

The Brushpopper and the Lady

by LES SAVAGE, JR.

Ramrodding the Broken Shield was a full-time job, Hugh Mitchell figured —until the lovely tenderfoot from the East showed up and proved to him that that was only a part of his duties!

"Agatha!" he shouted again, trying to close the distance between them.



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HUGH MITCHELL pulled his horse up sharply, turning it aside to cut off the woman, and forced her to halt. Then he sat there broadside across the trail, eyes squinted with the effort of listening. Late sunlight filtered the Texas brush to cast weird shadow patterns across his fiddling stud horse. There was little sound save the rustling mesquite in the breeze. "What's the matter?" Agatha Ware asked, from behind him. "Did you hear something?" He gave her an absent, backward glance, frowning in puzzled irritation. She was a tall girl, in what was no doubt the latest in riding habits from her fashionable London dressmaker. She had called it a Zouave jacket, with full Turkish trousers gathered at her trim ankles. Her shimmering hair was swept up under a matching fez, the same jade green as her eyes. She made a vivid, arresting picture, for a man used to the poor, slatternly, brush-women, in their cheap, cotton wrappers and home-made shoes.

"It sounded like voices off to the left," Mitchell told her. "There shouldn't be any Broken Shield hands over this way today. You stay here and I'll take a look."

"Now don't tell me it's dangerous," Lady Agatha said, in a bored, condescending way. "They told me in

London I'd find an Indian behind every bush, but I thought that was merely a provincialism."

"Look Lady Agatha," Mitchell told her, patiently. "As foreman of your uncle's ranch, I'm responsible for your safety. I'd rather you waited here."

"I'm coming with you. If I am to take over the Broken Shield, I might as well see its worst side first. I do hope they take this fez off before they scalp me. I'd hate so to get it dirty."

He could not help the anger flashing in the glance he cast her. Then he turned, tight-lipped, and drove his Copperbottom stud into the thick chaparral at the right of the trail, taking a secret pleasure in the soft sounds of disgust she made as the brush raked her face and caught at her clothes.

Mitchell was a big, rangy man, in the saddle, narrow through the hips, broad shoulders bunching up across the neck beneath his linsey-woolsey shirt. His eyes were the color of stirred gunsmoke, creased speculatively at the edges by the weather and a habitual curiosity about all the little signs of life scattered in its wake. His long mouth had a flaring curl to its upper lip that could express anger or humor without changing its line much. His legs, long

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and cat-gutted with muscle from a lifetime in the saddle, were in the grease-blackened leggins of this brush country.

He threaded the thicket with his eyes wide open and straight ahead, ducking branches and thorns automatically, and with open country in sight ahead, he reached down casually, and tugged his gun loose from its holster. He broke from the thicket onto a bank overlooking a dry stream-bed. A steer lay fretting in the bone-white sand, lashed to a *coma* tree against the other bank. There were two men hunkered down by it, poking under the hair of the hide and peering into its mouth.

“What's going on?” Mitchell demanded. “That's a Broken Shield steer you've got there.”

The nearest man rose. He was Fayette Baxter, hard-bitten, with a narrow, pinched face and bitter eyes, shoulders stooped a little in his faded ducking jacket, legs giving a horse-collar bow to his alkali-whitened levis.

“Maybe I'm lookin' for Texas fever, or botholes in the hide,” he said insolently. “I heard some of the Broken Shield stuff was running that.”

“We have had a little trouble along that line,” Mitchell said, “but I don't see it's any of Studs Kelly's business, Has the local gambling fallen off so bad that he has to run a few wet cows on the side?”

“Kelly doesn't have to rustle his beef,” the second man said, rising casually to face Mitchell. He was Boa Snyder, with the scars of the brush and the burns of the rope still scoring his hands and face, though he had given them up some time ago to work for Studs Kelly, the Red Wheel gambling boss. Snyder was heavier than Baxter, the beefy bulk of his shoulders stretching at his jacket which was made from an Appaloosa horse; a white hide with dark red spots splashed over it, as if some painter had spilled blood in a bowl of cream. He wore his oak-butted Remington tied down and his fiat-topped Mormon had a telltale bullet hole through its brim.

Mitchell took in the sandy floor of the wash and the two horses picketed on the other side of the *coma* tree and realized that Snyder was right. There were no signs of a fire and no running irons under their saddle leathers. “If you're not picking up wet beef, what are you doing?” Mitchell asked. “Is your boss figuring to buy some of the Broken Shield stuff.”

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Snyder's high cheek-boned face held all the impassivity of an Indian's and his voiced rustled soft as silk. "Studs Kelly never buys anything. People like him so much they just give it to him."

"That's right," Fayette Baxter grinned, "and if they don't give it, he takes it."

"What is it, Hugh?" Lady Agatha asked. "Are these men stealing our cows?"

Baxter turned to her, making a short, mocking bow. "If Mr. Mitchell had introduced us, ma'am, I might have told you just what we're doing with this critter."

Mitchell held his anger on a thin string, speaking through stiff lips. "This is Lady Agatha Ware, Baxter."

"Ah, then Studs was right," Baxter murmured.

"About what?" Mitchell asked.

"He said Lord Basil made a stipulation in his will that when he died, in order to inherit the Broken Shield, Lady Agatha had to come to live on the ranch for six months or it went to Lord Basil's nephew. Now why would he do that?"

Agatha made a disgusted sound. "The old fool had some crazy notion I would come to love it as much as he claimed to. He was afraid I might get rid of it without ever seeing it, if he

didn't make some 'stipulation like that.' Her lip curled wryly. "How right he was."

Boa Snyder laughed huskily. "You ain't done a very good job of convincing the lady what a pretty country we have, Hugh. I thought you was smoother with the gals than that."

"Let's forget the gals," Mitchell told him, "Untie that steer, Snyder, and let it up."

Snyder turned to his own animal, an old brush-scarred Billie horse with a rawhide-laced saddle. "You untie him, ramrod. I found out what I wanted."

Mitchell swung off his Copperbottom and took one great lunge after Snyder, grabbing his arm and spinning him around. As the man came face-to-face with him, Mitchell saw Fayette Baxter jump to his horse. He never packed a six-gun, but there was an over-and-under thrust in the saddle scabbard on his rigging, and he was after it. Without stopping his motion, Mitchell shoved the off-balance Snyder back into Fayette Baxter. It sent both men hard into the horse, spooking the hairy little bronc so that it reared high, squealing.

Pinned into the animal by Snyder's staggering body, Baxter still managed to pull his over-and-under gun free.

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But Mitchell had come right in after him, lunging low to smash the point of his shoulder against Boa Snyder's hip, spinning him off to one side. He brought that same shoulder into Baxter's belly, doubling him over. Mitchell twisted away, tearing the over-and-under from Baxter's weakened hands, and wheeled towards Snyder, as the man finally got his feet under him and whirled back, going for six-gun.

Mitchell swung the rifle around by the tip of its barrel so that the butt caught Snyder on the side of his face. He went over sideways with a sharp cry, sprawling into the sand. Mitchell reversed the over-and-under to hold it for shooting, spinning back towards Snyder, who had gone to his hands and knees with the pain of that blow in his belly, and was starting to rise again.

"If you're going to get up and untie the cow, go ahead," Mitchell told him. "If not, you'd better stay right there on your hands and knees."

IT was about five miles back to the Broken Shield ranch house, through heavy brush country, laced by winding, little-known trails. After Snyder and Baxter had untied the steer and let it run squalling into the thickets, they had left in a dour,

threatening silence, crashing off through the brush towards town. Mitchell had mounted and turned back towards the Broken Shield without a word to Lady Agatha. She rode silently for a few minutes behind him, but when they came to the first space broad enough to ride double, he found her big red bay at his hip.

"What do you suppose they were doing, Hugh?" she asked.

"I haven't any idea," he told her. "They obviously weren't rustling the beef. Studs Kelly's too smooth to have his men do anything that open. As soon as I get you back to the house, I'm going into Red Wheel and see him about this."

"You were rather rough with those men," she said. "Do you always settle your difficulties in such a forthright manner?"

Mitchell's lips drew tight across his teeth. Puzzled by what Snyder and Baxter were doing, still filled with the anger of their insolence, he reacted in thoughtless irritation.

"Maybe we do things a little different out here than you did back in... civilization," he said. "Like sitting a saddle. You show more air between you and the kak than the holes in a Davy Crockett fence."

"Have you ever heard of posting?" she asked thinly.

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“I rode with your uncle every day,” he answered. “He posted, but it never looked like that.’ Mitchell watched a confused, almost fearful look cross her face. “Lord Basil told me you were such a fine rider,” he said. “Jumping contests in Ireland and everything. He’d be mighty disappointed in you right now.”

She flushed hotly, tossing her head. “I can jump anything you can,” she cried defiantly, and clapped heels to her bay. It broke into a headlong gallop, almost pitching her off its rump. She regained her balance with difficulty, jerking aside to avoid a clawing arm of black chaparral as she burst down the trail. Mitchell kicked his own horse into a gallop.

“Agatha,” he called. “Stop it. I didn’t mean that. This brush will tear you off in a minute.”

She plunged through a hole in a mesquite thicket with a great, roaring crackle of brush that drowned him out. He followed her through, face whipped by shreds of her jacket that had been torn off, his brow corrugated with an intense frown. Now, not only was she showing too much space above the saddle, but her hands jerked high with the reins whenever she shifted to dodge the brush. If the bay had been a spooky horse, it would have shied and

pitched her long ago. It was a lack of horsemanship that did not fit in with his conception of an English gentlewoman, somehow. And it only seemed a part of many things that did not fit, little things, that he had noticed, ever since she arrived.

