I don't know who it was," panted Hashknife. "They darned near got me. Burned me across the neck. I chased him down the alley but he got away. Didn't somebody fire a shot near the Black Horse Saloon?"

"Yeah—one shot. I can't find out who fired it."

"Foxy devils," said Hashknife. "That shot was to draw me out of your office, Roarin'. I bit on it."

"Well, I'll be darned!" exploded Roaring. "Could it have been Horse-Collar or Lovely?"

"No, they're both in the office. Let's go down there."

They went cautiously past the alley and entered the office. Wind River Jim was lying flat on his back in the middle of the office floor, his face bathed in gore. Around his neck was Lovely Lucas' blue silk muffler, tied loosely, and inside the loop of this was a long-barrel Colt revolver, which Horse-Collar Fields was twisting around and around, shutting off Wind River's breath entirely, while Lovely sat on Wind River's legs to keep him from jerking.

"You fools!" yelled Roaring.

He knocked Horse-Collar aside and untwisted the muffler as quickly as possible. Horse-Collar landed against the wall and stared at Roaring indignantly.

"What in the devil was you tryin' to do?" demanded Roaring.

"Turny-keet," wailed Horse-Collar. "Look at his head, you big bully! He's bleedin' to death."

"Firs' aid for the injured," grunted Lovely. "Look at him kick."

Hashknife flopped down in the old swivel chair and shook with laughter, while Horse-Collar and Lovely looked at him in amazement. Roaring didn't see the humor of the situation. He wiped some of the blood off Wind River's face and head; enough to discover that the bullet had merely cut a furrow, knocking Wind River cold.

"You can't stop bleedin' thataway," he told Horse-Collar.

"The devil you can't! I did, the time I got shot in the leg. Saved in' life, too, y'betcha."

“Who shot ’in?” demanded Lovely. “That’s what I’d crave to know—who shot ’in?”

“That long legged geezer,” said Horse Collar, pointing at Hashknife. “Shot ’im and then run. He’s dangerous, I tell you. Didn’t he shoot at me awhile ago? Put ’m in jail, Roarin’.”

“Drunk and crazy!” snorted Roaring. “Take a look at this wound, will you, Hashknife? If you figger it’s bad enough, I’ll send out to Conley’s place for the doctor.”

Hashknife examined it closely and decided that Wind River would be all right in a few minutes.

“Get some water and wash his head,” suggested Hashknife.

As Roaring started for the rear of the office, Slim Regan stepped into the office. Slim was panting from running, and he ignored the sight of Wind River Jim on the floor.

“Hartley,” he panted. “Your pardner got hurt. They’ve got him in the Black Horse Saloon; you better come.”

Hashknife was past Regan before the Big 4 foreman finished speaking. He ran heavily up the street and crossed to the saloon. The crowd parted to let him in. They had placed Sleepy on the floor near the center of the room, and the yellow light from the center lamp illuminated his white face. Hashknife dropped to his knees beside him, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“Sleepy, do you know me?” he asked.

But Sleepy did not speak. He was breathing heavily. Hashknife could see the blood oozing through Sleepy’s shirt. He had been shot through the body on the right side, about two inches above his waist-line.

“I sent Hank Pitts for the doctor,” said Slim.

Hashknife looked up at Regan, his face twisted with pain.

“Thank you, Slim. Does anybody know how it happened?”

Slim shook his head.

“He was out by the hitch-rack. Hank Pitts almost stepped on him, Hartley. There was a shot fired out there awhile ago, but nobody investigated it.”

“That was the shot I heard,” muttered Hashknife. He got to his feet and stood fretfully looking down at Sleepy.

“I seen him in the restaurant a while ago,” said Ted Ames, a short, fat-faced cowboy from the 7AL.

Hashknife nodded. He knew that Sleepy had gone to supper with Roaring Rigby. Roaring came in and shoved his way to Hashknife. His arms were still wet from washing Wind River’s head.

“How bad is he hurt, Hashknife?” he asked.

“Bad enough. They’ve gone for the doctor. Wasn’t Sleepy eatin’ supper with you, Roarin’?”

“He shore was. I stopped to talk with Jeff Ryker, and Sleepy went out. While I was talkin’ to Ryker I heard that shot out near the hitch-rack, and then I heard the one that hit Wind River Jim. I came out, tryin’ to find out what was goin’ on, and crossed the street. That’s when I met you.”

“Who shot Wind River Jim?” asked a cowboy.

“The same man who tried to kill me,” said Hashknife savagely.

“F’r God’s sake!” exploded some one. “S gittin’ salty around here.”

“If there’s a blanket handy, I’d like to have some of you help carry him over to the hotel,” said Hashknife. “We’ve got a room over there.”

The blanket was forthcoming, and there were plenty of volunteers to act as stretcher-bearers. They put Sleepy on the bed, and several of the men waited with Hashknife, until the old doctor arrived. Among them were Slim Regan and Kent Cutter. Hashknife had nothing to say. He sat at the head of the bed, his lean face very grim in the lamplight.

It was the first time in their wanderings that either of them had been seriously hurt. Hashknife knew that only half of the plot had succeeded. These men, whoever they were, had planned to kill him and Sleepy.

It was an hour before the doctor arrived. He sent for more lamps, and the men held them over Sleepy while he made his examination.

“Close,” he muttered. “Went all the way through. Must have went through on an angle. Bad shock, lost lots of blood. Can’t tell all about it yet.”

He straightened up and peered at Hashknife.

“Pretty lucky, I think. Gut shot is very bad. Unless I miss my guess, he’ll pull through. Put the lamps on the table and get me plenty of hot water.”

Hashknife stretched his full length and sighed deeply.

“Glad, eh?” said Regan.

“Glad?” Hashknife blinked painfully.

“My God!”

He turned and walked over to a window, where he stared out into the night. The room was very quiet.

“We ain’t got much money, Doc,” said Hashknife slowly. “But if you pull him through, I’ll go out and kill anybody you want killed.”

The old doctor lifted his eyes and studied the lean figure at the window.

“All right,” he said finally, “I’ll take you up on that.”

“Name your man, Doc.”

“I can’t do it, Hartley; it’s a man who shoots in the dark.”

“All right, Doc, you’ll get his ears.”

Sunday was a dull day in Turquoise City. Hashknife hardly left Sleepy's side during the day. Sleepy had regained consciousness and was pretty sick. There was plenty of company. Wind River Jim, his head swathed in bandages, insisted upon playing nurse while Hashknife ate his meals.

"That's the least I can do," declared Wind River. "If your old leather beck hadn't deflected that bullet, it would have hit me between the eyes. And between you and Roarin', you stopped Horse-Collar from chokin' me to death."

Hashknife told Sleepy about Horse-Collar's tourniquet, and Sleepy cried tears. Even with all his pain he still retained his overdeveloped sense of humor. Later in the day Horse-Collar came to the hotel. He was sober now and had been talking to Jimmy Moran at the jail.

"I been talkin' with Jimmy," he told Hashknife confidentially. "He says you're detectin'. Gosh, I didn't know that."

"What about it?" asked Hashknife curiously.

"Thisaway, Hartley. You can't detect and set here. Tomorrow I'll be here. I ain't much of a good nurse, but I'll do what I can."

"That's mighty good of you, Horse-Collar."

"Not p'ticularly. I'm still workin' for Jimmy, and I take orders from the boss. Old Conley's out of danger, they say, and I heard that Frank Moran has paid Jimmy's debts at the Black Horse. I'll be here in the mornin'."

Jeff Ryker came and talked to Hashknife, trying to see if Hashknife had any idea who had shot Sleepy.

"There's been too much of this shooting going on around here," declared Ryker earnestly.

"Well, you can't blame it on Pete Conley or Jimmy Moran," observed Hashknife. "Mebby it's what you'd call an epidemic of crime."

"That's what it is. Conley's trial starts tomorrow. He hasn't a lawyer to defend him. The court will have to appoint some one to defend him, I suppose, and that will cause a delay. Personally, I don't think a lawyer would do him any good."

"You think he's guilty?"

"Beyond a doubt. He went out to kill Mallette. Admits it."

"Admits that he wanted to, Ryker."

"I don't know about that, because I never talked to him; but the evidence is all against him."

Hashknife studied the thin face of the prosecuting attorney—the wry neck inside the misfit collar, the deep-set eyes.

"And you was willin' to kill the case, if that half-breed girl would marry you, eh?" he said coldly.

Ryker flushed hotly and shuffled his feet on the old carpet of the hotel.

"That—that isn't true," he stammered.

"I never—"

"Why deny it?" queried Hashknife coldly. "You're not the first man in your position to misuse his power, Ryker. You ain't settin' no precedent that I know of."

"Oh, all right, I'm not going to discuss my personal affairs with you, Hartley. What I do is none of your business."

Ryker turned on his heel and walked away.

"You stick to your own business then," said Hashknife.

"And you stick to your own," retorted Ryker hotly.

Hashknife laughed softly and went back to Sleepy.

The doctor came again that night. Sleepy had not developed any fever, and the doctor was jubilant. In the morning he was stiff and sore, but cheerful. Horse-Collar Fields came fairly early in the morning and offered to stay with Sleepy as long as Hashknife wanted him to stay.

The court was to open at ten o'clock, but Hashknife did not care about the opening of the case. He saddled his horse and rode out toward the Conley ranch. Near the ford he met Doctor Shelley and Dawn. The doctor had told Dawn about the shooting of Sleepy, and the girl was full of sympathy.

"He's able to cuss this mornin'; so he'll get well," laughed Hashknife. "How's your father?"

"Just fine, Mr. Hartley."

"I wonder if I could talk with him."

"Go ahead," nodded the doctor.

"Don't talk too long."

Hashknife rode on to the ranch. He hadn't the slightest idea of why he was coming out to see Conley, except that he had what might be termed a hunch. Mrs. Conley admitted him, and he found the old man propped up in bed.

Conley stared at Hashknife out of sunken eyes.

"I heard them talk about you," he said huskily. "The doctor said your pardner got shot last night. Is he alive?"

"Yeah, luckily," said Hashknife.

"I'm glad somebody has luck." He stared up at the ceiling. "I've never had much of it myself. My son is being tried for his life, and he hasn't even a lawyer. I was goin' to get him one, but I got shot. Dawn has gone down to be with him." He shifted his eyes to Hashknife.

"Will they hang him, do you think?"

"Law is a queer piece of machinery, Conley."

"Law for a half-breed, Hartley."

"Law for anybody."

"Mebby. They tell me you came with Frank Moran."

Hashknife explained how it happened that he came to Black Horse with Moran, and the old man nodded.

"I hate him," he said.

"Yeah, I know," said Hashknife. "It's too bad, Conley. Hate never got either of you anythin' but misery. Hatin' folks is just like throwin' a rubber ball against a wall. It slams back at you."

"That's true!" The old man's eyes opened wide. "It does. Ain't it queer that my son and Moran's son should both be in jail at the same time. Jimmy Moran shot me, you know."

"Sure of it, Conley?"

"He called me out and shot me."

"Did you see him?"

"No. I don't remember anythin' after I opened the door and stepped outside. But he called and told me who he was."

"He admits it. Oh, he's sorry, Conley. He swears he didn't shoot you. Why, man, he's in love with your daughter."

The old man averted his eyes and his bony old face twitched.

"That's what hurts, Hartley—hurts worse than the bullet-hole in my side. That's what hate does. I—I was goin' to let Dawn marry Jimmy Moran, because I hated his father. Goin' to help his son marry a half-breed girl. It wasn't right."

"It was right, Conley; he loves her."

"Oh, I don't know. I didn't want him to at first. I gave him orders to keep away. But I got to thinkin' how it would hurt Frank Moran. That's hate. I'm not fit for much. By God, I was goin' to sell my girl! It's the same thing. Love! Bah! What in hell did I care about love? But I've had plenty of time to think lately. I fenced Hot Creek against the Big 4, but I didn't kill them steers. No, I didn't, Hartley. I'm a cowman. I've been a cowman ever since the old minin' days. Do you know, this ranch was a minin' claim? It was. About twenty-five years ago I located this as a minin' claim. In them days there was plenty of buyin' and sellin' prospects. You know Ryker? He was an assayer. Frank Moran was here. He had plenty of money to buy mines. He's always had money."

"You not talk too much," advised Mrs. Conley.

"I'm all right, mother. It was great in the old days; but the mines played out. This was my last location. I dug my discovery hole just west of Hot Creek. There's an old sycamore up there on the slope. It was a small tree twenty-five years ago, and it was there that I tacked my notice and dug my discovery. But things went wrong in the minin' game, and a little later I homesteaded and went in for cattle. I went up into Idaho to buy stock and that's where I met Minnie."

"My father big chief," said Mrs. Conley.

“Mm-m-m-m,” grunted Conley. “Not so awful big. You see, he stole some horses from me, and I went after ’em. I made him a trade for Minnie. He had six other daughters; so it wasn’t hard to make a trade, you see.”

“We get married, too,” said Minnie.

“We shore did; and I’ve never been sorry, Hartley.”

“Well, that’s great,” smiled Hashknife. “You better take a rest now, I’ll see you ag’in’, Conley.”

“All right; be sure and come ag’in’, Hartley.”

Hashknife rode around the house and headed for Hot Creek. He wanted to see that old prospect hole. He had a hunch that the Conley ranch was being desired for more than a winter water-hole and a shelter from blizzards.

He located the big sycamore and, in the brush at its base, he found the old prospect hole, which was practically hidden in an overhang of brush. It was an open cut, possibly five feet long, three or four feet wide, and not over five feet deep.