“Agatha,” he shouted again, trying to close the distance between them. “I apologize. If you want to jump, don’t do it here. These vines will heel your animal for sure.”

At this moment, however, the trail opened up before her, with a great, gnarled post oak fallen across the way. She headed straight for it, cropping her animal.

“Let up on the reins,” Mitchell shouted. “You’re breaking his neck.”

But the animal left the ground with her reins still so tight its chin was pulled in. Plunging after her, Mitchell waited to see her weight thrust forward. But it remained too far back. The bay was one of Lord Basil’s own jumpers, imported from Ireland, but even this magnificent beast could not compensate for the load on its rump. Its hind legs left the ground sluggishly, and caught on the log going over, and Mitchell shouted out loud as the horse fell.

THE animal and Agatha disappeared completely beyond the

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log for a moment, and then Mitchell was taking the jump, with the sight of her lying on the ground beneath a torn mesquite bush. He swung off his stud before it was stopped, dropping the reins and running to kneel beside her.

“You little fool,” he murmured. “You shouldn’t have done that, you little fool . . .”

But, suddenly, the words stopped coming out. Because she wasn’t little, and she wasn’t a fool. She was a large, fully formed girl, in his arms, and her proximity blotted out all the antagonism he had felt between them before. Her eyes fluttered open, half-lidded, like a sleepy child’s sultry and smoky in her daze. Her lower lip grew full, taking on a pouting, satiny curve, and when she took a breath, it swelled her breast against him.

“It’s all right, Hugh,” she said, huskily. “I don’t think I’m hurt.”

“You know,” he said, “when your guard’s dropped, and you let all that London fog roll away, you don’t look like England at all, to me.”

A sharp, fearful light flashed in her eyes, and she stiffened in his arms, twisting away, suddenly, struggling to sit up. He let her go, sitting back, filled with that puzzlement again. She pulled a strand of red hair back into place, arranging her coif fretfully.

“Just because she had a tumble doesn’t give the foreman a right to get fresh with his boss,” she said.

He stared at her a moment, trying to define this paradox in her, this mixture of warmth and chill. “I didn’t mean to be fresh,” he said.

A contrite look filled her eyes, and she bent to grasp his arm. “I’m sure you didn’t, Hugh. See if the bay is all right, will you? I think I can ride.”

She withdrew her hand abruptly, as if realizing how far she had bridged the gap. When he tried to help her rise, she brushed him off,

“Get the bay, will you?” she said, irritably.

He went after the big, red horse, face flushed a little. What was she doing? It seemed he could still feel her hand on his arm. Like the burn of a poker. No woman had ever affected him that way before. He wasn’t going to let it happen, now, was he? With this arrogant, spoiled creature, hot one moment, cold the next, never even knowing her own mind. But as he caught the bay, where it had spooked into a thicket, and felt its legs to make sure that they were not harmed, he knew that he had no control over what was happening to him. When he brought it back to her and held the stirrup, just the sight of her lithe, full body, swinging up,

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started a little pulse beating raggedly in his temple. He stood there looking up at her, and then turned silently to mount his own horse.

They rode in a long silence, threading their way through a narrow, thorny trail, until the first crumbling walls of an ancient building appeared through the white brush ahead. Agatha pulled her bay up, frowning at this, her eyes running down the line of adobe battlements to where the rooms began, most of them roofless rectangles with a few blackened beams remaining, the white brush and *agrita* climbing through gaping windows and over crumbling gaps of the maze of walls. It had its own, indefinable beauty, the picturesque beauty of any tangled, ancient ruin, touching something nostalgic in a person. He saw the way her head lifted, the interest kindling in her eyes.

“Better look out,” he said, “You’ll find yourself liking it.”

Anger flashed in her eyes, the haughtiness returning. “I don’t think there’s any danger of that, Mitchell.”

He stared at her, unable to understand her apparent hatred of this country. Born and bred in the brush, he knew a fierce love for its harsh, brutal beauty. It was one thing that had given him such an affinity with

Lord Basil, when the Englishman had first come here. Son of a poor family, Mitchell had gotten a job as a cowhand on the Broken Shield when he was only sixteen, and for nine years, had stayed with Lord Basil, becoming closer to the man than his own nephew, Conrad, had ever been. When he died, Lord Basil had given a choice section of his land to Mitchell, for the time when he would want to start a ranch of his own. He looked forward to that day, and this woman’s contempt of a land he loved so deeply instilled in him a deep animosity. He looked towards the crumbled buildings, answering her questions reluctantly.

“It’s an old Spanish fort,” he said. “I don’t think anybody else but the Indians even know it’s here. I took you through a short cut to the Broken Shield. You’d probably never be able to find your way back.”

“I have an eye for landmarks,” she said. “I’d start at the dry wash, I know my way to there, at least. Then I’d turn into the thickets at that pair of burned oaks. I’d follow the holes in the brush till I reached a great black tree shaped like a cross. Here I’d turn straight into the sun, if it were forenoon, or straight away from it in the afternoon. I’d follow that direction about a mile to a heap of

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bleaching cow skulls. How am I doing?"

"Amazing," he said. "Are you sure you come from England?"

Again there was that flash in her eyes, and the warmth withdrew itself from her face. Without speaking, she reined her horse around and trotted ahead. He did not start immediately. He stared after her, frowning. There was a strange, cold sensation in the pit of his stomach. A laughing owl started cackling off in some brakes, and he glanced over in that direction. Then, with a savage shake of his head, he thumped his horse into a trot, after Lady Agatha.

II

RED WHEEL stood near the southern line of Live Oak county, not much of a town; a strange mingling of squat adobe hovels and two-story, false fronted frames spreading away from a typical plaza, to peter out quickly in the brush. Most of the business was done in the plaza, and it was towards there that Hugh Mitchell rode, dust ruffling softly from beneath the hooves of his trotting horse. He had left Agatha at the Broken Shield ranch, and headed for town at a good clip, to reach it in late afternoon.

He passed the soft, musical gabble of Mexicans dumping onions and red chiles into a two-wheeled cart as they closed up the stalls comprising the open market along the south side of the plaza. He was heading for Studs Kelly's Aces and Eights, on the north side, but before he reached the tie-racks in front of the building, he saw Ellis Ashford step out from the door of his office, brief-case under one arm. Ashford had been Lord Basil's lawyer for the last few years, and was a tall, distinguished man in Panama hat and tropical whites wilted by a day in the spring heat of this land.

"How's Lady Agatha getting along?" Ashford wanted to know.

Mitchell's brow was corrugated by a small frown. "All right, I guess. How long had it been since Lord Basil saw his niece, Ashford?"

"Ten years or so. Why?"

"You'd never seen her before?"

"Didn't have to. She was the living image of those pictures he gave me."

"She was to get ten thousand pounds upon her arrival, wasn't she?" Mitchell asked. "Whether she decided to keep the ranch at the end of the six months or not."

"That's right," the older man answered, "I've given her the check."

"Has she tried to cash it?"

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“Of course not,” Ashford snorted. “There isn’t a tenth that much cash in Red Wheel, Hugh. That’s fifty thousand dollars, you know. What are you driving at? What on earth’s the matter ”

Mitchell shook his head. “I don’t know, Ashford. There’s something funny going on—I’ll see you at the party tonight.”

He necked the Copperbottom on up the line of buildings to the cottonwood racks before Kelly’s saloon. It was one of the few frame buildings in town, a gaudy two-story structure, fronted with white shiplap, gingerbread covering its tawdry facade. A row of windows and batwing doors opened out on the boardwalk that ran the length of its front, the only sidewalk in Red Wheel.

It was hot and dusty inside, and what few men stood at the bar took little interest in Mitchell. Opposite the bar, a half-dozen round, deal tables stood, empty and covered at this hour. A house-man sat at the last one, listlessly playing solitaire. Mitchell passed him without a word, going up the broad stairs at the rear, to the balcony above. The dry, insufferable heat of this country had dehydrated them, until they shook and creaked beneath his passage.

Studs Kelly’s office opened off the balcony. The door stood open, so Mitchell stepped inside. The room displayed a tawdry attempt at elegance, with its two deep chairs covered with mohair that moths had already eaten into, and the leather-upholstered Turkish ottoman set against one wall, that had been ripped and kicked by spurs until the cotton stuffing was spilling out on the imitation Brussels carpet.

Kelly, himself, sat behind the broad, marble-topped desk. He was facing toward the window, seated in a swivel chair, his spurred boots propped up on the window-sill. There was a whiskey decanter on the desk, with an open newspaper propped up against it, and he held a half-filled glass in his hand. “Pour yourself a drink, Mitchell,” Kelly said, without turning around.

Mitchell said curtly, “When I want a drink, it won’t be any of your rotgut, Studs. I came to find out what kind of hoof-and-mouth inspection your boys were giving the Broken Shield cattle this afternoon.”

“Hoof-and-mouth inspection?” Studs Kelly threw back his head and roared with laughter. “That’s a good one. Hoof-and-mouth inspection!” The swivel chair shrieked as he turned swiftly around, dropping his

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boots to the floor with a thump, sloshing whiskey into his glass without looking.

Tall and heavy-shouldered, there was something rakish about the carriage of his shaggy head of curling yellow hair, and the way one eyebrow cocked up in his scarred, heavy face. He had come up out of the brush the hard way, and still wore the rawhide leggings and filthy denim ducking jacket of the brush-hand. His one concession to the fact that he now owned the profitable gambling interests in Red Wheel was the big emerald ring he wore below the broken knuckle on the third finger of his right hand.

“When I’m going to own some property,” he said lazily, “I usually have a look at it before I close the tally-book.”