Hashknife was not a miner, but he knew a little about rocks. It seemed to him that there were indications that some one had broken off a little of the exposed ledge of reddish quartz long since the hole had been originally dug. Some of the quartz was badly honeycombed, rusty looking stuff.

He broke off a small chunk from about the center of the upper end of the cut, put it in his pocket and went back to his horse. His hunch was fading out now. It did not seem that this mere showing of honeycombed quartz would warrant any one’s making a great effort to purchase the entire ranch.

He rode back to the main gate and followed the fence down to the ford, where he dismounted and drank from the river. Sitting down on a convenient boulder, he took out the chunk of rock and washed it carefully, while the tall gray horse slaked its thirst and looked curiously at him.

A washing showed the quartz to be thoroughly honeycombed and not very hard. Taking the rock in his palm he struck it sharply against another rock, breaking it in several small pieces. For several moments he stared at the broken fragments.

Gold! It gleamed through the lace-like texture of the broken quartz, and there were even specks of it on his palm.

He examined it closely, knowing that it was gold. Hashknife had never seen rock so rich in his life. He tried to estimate its worth per ton, but gave it up. The rock was not heavy. It would take a lot of it to weigh a ton, and if all of it was as rich as this, it would be worth more money than Hashknife could estimate.

He put the rock back in his pocket. It was not hard for him to imagine what had happened. Conley had found a piece of promising float, located the property, dug a discovery hole and had never had an assay made. The mining boom had died, and Conley had never gone any further with the prospect.

Hashknife rode back to Turquoise City and went to the assay office, where he met “Mica” Jones, the old bald-headed assayer who ran the business for Ryker. The little place stank of acids.

Jones was idly reading a much-thumbed mining journal, when Hashknife came in and placed a piece of the ore on the battered old counter. Jones put on his glasses and picked up a receipt blank.

“Assay it for lead, will you?” said Hashknife.

Jones glanced at the sample. It was a most unusual request. He squinted closely at it and looked at Hashknife.

“There ain’t no lead in that stuff,” he said, giving an honest opinion.

“What do you think’s in it, pardner?”

Jones picked up the sample, turned it slowly in his gnarled hand and gave Hashknife a sharp glance. But the tall cowboy merely slouched against the counter, looking at other pieces of ore on the counter. Mica Jones swallowed heavily. He had seen the gold.

“It ain’t lead-bearin’ rock,” he said, clearing his throat harshly.

“Pshaw! Well, let it go then. I don’t know much about ore. Do you know anythin’ about minin’ laws, pardner?”

Mica Jones frowned. It was difficult for him to keep his eyes off that piece of crumbly red ore.

“Little bit,” he said. “Whatcha want to know?”

“Ain’t there some kind of a minin’ law that lets you go on a man’s ranch and locate a mine, if you can prove it’s worth more for mineral than it is for agriculture?”

Mica Jones carefully placed the piece of ore on a shelf behind him, drew out a plug of tobacco and bit off a huge portion.

“Yea-a-ah, I think there is. It was tried out five year ago. Feller jumped in on a ranch about ten mile below here and located a mine. Quoted that law and got a bullet plumb through him. They tried this rancher for murder, and the lawyer orated that this dead client was actin’ accordin’ to law; but the jury exonerated him without leavin’ their seat. It kinda set a precedent, you see. Out here—” Mica shifted his chew thoughtfully—“out here, you can hold what you’ve got, pardner.”

“That’s a good system,” agreed Hashknife. “Thanks for the opinion. Never mind assayin’ that stone.”

“Oh, that’s all right; come in ag’in’.”

“Thank you.”

Hashknife went to the hotel and found Horse-Collar and Lovely with Sleepy, who was resting easily. The doctor had been there and changed the dressing.

“Wind River was over here from the courtroom a while ago,” said Lovely. “They’re goin’ ahead with the trial of Pete Conley. The judge offered to postpone the trial until

Pete could get a lawyer, but the bug-headed half-breed said to go ahead; he didn't need any lawyer.

"They've got the jury already. Ryker ain't particular, because he's got a cinch. Him and the judge locked horns a few times this mornin', and the boys had fun out of it. Roarin' come damn near runnin' everybody out of the courtroom. Dawn is up there with Pete—jist them two. I tell you it don't look right. It's jist them two agin' the judge, jury and the crowd, not to mention Ryker. The judge says it's a farce. What's a farce, Hartley?"

"It's a cooked game that looks honest."

"Oh, yeah. He prob'ly meant that Pete ain't got a chance. But Pete's hardheaded. The judge asked him if he didn't want the case postponed until he could get a lawyer. Pete asked him where in hell he could find a lawyer that knew who killed Joe Mallette. It made everybody laugh."

"They'll have Jimmy on the stand," said Horse-Collar. "He'll have to tell about that poker game, I reckon. English Ed will be a witness, and the doctor said he'd have to testify; but what good will it do the half-breed? They won't be helpin' him. Suppose Mallette did steal from Pete?"

"It's murder, just the same," said Hashknife. "I suppose there's quite a crowd at the court-house."

"Biggest you ever seen," said Horse-collar. "Everybody in the country. I'd hate to be in Roarin' Rigby's shoes, if he has to hang Pete."

"A-a-aw, talk about something' pleasant," said Sleepy.

Hashknife saw Dawn Conley after the trial was over for the day, and he talked to her for awhile. She did not see a single loophole for Peter. Of course, the evidence was all circumstantial, but there was plenty of evidence that Peter had left the saloon that night with a revolver in his hand.

English Ed had testified to what he knew about it. The old doctor, who was also the coroner, testified. Jimmy Moran had not been brought from the jail to testify; but his testimony would be taken the next morning. Roaring Rigby had told the court how he had outwitted the men who came out to Conley's ranch that night to lynch Peter, and his testimony caused a laugh. Most of the men who had ridden through the hills that night were in the room.

Ryker had dominated the trial. The old judge, white of face, plainly nervous, humped at his desk. At times he would rebuke Ryker; but there was little dignity left in the man. He continually scanned the room, as if seeking the men who had warned him to leave Turquoise City.

In a half-open drawer at his right hand was a Colt revolver, fully loaded, and most of the time his hand rested on that drawer.

After Dawn had ridden away, Hashknife met Franklyn Moran. He had attended the trial and he told Hashknife much of what had happened. He was cheerful over the rapid recovery of Moses Conley, but he was curious to know who had shot Sleepy.

"You know as much as I do," said Hashknife.

Ryker came from the courtroom and gave them a curt nod as he went past, carrying papers and several books. The sheriff and the judge were close behind him; the sheriff walked home with him.

"Scared to death," said Moran, after the sheriff and judge were out of hearing. "The man is positively on edge. I don't believe he knows what the trial is all about. To begin with, his nerves are all shot from whisky."

"Are they?" asked Hashknife.

"Sure they are; he's the greatest single-handed drinker in this country. I haven't seen him for almost a year, and he's ten years older than he was at that time."

"I'd like to talk with him," said Hashknife. "I believe I'll go visitin'."

"Good luck to you," laughed Moran.

Hashknife hurried across the street and went through the alley between the saloon and restaurant. The sheriff and the judge were at the judge's gate, talking together, when Hashknife came up to them. Roaring introduced them, and the judge offered Hashknife a very limp hand.

"Pleased to meet you, sir," said the judge huskily. "Nice weather we're having these days."

"Pretty good," smiled Hashknife. "The sheriff has told me a lot about things that have happened around here, Judge, and I just wondered if you happened to keep one of those warnings."

The judge started visibly and looked at Roaring.

"It's all right, Judge," assured Roaring.

"I have," said the judge firmly, "the first one."

"May I take a look at it?"

"You may; I'll get it for you, Mr. Hartley."

The judge went into the house and came out in a few moments with the halfsheet of paper. The warning had been written with a pen, or rather printed with a pen. The paper was of ordinary grade, unglazed.

Hashknife looked it over carefully, examining the letters, even looking through it at the sun. There was a faint watermark—*Fordhill Bond*. Hashknife gave the paper back to the judge.

"What do you make of it?" asked Roaring anxiously.

"Who knows?" smiled Hashknife.

"Are you a handwriting expert?" asked the old judge.

Hashknife laughed softly and shook his head.

“Not me, Judge. I know pen and ink from typewriter, but that’s about all.”

“You didn’t come up to the trial, did you?” asked Roaring.

“I’ve been busy. They tell me Peter Conley hasn’t a chance in the world.”

“Gentlemen,” said the judge wearily, “let us not discuss the trial. Anything else, and I am at your service. Won’t you come in?”

Roaring shook his head quickly.

“Got to get back, Judge.”

Hashknife thanked the judge, but declined his invitation.

On the way back to the office, Roaring told Hashknife that the judge had asked him to walk home with him.

“He’s scared to death,” declared Roaring. “Personally, I don’t think they’ll harm him. I don’t think they’d ’a’ hurt Jim Randall, but he didn’t wait to see.”

“Time will tell,” said Hashknife. “The old judge has a right to be nervous.”

They went back to the office, where Wind River Jim was changing the bandage on his sore head. Hashknife sat down at the sheriff’s desk and rolled a smoke, while Roaring assisted Wind River Jim with his bandage. There were several sheets of writing paper on the desk, bearing the letterhead of the sheriff’s office. Hashknife picked one of them up in his hand and looked through it. Across the bottom of the sheet was the watermark—*Fordhill Bond*.

He dropped the sheet of paper back on the desk and lighted his cigaret.

“I’d like to get a line on the jigger that knocked on my temple,” growled Wind River Jim. “It shore aches me.”

“What does Pete think of the trial?” asked Hashknife.

“Sore about it.”

Roaring pinned the end of the bandage and came back to the desk.

“He testified today. Ryker tried to get him mad. I don’t think the jury believed Pete’s story. He admitted he wanted to shoot Mallette. He put up a good argument. Ryker wanted to know why he wanted to kill Mallette, and if he didn’t know it would be murder; and Pete asked him if it was murder to kill a horsethief. He said that Mallette stole his money, and that stealin’ was stealin’; and, by golly, the judge agreed with him, I think! You see, he’s bein’ tried for first-degree murder, and if that knot-headed jury brings in a verdict of guilty, it’s up to the judge to soak him awful hard. He can either hang Pete or give him life.”

“If somebody don’t shoot the judge between now and the time he’s supposed to pass sentence,” said Roaring dryly.

“I don’t think they will,” said Hashknife. “There’s other things to think about.”

Hashknife didn’t tell them what he meant, but went back to the hotel to relieve Horse-Collar Fields. Sleepy was in good spirits, much better than Hashknife expected him to be.

"How's it comin', cowboy?" asked Sleepy.

"I'm just about to sing me a little song," replied Hashknife, and Sleepy knew what that song meant.

Hashknife did not have a particularly melodious voice and seldom did he lift his voice in song, except when a puzzle was working out to his satisfaction.

"And me flat in bed," wailed Sleepy. "But go easy, pardner. You can see just how easy it is for to go down and out. I never had no warnin'. I felt it slap me down, but I never heard the shot. It hurts worse now than it has any time. The doctor says it's healin' up fine. You'll go easy, won't you, Hashknife?"

"If you need help, call on Horse-Collar and Lovely. They're the biggest liars that ever saw the sun come up, but they're on the square."

"Dang the luck, I want to ride with you. Can't you put it off for a week or so? The doctor says I'll be able to ride in a week or ten days, if I wear a wide belt."

"You lay still and take it easy. Get well, cowboy. I shore miss you. Ain't had nobody crabbin' at me for two days, and it ain't natural. And I'm not goin' to get hurt. Can you eat anythin'?"

"Soup!"

"All right. I'll git a tray of grub at the restaurant, and a bowl of soup. We'll eat up here and, by golly, I'll stay here until daylight. I'm as scared as the judge was. I'll find Horse-Collar Fields and ask him to come agin' tomorrow morning."

It was just daylight when Hashknife left the hotel. The street was deserted at that time in the morning, but Hashknife did not lose his vigilance. He found the keeper of the livery-stable, asleep in his little inside office, and told him he was taking his horse out.

"Yeah, all right," yawned the man. "Need any help?"

"No, I'll manage," laughed Hashknife. "What time did Ryker get back last night?"

"Ryker? Oh, it was about midnight."

"I just wondered."

Hashknife went to his horse, grinning to himself in the gloom of the stable. He knew nothing about Ryker's having been out last night, but he had followed another of his hunches when he asked the question.

He took the right-hand road out of Turquoise City, traveling east. Hashknife had never been over this road, so he went carefully. The country was fairly flat for about two miles. Then the road entered the foot-hills. About four miles from town he swung off the road, but kept it in sight and finally came out on a hogback ridge from where he could get a good view of the 7AL ranch.

He was not over two hundred yards from the buildings, but his view of the one-story ranch-house was partly obstructed by a huge stable and several sycamore trees. Behind the stable sprawled a series of corrals and beyond them could be seen the top of the old bunkhouse.

There was smoke coming from the ranch-house. A man came around the corner of the stable and entered the corral at the rear, where there were several horses. A little later he came out, leading a bay horse, which he led around the stable out of Hashknife's sight.

Hashknife tied his horse in a thicket and came back to the crest of the ridge, where he sat down to wait. It was about thirty minutes later that three men rode away from the ranch-house and came down along the road, passing Hashknife close enough for him to identify Kent Cutter and Ted Ames. The third man was Henry Miller.

They disappeared down the road, and Hashknife went back to his horse. He guessed that Cutter had a cook. There was a fourth man, Jud Hardy. Hashknife knew him for a thin-faced, hard-jawed young man, who had bad eyes—not physically, but morally. Eyes meant quite a lot to Hashknife, when it came to judging a man's character.