Mitchell’s jaw tightened. “What do you mean—own some property?”

Studs took an immense cigar from an inlaid ivory box on the desk, whipped out a Bowie knife and chopped the end of the stogie off. Then he thrust it between strong, white teeth.

“If young Conrad Ware loses much more at my faro lay-out,” he said, “he’ll have to give me the ranch to pay for his debts.”

“The ranch isn’t his to give,” Mitchell said, his eyes turning the color of gunsmoke. “Lady Agatha inherits the whole thing. Lord Basil knew Conrad would gamble it away in a week if he left it to him.”

Studs Kelly grinned. “Maybe it ain’t Lady Agatha’s to give, neither.” Abruptly, he reached for the paper, propped against the decanter, and handed it to Mitchell.

IT was the St. Louis Gazette, dated March 7, 1874. In the middle of the page, Mitchell saw a picture of a woman in a tiny bonnet and full-length cape who bore a striking resemblance to Lady Agatha. His startled eyes dropped to the caption beneath the picture which read, “Denise Parker, an actress with the road company playing the Lyceum theater here, killed by an unknown person in the Riverview hotel.”

“Looks a lot like her, don’t it?” Studs Kelly said. Slowly, Mitchell raised his eyes. When he failed to speak, Kelly took a match from a drawer, raised one leg to light it on the seat of his pants, and held it up to his cigar. Through the smoke that rose from the tip, he said, “March, the seventh. That would be about the same day Lady Agatha was in St. Louis, wouldn’t it?”

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Mitchell could restrain his violent reactions no longer and bent clear across the desk grabbing Kelly's lapel and yanking him forward. "What are you insinuating?" he bellowed.

Kelly grasped his wrists with a ferocious strength, and tore his hands off, coming to his feet so violently that he kicked over his chair. The two of them stood facing each other across the desk.

"Don't put your hands on me again, Mitchell," Kelly said gutturally. "I don't have to insinuate anything. Add it up yourself. Lady Agatha Ware got ten thousand pounds the minute she showed up here, didn't she? That's fifty thousand American dollars. Anybody'd commit murder for that kind of money, even a woman."

"But how?" Mitchell demanded, trembling with anger, and with something else he could not define.

Kelly shrugged. "It's simple," he said. "If they look that much alike, a switch in identities would be easy. And if they switched, the present Lady Agatha must have once been actress Denise Parker. Has she been doing a good job of acting, Mitchell?"

Mitchell leaned toward him, "You're wrong, Kelly. This is just a terrible coincidence, and if you go

around town talking about it, I'll come back and really put my hands on you."

Kelly took the cigar from his mouth. "You can't bluff me, Mitchell. I know you too well. If you really thought she wasn't a phony, you'd try to take me apart right now. The only thing that's holding you back is that you think maybe I'm right."

Mitchell bent over the desk again, gripping its edge so tightly his hands ached, shouting at Kelly, "That's not so—"

"It is," Kelly roared at him. "Prove I'm wrong. You know you can't. You know if you whipped me it still wouldn't change things. This woman's pulling one of the biggest hoaxes Texas has ever seen, right under our noses. It's so damn big and it's so damn smart it makes me mad as blazes I didn't think of it. She almost got away with it, too. And you know it. Now tell me I'm wrong again."

Mitchell stood staring at the man, his whole body trembling. Then, slowly, he turned and walked out of the office and down the stairs, and out of the saloon, getting on his horse and riding out of Red Wheel, without seeing anything or hearing anything or feeling anything except that deep,

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indescribable sickness, way down at the pit of him.

III

FOR all his love of this brushland, Lord Basil's idea of a great house had been in the style of an English manor, a great, brisk Georgian structure, rising incongruously out of the brush, with its gables and hiproofs, its iron deers prancing on lawns kept green by an army of gardeners. The brush people had long since ceased to scoff at it, however, for many of the biggest ranchers in this area were backed by English capital.

Mitchell reached the house in the dusk of early evening, with light casting saffron shadows out into the brush from every window of the great house, reminding him of the party that Ashford was giving in Lady Agatha's honor. All the way in, he had tried to decide what he should do, It was only a matter of time until someone else read a St. Louis paper, and put two and two together. And yet, he had no proof that would allow him to make an issue of it now.

He stripped his horse of its saddle, turning it into a pen, then carried his rig towards the tack-room at the south end of the barn. He was inside the door of the barn when he heard

Conrad Ware's voice, coming from the smaller door of the tack-room.

"It was an amazing coup, I will have to admit. I haven't seen my cousin Agatha since she was ten, and I swear, I never doubted for a moment that you were she, until I saw that picture in the St. Louis Gazette."

"Let go my arm, Conrad," Agatha said, in a taut, hissing way, "You're drunk."

"And you're not Lady Agatha at all. You're Denise Parker, an actress, a tawdry little imposter, trying to cash in on a million dollars—"

"*You're hurting my arm. Let go, you fool."

"I'll let you go if you get out, I'll give you this chance. Promise me you'll leave tonight and—"

It was then that Mitchell stepped into the tack-room. Ware wheeled, a blank, surprised look stamped into his face. He was a tall, foppish young man, despite his dark handsomeness, who had come to America on a remittance from his family ten years ago, and who had lived of his uncle here at the Broken Shield when the remittance had been cut off. He was dressed in an expensive, fawn-colored, long-tailed coat, and trousers of skintight moleskin, Light from a bull's eye lantern picked up the

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dangerous flash of his dark eyes and the gleam of white teeth behind the curl of his lip.

“Let her go, Conrad,” Mitchell told him.

“Stay out of this, Mitchell. It’s none of your business. She’s an adventuress. She doesn’t belong here.”

“I said let her go,” Mitchell half-shouted, grabbing the man’s arm and spinning him around. It tore Conrad’s hand off Agatha’s arm and brought into view the gold-headed cane he carried in his other hand. He tried to tear free of Mitchell, raising the cane to strike at the same time. Mitchell blocked the vicious blow and threw his shoulder against Conrad’s chest, bulling him backward a couple of steps. It knocked Conrad off balance and he stumbled and fell back, to sit down on the floor against a saddletree. He remained there, sprawled awkwardly on the dirt floor, jaw slack with drunken surprise. Then, with a muttered curse, he struggled to his feet.

Mitchell picked up the cane, as Ware reeled belligerently towards him, and thrust it into his hand. “Now go on into the house and sober up,” he told the man,

Ware hesitated, eyes blazing, angular features rigid. At last he

moved away, walking unsteadily along and making futile attempts to brush himself off.

Mitchell turned to Agatha, really seeing her then for the first time. She had on a gown of rich green moire, cut low to show the alabaster skin of her bare shoulders, and the curve of her deep breast. Picturesque Musquetaire gloves of tan suede reached to her dimpled elbows. Her shimmering red hair was drawn into a chignon from which one long curl escaped upon her graceful neck, Mitchell’s breath caught in him, and he realized for the first time how his impulse had led him to protect this woman even though he suspected her of being a murderess. Had her beauty that much influence over him? He stared into the shadowed darkness of her eyes.

“Was Conrad talking about the St. Louis papers?” he said. “I saw a picture in the Gazette this afternoon. It was of an actress named Denise Parker, who had been murdered in the Riverview hotel on the same day you were supposed to be in town. She looked so much like you, I couldn’t have told the two of you apart. Didn’t you have a room at the Riverview, too?”

The blood drained from her face, leaving it a chalky oval in the dusky

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light. "What are you thinking?" she asked.

"That you are Denise Parker," he said.

Her voice came in a desperate whisper. "You fool! You fool! How dare you even suggest such a thing? I should fire you on the spot. I should have your name so blackened in this country that you could never get a job again—"

"It wouldn't do much good," he said. "Conrad and I aren't the only ones who suspect this."

He saw her underlip begin to quiver. "It's not true," she said, in that same desperate whispering voice. "It's not true."

"I hope it isn't," he said gravely. "And we can prove it right now. Your uncle told me a lot about you that I don't think anyone else around here knows. He gave you a present when you were six years old that you were very fond of. What was it?"

He saw her lip begin to tremble again. Suddenly, she turned around and her shoulders rose and fell, as she sobbed soundlessly.

"It's true, then," he said. "You're not Lady Agatha. You switched identities with her in St. Louis, killed her, and came on here."

She wheeled back, coming up against him and catching desperately

at his arm, tears making pale, glistening streaks against her cheeks in the half-darkness. "I didn't kill her—I didn't! That's one thing you've got to believe. I switched identities with her—I'll admit that—but it was her idea. She saw me at the Lyceum the last night we played there. It was the same night our manager ran out on us, leaving the company stranded and broke. I was left without a penny.

"Lady Agatha didn't know that when she came to my room after the show. I was so startled as she had been, at our resemblance. She told me this story about having to come clear from England to claim her inheritance. She said she was already fed up with the west, its dust, its heat, its hardships. She wanted to go back to New York. She suggested this idea of our changing identities so that she could go back incognito, while I came out here and lived on the ranch as Lady Agatha Ware long enough to fulfill the stipulation of Lord Basil's will. She was to pay me twenty-five thousand dollars at that time. She didn't actually look as much like me as the picture in the paper, but I touched her up a little before I left. I didn't have to change myself much because nobody out here had ever seen Lady Agatha, except Conrad, and that was years before."

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Mitchell asked, “What about her maid? She had one, of course.”

“Her maid was taken sick in Chicago and Lady Agatha hadn’t been able to find one to suit her since. She spent most of the night briefing me upon what I should know. The present her uncle gave her was one of the things she didn’t think about, I guess. I’d ridden enough so that we thought no one would notice the difference—but you did, didn’t you?”