Hashknife mounted his gray horse and rode down to the ranch-house. There was a main gate, but it was wide open, sagging on its hinges. He rode around to the rear, where he found the kitchen door open. There was a pleasant odor of frying bacon and boiling coffee, doubly pleasant to Hashknife, who had had no breakfast.

As he swung out of his saddle, the cook came to the door. He was a grizzled little man, with a big mustache and a slight limp; a typical old round-up cook. In his hand was a frying-pan, still smoking hot. He peered at Hashknife wonderingly.

"Hyah, pardner," greeted Hashknife, "how about a little breakfast?"

"Hyah," he grunted, "pretty good— mebby."

He looked Hashknife over carefully and glanced at the tall gray horse.

"Ridin' kinda early, ain't you, stranger?" he asked.

"No law ag'in' it, is there?"

"Not that I ever heard about. Excuse me. My name's McCall. 'Jinyus' McCall, to be exact. Used to be Albert, until I cooked a forty-year-old sage-hen for some fellers. One of 'em said I was a jinyus—and it stuck. Ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Hashknife laughed and scraped his heel along the short boards that had been laid as a walk near the door. He glanced down at the boards, but lifted his head quickly.

"C'mon in," invited Jinyus. "I'll make you somethin' to eat right off the stove."

"Fine."

Hashknife stooped over quickly and picked up a little copper shell near the boards. The cook was looking at him curiously.

"Somebody been havin' target practise, eh?" said Hashknife, exhibiting the twenty-two shell.

"Pop-gun practise!" snorted Jinyus. "Ever since Cutter sent away for that danged gun, they've shot at everythin' on the ranch. Nothin' is safe. Cutter is the boss here."

"Oh, I see," smiled Hashknife. He started to enter the kitchen, but a man's voice stopped him short.

"What in hell do you want here?"

Hashknife turned slowly. About ten feet away stood Jud Hardy. His hair was uncombed and he had the general appearance of a man who had just got out of bed.

"I didn't want anythin'," said Hashknife meekly.

He noticed that Jud's hand was swinging close to his gun.

"You didn't; eh?" flared Jud. "Who are you lookin' for?"

"Not a soul. I was just passin' and smelled breakfast; the cook said he'd feed me, so I was goin' to eat."

"Is that so? Well, the boss ain't here, and the cook don't run this ranch. If you came from town, it's damn funny you didn't meet him."

"I didn't say I came from town," said Hashknife.

"Didn't anybody ask you, did they? You turn around and get on that horse."

Turn around and get on that horse! That was just what Hashknife was not going to do. He started to turn, as if to comply with Hardy's order, but at the same time he drew his gun so quickly that Hardy was looking down the muzzle of it before he realized that Hashknife had not turned.

The cook stood there, his mouth wide open, the skillet still in his hand. Slowly Jud Hardy's hands came up to a level with his shoulders.

"Unbuckle your belt and let it drop," ordered Hashknife.

One look at Hashknife's eyes, and Hardy complied.

"Back up five steps. Cook, you stand like you are."

"Believe me!" gasped the cook earnestly.

Hashknife walked forward, plucked Hardy's gun from the holster and flung it far back toward the corral. Then he backed to his horse, mounted and bolstered his gun.

"Thanks for the breakfast, just the same, Jinyus," he said.

"Oh, you're completely welcome."

Without further conversation he whirled his horse around and galloped off down the road.

Jud Hardy stared at the cook and slowly put down his hands.

"That shore as hell beats me," declared the cook foolishly. "What was all that gunplay about, Jud?"

Jud spat savagely and went after his gun. It had struck on its muzzle and was half-full of dirt and gravel. Jud came back to the kitchen door, swearing to himself.

"Gee-mighty, that feller was shore forked!" said the cook. "Didja ever see a gun pulled thataway, Jud. Jist *whap!* And you're it."

"Yeah," growled Jud darkly. He was fast with a gun himself.

"What did he want, Jinyus?"

"Breakfast."

"Tha'sso? Is that all?"

"Well, that's all he asked for."

“What did he pick up off the ground? He was showin’ it to you.”

“Oh, that,” the cook grinned. “Nothin’ but one of them little empty twenty-two shells. He asked me if we’d been havin’ target practise, and I said that ever since Cutter had sent for that damn gun, they’d been shootin’ at everythin’.”

Jud stared at Jinyus for several moments.

“Yea-a-a-ah? The hell he did!”

“Shore did. Go wash your face and I’ll have you some eggs.”

“To hell with the eggs! I’m goin’ to town.”

Jud whirled and ran down to the bunkhouse. Jinyus looked after him, shaking his head.

“I dunno what it’s all about,” he told himself aloud, “but it looks t’ me as though somebody was all het up. My, but that jigger shore can yank a six-gun!”

Within fifteen minutes after the opening of court that morning the case had gone to the jury. Ryker had made no plea to the jury, and the judge’s instructions were summed up in very few words. The twelve men had filed out, preceded by Wind River Jim, who acted as bailiff.

The judge did not retire. He slumped forward on his desk, resting his chin on one hand and watching the crowded room. Ryker sat at his table, slouched back in his chair, confident that the jury would bring a verdict for him.

At the opposite table sat Dawn and Peter with Roaring Rigby. Peter was not handcuffed. All the cattle ranches in the country were represented. The Black Horse Saloon was closed, so that every one could attend, and there was a sprinkling of the girls from the redlight row.

English Ed had a front seat, as did Cutter and Frank Moran. The room buzzed with conversation. English Ed leaned past Cutter and spoke to Moran— “I wonder where Hartley is, Moran?”

“I don’t know.”

“He pulled out almost at daylight. One of my swampers saw him ride out of town.”

Moran smiled thinly.

“I can’t quite figure things out, Ed. I wonder who shot Stevens.”

“That’s a puzzle. Looks funny. Roaring thinks that bullet that hit Wind River Jim was intended for Hartley. In fact it burned Hartley’s neck before it hit Wind River.”

“Somebody is scared of ’em,” declared Moran.

“Why would anybody be scared of ’em?” queried Cutter.

“I don’t know—but they are.”

“Who—Hartley and Stevens?” asked Cutter.

“No, the men who shot ’em.”

Ryker got up and came over to them, a smile on his thin lips.

“What do you think of it?” he asked.

"It looks like a poor piece of justice to me," growled Moran. "That kid needed legal advice."

"He could have had it, Moran. I've played easy with him. There's not a juror from this end of the county, and I made no plea. What more could I do?"

"He was as good as hung before the trial started," said Cutter.

"That's the worst of it," said English Ed. "I'm sorry for my part in it. Mallette was no good. No, I don't mean that I uphold murdering a man because he's no good. But I'm of the opinion that Mallette stole that pot, and if Pete had killed him on the spot, I'd have hired a lawyer to free him."