“I did think your style was pretty ragged.” He found himself half-believing her. The warmth of her body against him, the scent of perfume rising from her hair, the desperate plea in her eyes, were so convincing, he had to force himself to pull away.

“And you snapped up the offer just like that, with no questions asked?”

“I knew it wouldn’t be easy,” she said tensely, “but you can’t imagine how desperate I was, stranded, without a penny, a thousand miles from home. And even if I’d written home for money, grandma wouldn’t have had any to send me, She’s all I have left in the world.”

“If you’d left that out, it might have almost convinced me,” he said, sarcastically. He turned half away, staring out the door, trying to resolve this bitter confusion within him.

“Who murdered Lady Agatha, then?” he said.

“I have no idea,” she told him.

“But why should she be murdered?” he said. “Did she keep any of her jewelry? Did she mention knowing anyone in town?”

Agatha shook her head. “She gave me some of her jewels to make it look authentic. She didn’t mention knowing anyone in town that I remember.”

“What can you remember?” he said. “Isn’t there anything else?”

She wrung her hands, frowning intensely, on the verge of crying again. “I’m trying to think. So much went on that night. It seems to me there was something—I can’t remember, Hugh. I can’t.” She caught at his arm again, trying to come up against him once more. He blocked her off, held her back, afraid of what she could do to him.

“What did you do with the check Ashford gave you?” he asked.

“I sent it to the Riverview hotel in St. Louis,” she cried. “Addressed to Denise Parker, just like we arranged.”

Before he could speak again, there was the sound of horses in the driveway, and he turned to see the first guests arriving. He looked back down at the woman, torn by the emotions in him. He should think of

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her as Denise, now, he knew. But somehow he couldn't. There was still that regal line to her neck, that aristocratic refinement to her face.

"You do believe me, don't you?" she asked.

He shook his head, "I can't. The whole thing's too crazy."

"Then why didn't you turn me in?" she said, a sob catching in her voice.

"I don't know," he said huskily. But he did know. It was what she did to him. If he were even completely sure that she had murdered the real Lady Agatha, could he turn her in? He thrust himself from her, shaken by the question, unable to answer it. He backed away, wanting to free himself of her effect.

"Do you think you can carry it off tonight?" he asked.

Her head lifted, hope shining in her eyes, "You'll give me a chance?"

"Ashford will be here tonight," he told her. "As a lawyer, he should have connections in St. Louis. Maybe he can get more information, turn up something that will prove your innocence."

BY the time they reached the manor house, a long row of buggies and saddle horses lined the hitch racks under the cottonwoods. Mitchell followed Agatha across the

wide porch and into the hallway, with its dark oak wainscoting and parquet floor. To the left stretched big double parlors with wine red damask drapes at the French windows. The furniture had been shoved into the far end and small tables set along the sides. Here the guests laughed and talked as they drank the liquors brought them by the pretty Mexican serving girl. In the middle of the cleared space several couples were dancing to the music of the stringed orchestra brought all the way from Austin.

As they stood there in the wide hall doorway, Ellis Ashford came towards them. "You're looking very lovely tonight, Lady Agatha," he said, making a courtly bow. "Now if you wish, I shall give myself the pleasure of presenting your guests to you."

Mitchell could not help but admire the way she handled it—the mixture of graciousness and hauteur she managed to put into her greeting of the ranchers and their wives and daughters; the cool, casual manner in which she accepted the offer of a dance from an overly polite and barely sober Conrad.

Mitchell watched them conscious of a strange new feeling pounding inside him. He rolled a cigarette to steady himself, trying not to follow them with his eyes. But they drew

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him irresistibly—Conrad so tall and easy and handsome, and Denise, bent back over his arm in a lithe, graceful arc. He suddenly felt a vicious impulse to walk out and take her away from Conrad. A man wasn't jealous unless he was in love. In love with a murderess?

With a guttural sound, he dropped his cigarette, grinding it angrily under his heel. He turned to seek Ellis Ashford in the crowd, and finally saw him talking to a pair of neighboring ranchers. When he caught the man's eye, Ashford excused himself, and came over to Mitchell.

"Have you seen the St. Louis papers?" Mitchell asked.

A strange expression tightened the lawyer's distinguished face. Then he began to chuckle, indulgently, and grasped Mitchell's arm. "So that was what had you so spooky this afternoon," he said. He sighed softly. "Such is youth. Jumping so hotly at conclusions."

"I'm not the only one who added it up," Mitchell said.

Ashford shook his head. "It's a terribly unfortunate coincidence, Hugh. I don't think it's anything more. Can you actually believe a woman capable of such a thing? This woman?"

Mitchell lowered his eyes, mouth compressed, and Ashford chuckled in that indulgent way again. "Of course not. Now you go out and dance with her and—"

Before he could finish there was a commotion at the door. Facing around, Mitchell saw Studs Kelly, swaying tipsily and arguing with one of the servants. Flanking him were Boa Snyder and Fayette Baxter, both flushed with drink. Ashford was the first to move, walking swiftly over to grasp Kelly's arm.

"Get out of here," he told the gambler, whirl away, in a low, tense voice. "You're drunk."

Kelly grinned. "You wouldn't be putting me out of my own house, would you, pop?" he asked.

Mitchell moved in close to Kelly. "Your own house?" he repeated grimly.

With Ashford still hanging to his arm, Kelly turned to Mitchell. "Well, now, why not?" he asked. "Conrad tells me the Lady Agatha ain't exactly taken with the country. Maybe she'll give me the place. I've always wanted the Broken Shield."

Ellis Ashford tugged at his arm.

"Don't be a fool, Studs. She wouldn't desecrate Lord Basil's memory by turning it over to anyone like you. Now get out."

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Kelly swept him casually aside. “The hell I will,” he shouted. And before anyone suspected his intention, he had lunged out towards Conrad and Denise, where they stood near the center of the room. None of the guests made a move to stop him. Many of the ranchers were under Kelly’s thumbs, through gambling debts, or dirt he had dug up off their back trails, and Mitchell knew he could expect little help from them if it came to a showdown. As for the Broken Shield crew, the bulk of them were still down at the bunk-shacks, or out on the range. It left only a handful of frightened, useless Mexican servants.

Kelly grabbed Conrad’s arm, swinging him away. “Off the floor, dandy. Let a man swing this gal.”

“Stop it, Studs,” Conrad cried. “You’re drunk, you’ll spoil everything—”

Kelly swept aside his pawing arm and put one hand against his chest, lunging heavily into the push. Conrad staggered backward into the guests, caroming off into Boa Snyder. Before he could pull away, Boa had tripped him, sending him sprawling on his face. And at the same time, Kelly grabbed Agatha and swung her around toward the orchestra.

“Strike up the music,” he yelled hoarsely, “I want to romp and I want to stomp and I want to chase the rabbit—”

THE same unthinking rage swept Mitchell that had come when he saw Conrad with her in the barn. He stopped thinking of her as a murderess, an imposter. He plunged across the floor to hook one of Kelly’s elbows as the man swung around, spinning him away from the woman. Off to his left, Mitchell saw Snyder following him out, going for a gun. Mitchell let Kelly spin on around till he was going toward Snyder, then released him. Kelly staggered back off balance and went heavily into Snyder, knocking his feet from beneath him on the slick floor, so that they both went down with a heavy, thudding sound. At the same time, Fayette Baxter burst from the crowd. For once in his life, he must have left his over-and-under gun on his horse, for he was unarmed. Mitchell tried to wheel and meet the man, but Baxter came lunging into him before he was clear around. It knocked Mitchell back into a heavy sideboard, with Baxter following Mitchell grappled him here, took a blow in the belly, hooked a leg behind the man’s knee to trip him. Baxter

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would not let go and they both fell to the floor. Mitchell struck on his side, stunning him and Baxter tried to roll on top, Mitchell lunged back the other way to block that, and it carried them into the heavy sideboard again, tilting it over. There was a great clattering crash as it fell over on top of them, spilling off the candelabra and silver service, Mitchell lay beneath the heavy piece of furniture for an instant, dazed by the blow of it against his head. Then he began to crawl out from beneath it. Only Baxter's legs were visible, the rest of him hidden by the sideboard. There was no movement from him, and Mitchell realized he must have been knocked out.

Then Mitchell saw that one of the candles had caught onto the draperies, and flames were licking up the wine red damask. At the same instant, he saw Kelly coming at him from across the room, a drunken, twisted rage stamped into his heavy face. Boa Snyder was on his feet, too, and coming in behind Kelly. Not waiting to be pinned between them, Mitchell lunged towards Kelly. The man tried to halt and spread his legs to set himself, but Mitchell went into him at a run, blocking aside one of his heavy blows and hitting him in the stomach. He carried Kelly with

him back towards the stairs. They crashed into a newel post and its rounded surface spun Kelly around so fast that he fell face down onto the stairs. Before Mitchell could reach him, he rolled over on his back and scrambled upwards. Mitchell tried to catch his coat, his knee, but Kelly twisted away, gaining his feet on the third step. As Mitchell finally came into him again, Kelly's advantage of height gave him a chance to block Mitchell's blow and counter-punch, knocking Mitchell off to one side. He was kept from falling over onto the floor below by the banister. Panting, he twisted off this before Kelly could come down on him,

A sly, canny look crossed Kelly's face and he shifted his weight quickly, backing on up the stairs. The struggle had apparently cleared his head, for there was a bright, lucid glitter of rage in his eyes. Shaking his head dazedly, Mitchell followed him on up. He had almost reached Kelly, when the man gained the first landing, and grabbing a tall *jardiniere* that stood on a pedestal in the corner, hurled it at Mitchell's head. All Mitchell could do was throw up his arm. It broke the blow. Half-blinded by the smashed China, Mitchell went on into Kelly, grappling him around the waist and twisting him in against

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the banister, Kelly tried to bring a knee into Mitchell's groin, but Mitchell blocked it with his own knee and smashed Kelly in the face. This knocked the man heavily back against the banister. Mitchell hit him again in the stomach. The already weakened supports smashed and Kelly went on through, falling heavily to the floor below. Mitchell heard Denise cry out sharply from the smoke-rilled room.