Moran looked queerly at English Ed.

"I didn't expect that from you, Ed." The gambler flushed.

"I've been accused of a lot of things I never did, Moran."

"I suppose."

"The judge keeps an eye on me," said the gambler softly. "He thinks I tried to run him out. I didn't."

"He's getting old," said Ryker. "We need a younger man on the bench."

"You, for instance," suggested Moran.

"Why not? I belong here and I can qualify."

Ryker laughed, and walked over to the table beside Dawn. He spoke to her and she got quickly to her feet.

"Go and sit down where you belong," she said coldly.

Ryker laughed angrily, but did not move. The judge struck the top of his desk with a clenched hand.

"Ryker, go and sit down!" he snapped. "That girl and her brother are under the protection of this court."

"Oh, is that so?" demanded Ryker. "Since when did the court have jurisdiction over a prosecutor during a recess?"

Before the judge had a chance to reply, Pete Conley sprang from his chair, caught Ryker by the collar with his left hand and smashed him in the face with his right fist. He had only time to hit Ryker once before Roaring had grasped him in both arms and dragged him away.

Ryker went to his haunches, but staggered back to his feet, gore running from his nose, his big collar half-torn from his skinny neck. The room was in an uproar. Roaring forced Pete back into his chair and held him down.

Ryker was dazed, blinded. He clawed under his coat trying to draw a big Colt gun before Cutter sprang across the railing and grasped him. He swung Ryker around, talking swiftly. He handed Ryker a handkerchief to mop off the blood; and the prosecutor of Black Horse County leaned against his own table.

The judge hammered wildly on his table, while the cowboys in the audience whooped with joy. This was the first bit of action they had seen. Roaring talked earnestly with Pete, who nodded in agreement. Roaring smiled with evident satisfaction, and there was a ghost of a smile on the face of the old judge.

“By golly!” roared the voice of Lovely Lucas from the back of the room. “That’s the first time I ever saw a half-breed git the best of anythin’ in a courtroom!”

“Turn ’em loose, and I’ll take the breed for forty dollars, even money!” boomed Mark Clayton, of the Big 4.

The old judge rapped for order.

“Cease this disturbance, or I’ll have the sheriff clear the court!”

“You better let well enough alone,” said Hank Pitts. “If Roarin’ Rigby lets loose of Pete, Ryker loses his scalp.”

Hank’s sally brought a laugh that the judge was unable to check. Dawn was leaning forward on the table, crying. Ryker was angry. He tried to arrange his collar, but found that Pete had torn out the button-hole. He finally took it off, exposing about eight inches of thin neck.

Wind River Jim came from the juryroom, closing the door behind him. The judge rapped again for silence.

“They’ve made up their minds, Judge,” said Wind River.

“Bring them in,” said the judge wearily.

The room became silent, as the twelve men filed in and sat down. They looked curiously at Ryker, who was holding the handkerchief to his nose and lips, but none of them looked at Pete.

“Gentlemen,” said the old judge, “have you reached a decision?”

The foreman of the jury, a tall, bearded cattleman from south of Turquoise City, arose and handed Wind River a sheet of paper.

“We have, Judge,” he said, and sat down heavily.

Wind River gave the paper to the judge, who read it slowly.

For a space of possibly ten seconds the judge stared at the back of the room, not a muscle of his face moving. An impatient cowboy scraped a boot-heel on the floor, and it sounded very loud and harsh in that silent room.

“This is your verdict?” asked the judge, without looking at the jury.

“That’s it,” said the foreman.

The old judge shifted his eyes and looked at Peter Conley.

“Peter Conley, stand up,” he said. It was little more than a whisper.

Roaring nudged Pete; he got awkwardly to his feet. Dawn got to her feet, as if to assist Pete, and the judge shifted his gaze to her. He looked back at the verdict.

“Peter Conley,” he said, “the jury has found you guilty of murder in the first degree.”

The judge stopped, but did not look up. Dawn reached over and put her hand on Pete's arm. He turned his head and looked at her, his face twisted painfully.

There came a slight noise from the rear of the room, and the judge looked up. It was Hashknife Hartley, coming down the aisle, his spurs rasping harshly on the board floor—a jarring note in the most dramatic moment of the trial. But Hashknife did not seem aware of it. There was an empty seat at the end of the first row, and he went all the way down to it.

He looked at Ryker as he sat down, and a smile creased his wide lips. He looked at Peter and Dawn, standing up. The girl looked at him and there were tears in her eyes and on her cheeks. Hashknife turned his head and looked at the silent jury. The room was very quiet.

"They found him guilty, Hartley," whispered a cowboy behind Hashknife and the whisper could be heard all over the room.

The judge looked sharply at the whisperer.

"Peter Conley," he said slowly, as if weighing every word, "you have been found guilty. Is there any reason why the sentence of the court should not be imposed at this time?"

Peter did not speak. He did not know what to say.

"Have you nothing to say, Peter Conley?"

"I didn't kill him, Judge; that's all I say." Hashknife got slowly to his feet, facing the judge.

"If you don't mind, Judge," he said slowly, "I'd like to speak for Pete Conley."

"I object!" snapped Ryker hotly.

"You look like you had once before," said Hashknife. "I'm kinda surprized at all that red on your handkerchief, Ryker; I thought you'd bleed yaller."

Ryker turned appealingly to the judge, but the judge did not look at him.

"What did you want to say, Hartley?" he asked.

"Why not sentence the guilty man?"

"The guilty man?" It was a whisper—a hoarse whisper.

"The man who killed Joe Mallette by mistake, Judge. The man who dragged Joe Mallette from your door and took him across that vacant piece of ground, draggin' his boots full of gravel. Mallette was so drunk that he made a mistake in houses, Judge. You're safe; you shot because you thought he had come to fulfill that warnin'. Tell the truth!"

Roaring was on his feet, as were half of the men in the room. The judge continued to stare at Hashknife, whose voice rang like a bell in that crowded room.

"What do you mean, Hartley?" cried Roaring.

"Ask the judge; he knows."

The old judge got slowly to his feet, his face white, his mouth half-open, breathing heavily. His right hand was in the drawer of his desk, clutching the heavy revolver.

“Be quiet!” cried Hashknife. “Let him talk!”

The judge wet his lips with his tongue.

“It’s time to tell,” he said. “Yes, it’s time. Hartley’s right. I hoped the jury—but that’s past. I killed Mallette. The gambling element warned me to get out of town. They swore to kill me. You all know it. I wouldn’t run. I—I waited for them to come after me. Mallette came. He flung open the door of my house and came in. I—I was sitting in my chair beside my table, and I shot once.”

His eyes went slowly around the room and he swallowed painfully.

“I never shot a man before,” he continued. “Wong Kee and I dragged him away. Better to have left him there and sent for the sheriff. But a man don’t know what he would do, until the time comes. Pete Conley is innocent. I killed in what I thought was self-defense.”

He lifted his head and his voice grew stronger.

“I’m glad it’s over now.”

English Ed was on his feet, facing Hashknife and the crowd.

“I don’t blame the judge,” he said. “Mallette was drunk and he got into the wrong place; but I’ll swear that Mallette was not in any plot to run the judge out. It was not the gamblers. I’ll swear that we had nothing to do with it.”

“And I’ll back you, Holmes,” said Hashknife.

He stepped through the railing his back to the jury, where he could face the crowd. A man was coming hurriedly down the aisle. It was Horse-Collar Fields. He stopped just short of the railing and said to Hashknife—

“He’ll be here in a minute, Hashknife.” Hashknife backed up a step and his hands dropped to his sides. The eyes of all in the room were upon him, and they saw him hunch forward a trifle, his right arm lifting just above his waist-line.

“It’s Jud Hardy comin’,” he said evenly. “He’s comin’ from the 7AL ranch, ridin’ the hocks off his horse to tell his outfit that Hashknife Hartley found an empty twenty-two shell beside the kitchen door. He tried to kill me, I reckon. He knew that a twenty-two was used to kill them eight Big 4 steers. He knew there was a million dollar ledge of gold ore on the Hot Creek ranch, and he wanted his share. He knew, and his outfit knew, that as long as Moses Conley lived he’d never sell out—and they wanted it. So they tried to send the Big 4 against Conley and when that didn’t work they tried to kill him. Cutter—don’t!”

Hashknife drew swiftly and fired from his hip. The report of his gun blended with the one that flashed beside him from Horse-Collar’s gun.

Cutter staggered sidewise, trying to cock the gun in his hand, but English Ed caught him in his arms and flung him to the floor. Wind River Jim vaulted the railing and fell

upon Ted Ames, who was trying to reach the aisle, and from further back in the room came the triumphant yell from Slim Regan:

“Ho-o-o-old fast, Henry! Take his feet, Bill!”

They had captured Henry Miller. Horse-Collar had fired one shot at Ryker, who had drawn his gun, and then had whirled and run swiftly from the courtroom.

“Got Mister Miller!” yelled Regan.

From outside the building came a fusilade of shots, a wild yell. Some of the men ran out, crowding at the doorway, and some of them fell down. The room was in an uproar. The old judge had drawn his gun from the drawer and was standing very straight, resting the muzzle of the gun on his desk. The room was hazy with smoke. Roaring was shielding Dawn from the crowd.

English Ed got slowly to his feet. One knee of his pin-striped trousers was split wide open and the knot of his necktie was under his left ear. Cutter did not get up. Ryker was sprawled across his desk, one hand hanging limply over the edge, his gun on the floor. Hashknife stepped over to the table and touched the prosecuting attorney on the shoulder.

“Horse-Collar Fields shoots straight,” said Hashknife meaningly.

The crowd of men was coming into the room again, headed by Horse-Collar. They were bringing a disheveled Jud Hardy, whose face was bruised and dusty, clothes torn.

“He tried to git away on his bronc when he heard the shootin’!” yelled Horse-Collar triumphantly. “I had t’ hit him on the fly, by golly!”

“Kent Cutter’s dead,” said Roaring Rigby. “I don’t know yet what it was all about, Hashknife.”

“He’s a liar!” wailed Jud Hardy.

“You don’t even know what he said!” snorted Lovely Lucas.

“Bring ’em down here,” ordered Hashknife. “All three of ’em.”

They came—Henry Miller, Jud Hardy, Ted Ames—brought down bodily by cowboys who longed for a chance to handle them roughly. Hashknife looked them over. Miller and Hardy shut their lips tightly. Hashknife stepped up to Ted Ames.

“You’ll talk,” he said. “I’ve got the goods on all of you; but a talk will help you out, Ames—State’s evidence, you know.”

“Squealer, eh?” defiantly.

“Not now. It’s a hangin’ matter—unless you talk.”

Ames looked around at the faces of the men.

“I’ll talk,” he said. “Cutter and Ryker schemed it, just like you said. Cutter shot Conley; Jimmy Moran almost got Cutter that night. Me and Cutter killed them Big 4 steers. Pete Conley had the only twenty-two in the country, until Cutter sent away for one. Usin’ a twenty-two would cinch it on to Conley. Cutter wanted Mose Conley out

of the way, so he could buy the ranch. Dawn Conley admitted to Ryker that she and her mother would be willin' to sell."

"Who shot Sleepy, my pardner, and tried to kill me?"

"Me and Jud Hardy. I missed you, Cutter said we'd have to kill you both, and they'd blame English Ed and his gang."

"All right," nodded Hashknife. "Cutter knew I found that mine, didn't he?"

"Ryker came out and told us last night."

"And Ryker was the one who wrote the warnings, wasn't he? He used paper that the county furnished."

"He wrote 'em," nodded Ames. "Cutter wanted to be judge of this county, and he hated Judge Beal. They warned the sheriff, too. Cutter said he was too honest. But we didn't know who killed Mallette. We thought Pete was to blame for that. Ryker wanted to marry Dawn Conley. Said he'd get control of the property thataway. Ryker was a bad bird."

"Thank you, Ames. You're wise to tell it all, and it won't hurt you none at the trial."

Hashknife turned to the old judge, who still stood at the desk, gun in hand.

"You can put up your gun, Judge," he said. "The whole county will vindicate you for your mistake. Mallette was a thief and a card-sharp. You did just what any man would have done. Now, forget it."

"I—I'll have to put these three birdies in jail," said Roarin', "and turn Jimmy Moran loose, eh?"

"Y'betcha."

"Bring 'em along, boys."

Hashknife turned to meet Dawn and Pete. None of them spoke for several moments. Franklyn Moran stepped beside Dawn; he seemed bewildered. Hashknife smiled at Dawn.

"Let's not talk about it, Dawn," he suggested. "Jimmy will be out pretty quick, and he'll come up the street, you know."

Dawn glanced quickly at Franklyn Moran.

"It's—uh—all right," he said. "Fine, Dawn."

"I don't talk much," said Pete dumbly.

"That's fine," grinned Hashknife, "You're a man after my own heart."

Dawn and Pete went hurriedly up the aisle. The old judge came down to Hashknife and Moran and held out his hand to Hashknife.

"I don't pretend to know much about it," he said slowly.

They shook hands gravely, and Moran shook hands with the judge.

"You know many things, young man," said the judge. "I have grown very old today, but I'm going to grow younger. I hope you stay with us; Turquoise City needs men like you."

"I hope he will stay," said Moran. "I'm still shocked, and I don't know what to do or say."

"Will you do me a favor?" asked Hashknife.

"Anything in the world, Hartley."

"Come out and see Moses Conley with me."

"Moses Conley? Why, well, that's quite—I'll go."

They walked from the court room and met the doctor on the stairs.