"Look out behind you, Hugh—Snyder—"

He wheeled, and saw Snyder running up the stairs, almost upon him. With his upper body twisted around towards the banister, he was in no position to block Snyder with his arms. All he could do was lash out with his foot. It carried him off-balance, and he was falling in the same instant that his kick caught Snyder square in the belly. The man folded over his boot like a closed jackknife, then pitched backward and flopped helplessly over and over to the foot of the stairs.

LYING there on his stomach on the landing, with his head hanging over the edge, Mitchell saw Kelly rising groggily from the debris of the banister and the floor below. Mitchell rose to his hands and knees and dropped onto Kelly from the landing,

carrying the big man once more to the floor with the weight of his body. His fall was partly broken by Kelly's body, but it still dazed him almost as much as it did Kelly, and he was unable to get a hold on the man before Kelly reeled away from him. Kelly gained his feet with a stupid, beaten look on his face. Mitchell got to his own feet with great effort, gasping, hardly able to stand.

"You still think it's going to be your own house, or are you going to get out?" Mitchell asked,

"You're the one that's getting out," Kelly shouted,

Mitchell was too groggy to shift away in time, and Kelly's blow caught him on the side of the head, knocking him back against the wall beneath the stairway. Dimly, Mitchell saw Kelly coming on in, aiming the next blow at his belly. With a gasp, he twisted around in a quick jerk, so that his face was turned in flat against the wall. He heard Kelly's scream of pain, as the man's first went into the wall where he had been the instant before, then Mitchell twisted back and caught Kelly's arm, throwing him around. Incapacitated by the pain of his smashed hand, Kelly did not have the coordination to cover himself and the swinging motion threw his arms

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out wide, leaving his whole body open.

With all his weight, Mitchell went into the man, slugging for that square, beefy belly. Kelly grunted sickly, staggering backwards. Mitchell followed him, hitting him again. Kelly gasped, refusing to go down, brutal face twisted with the effort of maintaining his feet, as he staggered on back. Mitchell followed him still, so exhausted by now that he could hardly see the man, keeping himself right up against Kelly's belly, so his blows would not miss. He did not know how many times he had slugged, had no conception of how far they had gone, staggering across the smoky room, until there was a brittle crash, and he saw Kelly going through the French window that led out onto the front porch, in a splatter of broken glass.

Through a thick haze, Mitchell felt someone catch at his arm and cry, "Hugh —please—that's enough, You'll kill him. He's through."

He shrugged off the restraining hand, driven by bestial, primal urges so deep he could not identify them, and went on through the broken window after Kelly, ripping his shirt and slashing his hands and face. The big man had come to his hands and knees, blood dripping from his

shaggy head onto the porch, unable to rise further. Mitchell reached him and bending down to grab for his coat, almost pitched over, himself. Then with a great, gasping breath, he heaved the man upward and backward.

Kelly pawed feebly, impotently, at him, and with the last of his strength, Mitchell threw his shoulder against the gambler, heaving him over the waist high porch rail to fall heavily, soddenly, on the ground below. Mitchell grabbed at the rail to keep himself from falling after Kelly. Leaning the whole weight of his body against it, he dragged in a great, sucking gasp of air and panted, in a voice he hardly recognized as his own, "Now get up. Now get up."

Kelly lay motionless upon the earth, and at last Mitchell turned away, vaguely conscious that the men had put out the fire, and that someone was picking his way carefully through the broken window. Then Ellis Ashford stood beside him, "If he had any doubts about whom this house belonged to," he said, looking speculatively over the rail at Kelly, "I guess he knows now."

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IV

THE day after the fight, Mitchell awoke, feeling stiff and sore. From the kitchen, on the other side of the dog-run, he heard the clatter of pots and pans. He rolled over with difficulty and looked about him. The other bunks were empty and he realized the men had let him sleep late.

He rose with a groan, rubbing dismally at his bruises, memory of what had happened the night before filtering his mind as he dressed. Boa Snyder and Fayette Baxter had put Studs Kelly on his horse after the man had regained consciousness, and Kelly had left, barely able to stay in the saddle and too groggy even for speech. One by one, the guests had left in an embarrassed, furtive way. Afterwards, Ashford and a couple of the Broken Shield crew. had helped Mitchell to the bunkhouse and doctored his wounds. He had pieced this much together when the cook's strident voice came to him from the kitchen. "Wake up, Mitchell," he yelled. "Sheriff's here. Just went into the house."

"All right," Mitchell answered. He stood a moment, sliding a tongue over his dry lips. Then he walked out the door and up the path to the manor

house, moving slowly, painfully, the hot noonday sun hurting his eyes.

A long-legged roan was hitched to the rack in front of the house, blowing like it had been ridden hard. Frowning, Mitchell climbed the front steps, and swung open the door.

The interior was a shambles, with soot from the burned drapery dirtying the delicate satin upholstery of the chairs and couches that had been shoved to one end for the party. Pieces of the wrecked banister were strung half-way across the scratched and dented parquet floor; the sideboard still lay face down in a far corner and the broken French window sagged open.

Just inside the door, Sheriff Glen Leeds stood talking with Conrad Ware. Leeds was a tall, dour man, dressed in a black broadcloth suit whitened by alkali and wear, the right tail of its claw hammer coat pulled higher than the left by the bulge of his gun.

"Hate to bust in on you after the night you had," he told Mitchell. "But I got a warrant for the woman passing herself off as Lady Agatha, Young Ware tells me you know the details. St. Louis police want her arrested on suspicion of murder. They've found some gold alloy in the wound in the dead woman's head. Looks like some

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ornament chipped off the murder weapon. A lot of other new evidence makes it a pretty tight case.”

Mitchell felt the blood drain from his face, but before he could find words, young Ware grinned sardonically.

“Perhaps you shouldn’t take Mitchell so completely into your confidence, Sheriff. The lady’s charms have had a great effect on him. Remember, he found out about this yesterday, and didn’t contact you about it, one way or another.”

Leeds squinted pale, humorless eyes at Mitchell. “That so? I didn’t know you were that susceptible to the gals, Hugh. Maybe you better come along to town with me, after I get the woman.”

“She’s probably still upstairs,” Conrad told him.

“No, she ain’t,” came the querulous, raucous voice of the housekeeper, and they turned to see the gaunt, rawboned, back-brush woman standing in the doorway, suspicion hardening her narrow, roughened face. “She must have seen you comin’ through the brush from her upstairs window, Sheriff. She went out the back way and got a horse about ten minutes ago. If I’d known it was you she was runnin’ from I would have tried to stop her.”

Leeds wheeled from Mitchell to Conrad. Then a tight, surprised suspicion settled into his face, and he said. “Saddle your horses, both of you. We’ll go after her together. She can’t get far in this brush.”

It took them but a few minutes to throw the saddles on their mounts, with Mitchell hardly able to contain himself under Conrad’s sarcasm. Yet he knew that half his anger was at himself, for trusting Denise.

They circled the ranch till they picked up her trail where she had made a big hole, tearing through the mesquite southward. It was a sign a greenhorn could have followed, running through the brush for a mile—mesquite berries whipped off their branches to lie scattered across the trail, small branches of black chaparral broken and hanging, great gaps trampled out of thin white brush. But when they reached the first water, it halted them. Either by accident, or by design, Denise had turned down this shallow, brackish stream, for there was no trace of her exit on the other side, where it would have been had she ridden across.

“She won’t have enough sense to ride it far,” Leeds said, sharply. “Ware, you head upstream. Mitchell and I’ll go down, Yell if you find sign.”

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With a mocking grin at Mitchell, Conrad turned away. Mitchell followed Leeds as the man splashed through the shallows in the other direction. But he knew the sheriff would find no sign in this direction. He had been watching the general direction of Denise's trail, and had finally decided it was heading towards the dry wash of Rio Blanca, where they had first come across Boa Snyder and Fayette Baxter inspecting the beef. That meant she would head on down the wash to the trail leading into the old Spanish Fort.

And if she were heading in that direction, she would have turned downstream. That would leave it up to Conrad. Mitchell had little faith that Conrad would be able to find where she had left the stream. Then Mitchell realized that there was no impulse within him to tell Leeds this. He tried to define why, and could not. He only knew that he had to reach Denise—and alone.

THEY reached a turn in the stream. Leeds was intent on the banks, and wheeled past the curve, cut off, in that instant, from Mitchell, by an overhanging post-oak. Mitchell wheeled his Copperbottom back and splashed across the water, spotting a hole in the fringing brush, and

plunging through it. "Mitchell," he heard Leeds call, "Come back here —"

But he was already hitting the brush at a dead run. Leeds was a brush country man, but he had not actually worked cattle in many years and his horse could not match the Copperbottom. Mitchell could not hear the crash of brush behind him over the great clatter he himself made. Dodging, running, ducking, he tore through the thorny, malignant thickets, eyes wide open, swinging off on "one side and then the other to avoid a bunch of clawing retama or keep from being swept off by an oak branch. At last, he pulled up. He could not hear Leeds behind him, and knew he had outdistanced the man. He turned the stud horse and headed for Rio Blanca. He reached it by noon, soggy with sweat in the brazen heat. He rode the sandy wash till he found the blackened pair of post-oaks, turned in here, picked up the trail to the fort. Now he could see her sign again, but he did not bother following it.