"My goodness!" he blurted. "More shooting! I jump around like a grasshopper. What was it? Nobody talks—they yell. Ten men yelling at me at the same time. I can't hardly keep Stevens in bed. Fields came up and danced on the foot of the bed. Crazy men."

"You can't do any good up there, Doc," said Hashknife.

"Only in your capacity as coroner."

They went on down to the street. Jimmy was running up from the jail, and Dawn met him. Pete stood on the sidewalk, blinking around. He didn't know what to do.

Hashknife took Moran by the arm and led him down to where Dawn and Jimmy were looking at each other. Jimmy looked at his father and grinned foolishly.

"Hyah, Dad," he said. "How are you?"

"All right, Jimmy. Why don't you kiss her. We're all going out to see her father."

"For heaven's sake!" Jimmy cried. "Who upset the world?" He stepped past Dawn and held out his hand to Hashknife. "You did," said Jimmy. "I'm all out of words, Hartley."

"Good, boy! So am I."

It was Mrs. Conley who saw them from afar, as they came up the dusty road. There was a top-buggy, and several men on horseback. She had been anxiously waiting for Dawn to come home and bring the news. It had been impossible for her to leave her husband, as there was no one else to take care of him. She went back to the old man.

"Some folks come," she said. "One buggy, five, six horses. They turn in our gate."

"Who can it be? What has happened now, Minnie? Dawn said she was sure the case would go to the jury today. Who would be coming here today?"

"I go look."

Mrs. Conley stood dumbly on the porch and watched Pete and Dawn and Jimmy Moran get out of the buggy, while Franklyn Moran, Slim Regan, Lovely Lucas, Hank Pitts and Hashknife dismounted from their horses.

Dawn ran up and threw her arms around her mother, who merely stared at everybody, especially at Pete, who grinned sheepishly.

“Peter is free, mother!” exclaimed Dawn. “He didn’t shoot Mallette! Don’t you understand? He’s free!”

“Pretty damn good, eh?” The Indian woman smiled.

“Will you shake hands with me?” asked Moran, holding out his hand to Mrs. Conley.

She looked closely at him for a moment.

“Your name Moran. You want to shake hands? You crazy?”

“No, I’m not crazy. I want to be a friend.”

“Damn funny.”

She shook hands with him wonderingly, and they all went into the house. Dawn ran to her father, telling him the good news. Conley patted her on the head and stared at Franklyn Moran, his sunken eyes wide with wonder.

“Conley,” said Moran, coming in close to the bed, “I came to see if we can’t be friends. It seems that our kids have decided to marry each other, and I think it’s time for us to bury the hatchet. Everything else has been straightened out. The 7AL were the ones that caused the trouble. They tried to start war between us. They killed my cattle on your land, and they tried to kill you. Hartley run ’em down. Cutter is dead and the rest of his gang are in jail. Ryker is dead; he was a leader in their crooked work. Will you shake hands with me?”

The old man held out a shaking hand.

“Hartley tells me you are rich,” said Moran, “and I want to be the first one to congratulate you. Ryker and Cutter discovered a rich gold ledge on your ranch, and that’s one of the reasons they wanted to buy you out. Hartley found it, too. That was one of his clews, I suppose.”

The old man’s eyes opened widely and he stared at Hashknife.

“Rich gold ledge?” he queried wonderingly.

“Rich enough to make them do murder to get it,” said Hashknife. “It’s that old prospect you told me about—the one east of Hot Creek, under the big sycamore.”

Conley sank back on his pillow and stared at the ceiling.

“It’s awful rich,” said Hashknife. “Rotten with gold.”

“Rotten with gold,” echoed Conley. “Crooked gold!”

He lifted himself on his elbow and looked at Moran.

“Remember why I got mad at you, Frank? You cut me out of a deal. Mebby it was business; but that’s all past. You had money; you bought several pieces of property and paid a good price on surface showings, you remember?”

“I did, Mose.”

“Oh, I was mad,” smiled Conley. “I was hot-headed in those days. I wanted to get even with you; so I blew over a hundred dollars’ worth of gold-dust into that rotten, red quartz, with a shotgun. I salted it for you, Frank; but before I got a chance to show

it to you, you left the country. I hated you for leaving. I hated what I had done so much that I never even tried to hammer the gold out of that little ledge. And that's what caused all this misery."

"And it's been there over twenty-five years, Mose?"

"Yes, my first and last crooked work."

"Pretty damn good!" exclaimed Mrs. Conley.

"That's right," said Hashknife. "I know how they felt. I had a touch of it myself."

He walked out to the porch and Dawn followed him out.

"Do you realize what you've done today?" she asked.

Hashknife looked at her curiously.

"Aw, I didn't do nothin'," he said slowly. "It just kinda worked out thataway. I think Jimmy's lookin' for you."

As Dawn turned back to the door, Slim Regan stepped out on the porch, his hat tilted forward. He scratched the back of his hat in evident bewilderment.

"I'll be darned," he said slowly. "Lotsa things I don't *sabe* yet, Hartley. You say that Cutter and his gang knowed you was after 'em, and jist the same they go and leave a twenty-two shell layin' around where you could find it."

"They didn't, Slim; I dropped it there myself. Their mistake was in admittin' it."

"F'r gosh sake! And what made you think Jimmy Moran didn't shoot Conley?"

"Because there was two shots fired. Jimmy shot one, but Conley didn't shoot any."

"The hell he didn't? There was an empty shell—"

"But it never was fired in Conley's gun. He always kept the hammer of his gun on an empty shell, Slim. This shell had a queer dent in the primer, so I accidentally fired the gun to see what mark it made. That was the time Horse-Collar and his gang started the trouble. After the gravel in Mallette's boots proved that he'd been dragged, I picked the judge as the killer."

"Detectin'," said Slim slowly, "ain't nothin' but jist common sense, is it?"

"And a lot of luck, Slim."

"Well, I'll be danged!"

Slim went clumping back into the house, anxious to talk.

Hashknife walked out to his gray horse and swung into the saddle. He was just a trifle weary and he wanted to get back to town, but Moran called to him, hurrying down from the rear of the house.

"How much do I owe you, Hartley?" he asked.

"What for?" asked Hashknife blankly.

"For what you've done. I realize it is more than I can ever pay you, but I—"

"Then I'll always have somethin' comin'," grinned Hashknife. "Forget it, Moran. Right now I'm goin' to town and fold myself around some ham and eggs. And then I'll have to tell Sleepy what he missed. So long!"

He rode swiftly away, leaving Moran alone, check-book in hand. Mrs. Conley, Dawn and Pete came out on the porch, looking for Hashknife, but he was far down the road. Moran folded up his check-book and came back to the porch.

“I can’t figure him out,” said Moran.

“Pretty hard,” admitted Pete blankly. “He got me loose.”

“He’s wonderful,” said Dawn.

“Damn right!” said Mrs. Conley emphatically.

Which was all right with Hashknife, as long as he didn’t hear what was said.