Then the crumbled, ancient walls of the fort were visible, rising from the brush ahead. He pulled up a moment at one of the gates, muttered angrily, and drove his Copperbottom on through. He saw hoof-pocks in the

dusty floor here, leading through a door into a long, roofless hallway. He rode beneath one blackened beam, staring through a door on one side into an empty room. Finally he halted, and called.

“Denise. I know you’re here. It’s Hugh. You might as well show yourself. I’ll find you sooner or later.”

There was a moment of silence. Then he heard the snort of a horse, farther down the hall, and she stepped out of a doorway. He rode up to her, staring down into her pale, tear-stained face.

“What did you think you could gain by coming out here?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I don’t know! I just saw the sheriff coming and knew he was after me. I got panicky, I guess. You said nobody else knew about this place. It was the first thing I thought of. I . . . I . . .”

She bowed her head, shoulders trembling, small, wracked sobs coming from her. He swung off his horse, catching her elbows.

“I’m a fool for doing this,” he said. “I should have turned you in at first.”

She turned her face up to him, coming in against him, swallowing hard. “You’ll help me, Hugh? You’ll believe me? I didn’t do it, I swear I didn’t.”

“We’ve got to have proof of that,” he said, “Just your saying so isn’t enough. You said before there was something you couldn’t think of. Have you remembered it? This is your last chance, Denise.”

A small, fugitive expression passed through her eyes, and she turned her head down, as if to hide it. “I have remembered something,” she said, in a small, muffled voice. “I went with the real Lady Agatha about three that morning, to her room, to get some of her clothes and a few jewels. As I left, with her bags, I saw a man coming down the hall. It was from the rear stair way. I was still dressed in my own clothes, and I got only a glimpse of him in the dark hall. I couldn’t see his face or anything.”

“Did he go into Lady Agatha’s room?”

“I didn’t wait to see.”

“Wasn’t there anything to distinguish him?”

“I told you it was dark.”

“But a hat, a coat, shoes. Something that you can remember.”

“A cane.”

“What kind of a cane?”

“How do I know, how do I know —” she was almost on the verge of crying.

“Leeds said they’d found some chips of gold alloy in the murdered

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woman's wound. Could it have been a gold-headed cane?"

She looked up in a wild eagerness. "Yes, that was it. A gold-headed cane. I remember now. There was just enough light to glint on it."

"If there was enough light to glint on it, you must have seen his face."

"No, I told you I couldn't. His hat must have cast that into shadow or something. Only a cloak, a long cloak, and a gold-headed cane. That was it."

He moved back a little, afraid, once more, of the insidious effect her beauty had on him. "Conrad has a gold-headed cane," he said, slowly.

Her eyes widened. "Does he?"

"You know he does, He tried to hit you with it in the barn. Damn it—" he stepped clear back from her, torn bitterly again by those two conflicting emotions in him, the terrible, gnawing suspicion, and his desire for her. "You are an actress, aren't you? But every time you overplay it. Like that final touch about your grandmother being the only one you have left in the world. And now you don't remember about Conrad's cane."

"But I didn't, Hugh. You can't know how crazy this has driven me. I can't think straight any more at all. I'm trapped, can't you understand

that, I'm completely trapped, with no way out. How would you feel? Could you remember all the little details of your life over the past weeks? Please, Hugh, you've got to believe me."

A desperate look shone in her eyes. "If Conrad is connected with this, we could find out. If he murdered her, and he thought I had something that would prove it, he'd come after me. If he were capable of killing his own cousin he'd be capable of killing me. Where will he be now, Hugh? Where can you reach him?"

"If he and Leeds can't trail me, Conrad will more than likely head back into town and get drunk at Kelly's place. That's where he spends most of his time," Mitchell said, eyes narrowing.

"Can't you go there, then? Drop some kind of word that I've got proof he killed Agatha. A letter, news from the St. Louis police, anything. Let him find out where I am, and how to get here."

His narrowed eyes studied her face closely, almost desperately. "So he can try and kill you?" he asked. "That's a heck of a set-up."

"You can follow him," she said. "He'll talk. If he killed Lady Agatha, I can get it out of him. Please, Hugh, give me this chance."

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He stared down at her deep breasts, rising and falling heavily with her breathing, the satiny texture of the flesh forming the soft, pale curve of her cheek, the ripe, red fullness of her lips. The stunning, compelling beauty of her seemed to suck him in, like a vortex. But it wasn't strong enough in this moment, to drown his suspicion.

"So neat," he said, in a hard voice. "Always so nice and neat. Did you figure it out that way when you killed Lady Agatha, too?"

A startled, shocked expression leaped into her eyes. "Hugh!"

"That's right," he said. "I'm not convinced."

"Hugh," she said, again. Only it was throaty, now. Her lids dropped over her eyes till they had a smoky, provocative look, and she moved in against him once more, and he could not stop her. Soft arms were about his neck, the warm fullness of a body glued to him, those ripe lips meeting his.

When it was finally over, she pulled back, staring up at him with heavy-lidded eyes. When she saw what was in his face, she said, "Now, whether you believe me or not, you have to go, don't you?"

The blood was so thick in his throat he could hardly speak. Finally

it left him, strained and guttural. "Yes," he said. "I do."

V

IT was late afternoon before Mitchell reached Red Wheel. He did not see Conrad's horse at the rack before the Aces and Eights, but he went inside anyway, and started to drink. He bought a bottle and took it to a table so nobody would actually know how much he took on. The tension in him built higher as time dragged on. He knew he would be in a tight fix if Sheriff Leeds were the first to hit town. He slackened in the chair, put a bleary, sleepy look onto his face, pretended to get successively drunker.

There were only a few men at the bar, and they took little notice of him. Fayette Baxter came in, after a while; he halted by the stairs, watching Mitchell narrowly, then went upstairs and into Studs Kelly's office. Then another man came through the door.

It was Ellis Ashford, He looked around the big room till his eyes lit on Mitchell, and he came over that way, dropping into a chair at the table.

"What's the matter, Hugh?" he asked. "Have you gone completely crazy? Leeds just hit town. He says

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you helped Denise Parker escape. You can't stay here. He wants to arrest you."

Mitchell knew he had to act out his part even for this man, and he wobbled his head drunkenly. "Helped her escape! I wouldn't help her take a drink if she were dying of thirst."

Ashford leaned forward, grasping Mitchell's arm, genuine concern in his face. "What is it, Hugh? Was I wrong about her? Do you honestly think she's capable of something like that."

"Capable, hades," muttered Mitchell. "She'd stick a knife in your back as quick as that."

He saw Conrad Ware swing through the bat-wings, powdered with alkali, a flushed, angry look on his face. The man walked halfway to the stairs before his hot glance fell on Mitchell; then he halted in surprise, and finally turned to come that way. Mitchell filled his glass, tossed off a quarter of it, eyes watering at the fiery burn of the rot-gut.

"So you didn't find her," Conrad said, halting above Mitchell.

"No," Mitchell slurred, "Didn' fin' her." Conrad's lips compressed tightly.

"You're lying. You know where she is. You're in love with her."

"Who could love that murdering, pig-sticking wench," Mitchell said, bitterly.

Conrad grabbed his shoulders, long fingers digging into the muscle. "What happened?"

"You wouldn't be so bitter if nothing had happened," Conrad told him sharply. "You found her out there, That's what happened, You tried to make love to her and she wouldn't have it. You let her get away. That's it, isn't it?"

"Didn't let her go," Mitchell said. "She'll never get out of the brush alive. Maybe she found her way into the Spanish Fort. She'll never get out."

"Spanish Fort?" Conrad asked. "What Spanish Fort?"

"I'm not telling anybody," Mitchell muttered, taking another drink. "I don't care if she does have proof."

A changed, sharpened look entered Conrad's face, and he sat down, staring at Mitchell. "Proof of what?"

"Of who killed Lady Agatha." Mitchell laughed drunkenly. "That's funny. She killed Lady Agatha."

"Did she?" Conrad asked, in a strange voice. He leaned forward catching Mitchell's arm. "What kind of proof."

"I dunno. A letter, or something." Mitchell raised up abruptly, staring at

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Conrad. “Why should I tell you that trail. After the burned post-oaks, anyway?”

“You have no reason to shield her any longer,” Conrad said. “She’s played you along and used you and incriminated you till the sheriff is ready to arrest you as an accessory after the fact. You don’t owe her anything. Maybe she can find her way out of the Spanish Fort. She can’t get through Dirk Thickets.”

“Isn’t the Dirk Thickets,” Mitchell mumbled. “It’s down that old cut-off of the Chihuahua trail into the bottoms of that dried up creek the Indians used to get their sotol stalks from.”

“Rio Blanca? That doesn’t lead anywhere,” Ware said, frowning. “It comes right up against the Comanche Thickets and nobody’s ever gotten through there.”

“There’s. an old Indian trail through the thickets nobody else knows,” Mitchell said, “You can find the opening between a pair of burned post-oaks.”

“And then what?” An eager look filled Conrad's eyes.

“Nothing,” Mitchell muttered. “I ain’t telling anybody how to get there.”

A cunning light filled Conrad’s eyes; he masked that, and shrugged. “You don’t have to. Anybody knows

that trail. After the burned post-oaks, it’s another dry wash.”

“Blazes it is,” Mitchell growled.

“Have another drink,” Conrad said, pouring Mitchell’s glass full once more.

Ashford put his hand on Conrad’s arm, “You haven’t got any right to do this, Conrad—”

“Stay out of this, you old shyster,” Conrad snarled, wheeling on him, a whipped, raging look stamped into his narrow, handsome face. Ashford stiffened in his chair, blood draining from his cheeks. Then he stood abruptly, trembling.

“You shouldn’t have said that. I think I'd better go get Sheriff Leeds.”

He wheeled and stalked out. Mitchell watched him go, trying to hide the tension in him, knowing there were only a few moments left, now. Conrad turned back, that same knowledge in his face.

“You’re so drunk you couldn’t find your own way back in there,” he said.

“Sure could.” Mitchell let his head wobble, as if approaching a drunken stupor, a silly grin fixed onto his face. “After the burned post-oaks, it’s a black chaparral shaped like a cross. Cut east to a pile of buffalo skulls. Indians put ’em there. From there white-brush grows right down the line to the fort.”

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CONRAD whipped up and out of his chair even before Mitchell was finished. Mitchell sat slack, watching him go through the bat-wings, listening to the abrupt stamp of his horse, then the muffled thump of hooves breaking swiftly into a galloping tattoo. After a moment, he rose also, wandering drunkenly to the door, almost falling over another chair. He went out and pretended to have great difficulty untying his horse. He climbed heavily aboard. As the animal swung out into the street with him, he saw the light go out in Kelly's office. Then he caught sight of Leeds coming up the main street towards the plaza, from the sheriff's office.

He wheeled the horse towards the other side of the plaza and broke down that way through the dusk mantling the town. A barking dog ran across before him. He approached a frame store, with an alleyway between it and the next adobe structure. As he crossed the front of the store, the shot smashed at him.

The Copperbottom reeled up, screaming insanely with pain, Mitchell kicked free of the saddle and let himself fall as the horse plunged onward, weaving, sun-fishing, finally veering wildly across the street to

smash through a spindle fence and go headlong against the wall of an adobe house.

Mitchell hit the earth hard, rolling off it till the curb before the store halted him, Gasping, he came dazedly to hands and knees. The shot must have come from the opposite side of the street, for he had felt the jerk of the horse against his right leg. He was completely exposed here, though the thick dusk obscured him somewhat.

He got to his feet, lunging for the alley. Another shot filled the twilight behind him. The bullet smashed into the curb where he had just crouched. He plunged into the sanctuary of the alley, flattening against the siding of the store. He stood glued here, getting his gun out, searching the opposite side of the street for movement, There were loud, frightened voices within the house over there. A light winked on, turning a window into a yellow rectangle, then blinked off again. A man came hesitantly from a doorway, staring at the dead Copperbottom where it lay twisted at the foot of the smashed wall.

"Come back in, Tirado, you fool," a woman squalled, and the man turned back through the door.

A baby began to bawl. The hound started barking again. Mitchell could see nothing else over there, and began

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to sidle along the wall till he reached the end of the alley. Then he ran down behind the houses for a full block, and reached a winding lane they called a street. It led back to the main avenue out of town, and he cut down it till he reached the broad, rutted way once more. He halted here, by a willow fence, and finally decided that it was dark enough to chance it. He cut across the street, ducking down behind another fence on the other side. Chickens set up a frightened cackling. He went on, till he found the alley running behind the houses.

Turning back towards the plaza, he moved carefully. There were willows and post-oaks here, and he took their cover, slinking behind a spindle fence, moving between two sheds. There was a corral ahead, filled with the muffled snorting and trotting of an excited horse, He guessed he was near the spot where the shots had come from, now.

He could hear once more the muffled, frightened voices from within the adobe hovels. This was the Mexican district, and they had seen enough trouble in this country to know the wisdom of remaining inside. He passed the corral, reaching a gnarled post oak. He stood up against the trunk of the tree, breathing

softly, waiting. Finally, he saw slight movement up by one of the ancient, two-wheeled *carretas* the Mexicans used for wagons. The cart stood behind a pair of houses, and from the passageway between these adobe structures, Mitchell judged a man could see the store building across the street. That would be the spot, then.

The man appeared suddenly. He made a cat-like shadow, slightly darker than the dusk, a lean, tense, bow-legged form, holding a rifle. That rifle stamped him for Mitchell.

“Here I am, Fayette,” he called, softly.

Fayette Baxter wheeled, the over-and-under swinging around. The guns made a smashing detonation against the thick dusk. Baxter had not gotten turned completely toward Mitchell. The bullet went crashing into a wall ten feet to Mitchell’s left. Baxter’s body seemed to lift up as Mitchell’s bullet struck him. A great gust of air left him, and he hung there a moment. Then the rifle left his hands and he pitched forward on his face.

Mitchell ran toward him in a crouching run, squatting down beside the *carreta*. Ahead of him, sprawled face down with the dust settling mordantly back around his body, Baxter lay moveless. No breathing stirred his body. Nothing else made

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sound in the night, for the next few moments. Even the people in those houses were silent, listening. Then a woman began to sob, and called upon all the saints, that she had never sinned, why was this terror brought to her house?

MITCHELL moved at last, convinced that no one else was here, crossing the alley to that corral. He found a rawhide line slung on the top pole, and ducked between the poles. He cornered the fretting, snorting animal and slung the rawhide on its jaw, in a hackamore. It was not much of horse, a weedy, hairy little brush-bronc, but it was the best he could do, in the tension of realizing how time was running out, with Conrad so far ahead of him. He lowered the bars of the gate, and led the animal out. Then he swung aboard and booted its flanks.

He galloped down the alley to the lane, down the lane to the main road from town, out this into the brush. It was dark night when he reached Rio Blanca, but the moon had started to rise by the time he found those blackened post-oaks. He had pushed the animal unmercifully, and the poor beast was stumbling and wheezing as they turned out of the wash into the trail.

He did not bother to follow the meandering path. He burst his way straight through the thickets, smashing through the white-brush, tearing great holes in the chaparral. The moon was high, casting weird shadows through the brush by the time he came within sight of those bleached buffalo skulls. It was here that the horse died. It balked, and halted, refusing to go on, and stood there, beginning to shudder heavily beneath him.

Mitchell swung off, stood there a moment, a bitter recrimination filling him. He had never run a horse to death before. He wanted he shoot it, put it out of its misery. He knew that would give him away, however. Before he could decide, the animal gave a great, hoarse sigh, and went to its fore knees. Then it flopped over on its side, and died.

Mitchell turned and ran the rest of the way. Torn and bleeding from the wild ride through the thickets, chest heaving with the effort of dragging in air, he came within sight of the fort. He dropped to a knee here, vision swimming, drained, in that moment, by the run. Then his eyes found Conrad's horse, one of Lord Basil's big bay jumpers, hitched to a *coma* tree. And beyond that, Conrad, clearly recognizable under a risen

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moon, lying in a silent, inert heap, near the doorway to the fort.

Mitchell pulled his gun again, remembering he had forgotten to reload it, back in town. He jacked out the empties, shoved in fresh shells. Then he darted to the protection of the wall, walking in a crouched, tense way to where Conrad lay. The man's head had been smashed in. He was dead.

Mitchell stood there, back against the wall, a deep, sick feeling pervading him as he realized what this meant. Yet, even realizing it, there was a part of him that still refused to believe it. How could she have such an appalling influence over him? It was so obvious what had happened, so obvious how she had implicated him in this, until he could not turn her in without incriminating himself.

He saw what a position it put him in. There was even a witness to how he had lured Conrad out here. Ashford had heard the whole thing. It made Mitchell an accomplice in Conrad's murder. Not only Conrad's. The real Lady Agatha's.

The devilish cleverness of it struck him like a blow. What a fool he had been. And she thought she had won, now? She thought she had time tied up so completely that he would do

whatever she wished? Not this time, damn you!

Face set, he wheeled and walked in through the door, into the first great chamber. This had once been the parade ground of the fort. Moonlight washed the hard-packed earth, sought out the far corners, dribbled through the crumbling holes in the wall.

He reached the door into the first buildings. Much of the roofing had fallen in, leaving blackened beams here and there to cast long fingers of shadows over the open spaces. The narrow hall was a well of darkness, with startling spots of light here and there where a gap or a fallen section of wall allowed it through. He moved slowly down the hall, listening for sounds, sweat from his palm greasing the butt of his gun. He heard a snorting sound ahead. Her horse.

He moved on, through a shaft of light falling through a doorway, into the cottony blackness beyond. Then he made out the animal, standing forlornly in the middle of the hall, reins trailing. Approaching it, he saw that it was not Denise's bay. He ran his hand over its hot body, finding lather between the forelegs. He could not place the animal. It looked like a leggy roan, with a white patch on its head. Had Leeds gotten another horse and beaten him here?

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THEN, far down the passage, there was a rattling sound, as if shale had dribbled from a wall, After this, a soft scurrying, like the movements of rats. Then a voice, startling him.

“Denise, you might as well come out. You can’t get away.”

“I won’t,” the woman answered. “You can’t make me. Get away, get out—”

The walls muffled both voices, Mitchell could recognize Denise’s by its feminine sound. The other was not clear to him. He moved down that way faster, pulses~ pounding, Again that scurrying sound, a sudden crash, then Denise screamed.

“Stop it, let me go, you fool, let me go—”

“Not this time, my dear. You’ve come to the end of the game.”

Mitchell broke into a run down the hall. The sounds of struggle ahead covered his own noises. There was a guttural, grunting sound, the acrid, rustling shift of feet against the earth, a gasp from Denise.

“Please, please, you’re hurting me.”

Mitchell reached the end of a hall, saw them in the huge chamber it opened into, It was like a picture, static and vivid before him in that last moment. Ellis Ashford held Denise up against the wall with his long,

lanky body, one arm across her throat. His other was back over his head, holding a cane. Its gold head glittered in the moonlight.

“Drop it, Ashford,” Mitchell shouted.

The lawyer wheeled, gaping at him. In this same moment, there was a clattering, crashing sound from the other end of the hall, and Mitchell half-turned to see Studs Kelly and Boa Snyder ride headlong through the gate.

With Ashford’s attention on Mitchell, for that moment, it gave Denise a chance to twist away from the lawyer and dart across the room to a further door.

“Ashford,” Kelly bellowed, hauling up in the outer courtyard. “You here?”

“Back here,” Ashford yelled, wheeling to run after the girl. “Mitchell’s in the hall. Hurry up, Studs.”

Kelly put the spurs to his horse and plunged across the courtyard into the hall, with Boa Snyder behind him, opening fire immediately. The bullets kicked at the ground and chipped adobe off the walls, frightening Ashford’s roan so that it whinneyed wildly and ran on in towards Mitchell.

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With all three horses threatening to ride him down, the bullets slamming into the adobe walls about him, Mitchell took one shot before he flung himself into the door. He saw Boa Snyder throw up his arms and pitch off the back of his horse, and then that was blocked off from him, as he jumped behind the wall. The room was empty, and he wheeled to run for the door Denise and Ashford had disappeared into. As he reached this, he heard the horses clatter through the hall opposite the other door, with the adobe walls shaking as the animals bumped against them, and Kelly's hoarse curse. Saddle leather creaked, and the man appeared at the other door just as Mitchell ran through.

Kelly threw a shot that chipped wood from the door frame behind Mitchell. Then the wall blocked off Mitchell. He found himself in a narrower hallway, some of the roof still remaining here to leave it completely shadowed, leading on back into a maze of rooms beyond.

Without understanding it fully, yet, he knew a great, sick fear for Denise, ignoring Kelly's threat behind him, he turned down the narrow hall, feeling his way along it till he reached a turn. He moved around this, and ahead of him saw that the

roof had fallen in, leaving a length of the rubble-filled passage brilliantly lighted. From behind this lighted portion came a rustling sound. At the same time, Kelly's voice boomed out behind Mitchell.

"Ashford, damn you, where are you?"

I ain't going to play cat and mouse like this all night."

His voice formed a few muffled echoes that played back and forth within the ghostly chambers, to die, at last, and leave that black well of silence. Mitchell's shirt was clinging to his back now, sticky with sweat. Again, he heard that rustling sound in front of him, like the shift of clothing against a stealthily moving body. But it did not seem to be actually within the hall. Then there was a crunching sound. Repeated. Like footsteps in that rubble of fallen ceiling.

Mitchell was about to shift forward, when he heard another noise behind him. This was heavier, a repeated crunching sound, clearly recognizable as footsteps back around that turn. It would be Kelly, then, coming in behind him.

Suddenly, from the shadows staining the other end of the hall he heard the sudden burst of running feet, a sharp feminine gasp, and Ashford's vindictive voice.

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“All right, you little vixen—”

Mitchell knew Kelly would be around that corner in the next instant, and that he would expose himself to the man's murderous fire if he ran into that lighted section of the hall. Yet, he also knew he had only that next instant in which to save Denise.

With a deep, gasping breath, he broke into a run. As soon as he reached the moonlit section, there was a blasting shot, chipping adobe off into his face. He wheeled, firing at the blast of that shot. Right after his own detonation, he heard the sound of running feet behind him. There was a second cherry-red blast from back there, but it was pointed at the ground, kicking earth up five feet behind Mitchell. He fired at this, again and again, still running, himself, in a twisted, backward way, until his gun was empty. As he reached the end of the patch of moonlight, and plunged into the blackness beyond, Studs Kelly came into it from those other shadows.

He was just about through running. He held his gun, but it was pointed at the ground. He veered from side to side, plunging first into the left wall, then the right. Finally, halfway through the moonlight, he rammed into the wall again, with his shoulder, and stopped, and sagged there a

moment. Then he began to slide down into a sitting position, the whole front of him covered with blood.

Mitchell whirled, still holding his empty gun, and flung himself through the doorway at the end of the hall. Across the chamber here, Denise jay twisted against the wall, face pale and contorted, as she gripped the gold-headed cane with both hands. She must have blocked Ashford's first blow, and caught the cane, for he was down on one knee over her, trying desperately to tear the cane free. He twisted it loose from her hands just as they both caught sight of Mitchell. Ashford came up to his feet in a twisting motion.

Mitchell was running so hard he could not stop himself, and went heavily into Ashford, carrying the man back against the wall. Face twisted in rage, Ashford swung the cane out in a wide arc that brought the end against the back of Mitchell's head. It knocked Mitchell partly aside. Stunned by the blow, he tried to use his empty gun to whip Ashford. Ashford jumped back and knocked the gun from his hand with another blow of the cane.

Mitchell went into the man once more. He grappled Ashford, trying to pull him back off-balance. Ashford

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shifted his weight, jabbing Mitchell in the groin with the point of the cane. Surprised at the man's vicious strength, sickened by the stab at his groin, Mitchell dropped to his knees. With a triumphant curse, Ashford raised the cane to strike his head.

But Mitchell got both arms about the man's legs, scissoring them, and put all his weight against Ashford. The lawyer was going over backward when his cane struck, weakening the blow. Mitchell sprawled up on top of him, striking at his face.

Ashford jerked away from the blow. Mitchell caught the cane with one hand, as Ashford tried to lift it, struck again with his other fist, again. His third blow found the man's face fully. Ashford groaned, went limp beneath him. Slowly, dazedly, Mitchell got to his feet, turned to Denise. She was still huddled against the wall, staring white-faced at Ashford. He moved over wordlessly to help her up. She stood against him a long time, trembling. When he felt she had pulled herself together, he asked:

"It was Ashford who killed Conrad, then?"

"Conrad?" Her eyes turned up, startled. "Yes," Mitchell nodded. "Conrad's dead outside. His head mashed in."

"I didn't know that," she said, "I heard someone coming into the fort. I thought it was you." She shook her head, eyes blank with wonder. "It was Ashford who killed the real Lady Agatha, then?"

"Looks like it," Mitchell muttered. "But why?"

"Money. What other reason is there?" Studs Kelly said, from where he sat in the hallway.

Mitchell wheeled towards him, took an impulsive step in that direction. "You'd better not talk, Kelly."

The man sat with his head sunk onto his chest, eyes closed, a twisted, contemptuous expression on his lips. "Why not? I'm at the end of this dally. Ashford figured we could get the whole inheritance if he worked it right. Before that time, I wouldn't give Conrad any credit because I knew he wasn't going to inherit anything. Then Ashford came to me and suggested that if Conrad piled up enough gambling debts, and something were to happen to Lady Agatha, I could claim the inheritance as payment of the debts."

"That's why your men were looking over the Broken Shield cattle?"

Kelly laughed, choked up blood. "I'm a business man," he said, finally,

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squinting hard in pain. "I like to see what I'm getting fer my money."

"Then Ashford was the man who killed the real Lady Agatha?"

"Yeah," Kelly said, "He had every angle figured. He even used a gold-headed cane so it would be blamed on Conrad if anything went wrong."

"He didn't figure one angle," Mitchell said.

"The actress?" Kelly coughed weakly. "You can imagine what that did to the old shyster, when she showed up here and everybody took her for the real article. I had to admire her. I almost hated to break up her little game."

"Why did Ashford kill Conrad?" Mitchell asked.

"Conrad began to suspect what kind of deal we were pulling when the real Lady Agatha was murdered. When this actress showed up, he thought she was working with us, to prevent him from inheriting the estate on the death of the only other heir."

"Then he must have suspected Ashford of Lady Agatha's murder, and thought the proof I said this woman had would incriminate Ashford," said Mitchell. "That's why he came here."

The gambler did not answer. His head had fallen forward on his chest. With a small sobbing sound, Denise

turned her face in against Mitchell. He was still holding her when Sheriff Leeds stepped into the moonlit section of the hall, and halted, gun in hand. He took in the whole scene before he spoke.

"I heard the last of what Kelly said," he murmured, finally. "Ashford is the one I'll ship back to St. Louis, then."

"That's right," answered Mitchell. "He and Kelly were splitting on the deal."

"I followed Kelly out here," Leeds said, holstering his gun. "He must have been following you. Boa's out there with a bullet in the leg. I ain't seen so much carnage since—"

"Will you take over?" Mitchell broke in. "I'd like to get her out of this."

Leeds pursed his lips, nodded. Mitchell kept himself between the woman and Kelly's body, as they passed, going down the narrow, black hall and through the door into the chamber, mottled with yellow moonlight. Here they halted a moment, while the woman leaned against him, gathering herself.

"It'll be hard to think of you as anything but Agatha, after all this," he told her. Then he tilted her chin up. "I was always bothered by that mixture of hot and cold in you. The

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cold was when you were trying to act like Lady Agatha, wasn't it?" She nodded, in mute answer, and he added, "And it was Lady Agatha who didn't like the country."

"Yes," she said, fiercely. "I tried to act towards it the way I thought Agatha would. But Denise Parker loves the country. She'd do anything to stay."

"Would she marry the ex-ramrod of the broken Shield who is going into business for himself after they settle the estate?"

Her eyes darkened. "This is an awful place to talk about it." Then a

tremulous smile lit her face. "But I'd say yes to that anywhere, Hugh."

He gathered her into his arms, no longer torn by what she did to him, no longer afraid of it. "I'll give you a chance to say it in a much better place than this," he smiled.

THE END