



INVITATION BY BULLET

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INVITATION WAS BY BULLET ONLY TO OLD RUBE MAMEROCK'S FANDANGO AT THE OX BOW RANCH. WHETHER THEY STAYED BY REASON OF ANOTHER SLUG WAS UP TO THE GUESTS THEMSELVES. A WILD HAND WAS PLAYED OUT THAT NIGHT WHEN TWO ROVING PARTNERS SAT IN AT THE GAME WITH DEATH.

CHAPTER I

INDIGO FORECASTS DISASTER

THERE was rain over in the distant hills. November's clouds, scudding along the ceiling of the desert, were ripped wide by the jagged peaks and emptied of their liquid freight. The immediate foreground, too, had been touched by rain; the clay-and-sand ground was sodden, every depression of hoof and pad was carved clear and every rock bowl held water. Dampness weighted the air, the raw dampness of a swiftly approaching wet winter. It was high time for all wayfarers to be holing up, yet Indigo Bowers and Joe Breedlove still were on the roll, weatherworn and scarred veterans with a thousand miles behind them and no visible goal ahead. These two were like work ponies turned out. They found the freedom good and they tarried at green pastures only for a night, avoiding all entangling fences, refusing every bait that led to a corral. Either, left

to himself and to his primal impulses, would have obeyed the sure and certain instinct of range creatures to seek shelter at this season. But together they defied rules. Shelter meant settling in town or on a ranch. It meant gathering with other men. And there would be ties and associations surely binding them during the severe months; old habits conquering the impulse to roam. And when spring came it was entirely possible that the partnership would be disrupted and only one would follow the trail again. Neither Joe nor Indigo confessed this fear but it was very strong and real to each. Thus they rode beyond good weather, fearing to mention the need of pegging down a picket.

Indigo eased himself in the saddle and pointed his thin, waspish face into the wind. This gentleman's gross weight tallied not much more than a hundred twenty pounds, which was wholly inadequate to withstand the wear and tear of his enormous distrust and suspicion of the universe as well as all and sundry humans moving about it. He

was short and very thin and never smiled; never, in fact, found anything worth smiling at. To Indigo the world was a snare and a delusion and life was one vast effort at maintaining a proper respect for his dignity. Every day was just another twenty-four hours of possible disaster. He stared into the remote grayness of the desert, eyes contracting. And he nodded several times, moving his free arm with a gesture that his partner knew to be the forerunner of an ominous and gloomy prediction.

"I tell yuh, Joe, I ain't a man to go out of my way to find trouble, but this doggone' country shore gets on my nerves. The cards don't lay right whatsoever. Peril an' strife is due to break down on us like a ton o' bricks. Did yuh hear somethin' sneakin' around our camp last night?"

"Sagebrush rustlin'," murmured Joe.

Indigo sighed. "Joe, I ain't never ceased to marvel how yuh reached this ripe stage o' maturity sound and unhalting. Yo're as innocent as a babe in three-cornered overalls. Sagebrush, eh? First time ever I heard sagebrush stumblin' over rocks."

JOE smiled, a slow and crinkling smile that was like throwing wide the doors of a warm and glowing house. Joe was a tall and muscular man with silvering hair and blue eyes. He was a lazy moving man, he spoke slowly and with a drawling gentleness, a trick that was even more pronounced when he became thoroughly roused. But even without action or speech the character of Joe Breedlove was plainly to be seen upon the fine, bronzed features—an even, humorous serenity that inevitably drew others to him. On the long trail of his life were a thousand friends who had said goodbye to him with a sharp and personal sense of regret. For Joe could not walk among his kind without creating affection and respect.

"Let it pass," said he, still smiling at his peppery consort. "You been at peace with the world for a week straight and the monotony is sort of makin' you nervous."

"Yuh can't slink it off thataway," grumbled Indigo, rubbing his peaked nose. "Tell me a time when I ain't been right about this feelin'."

"It's a fact," admitted Joe. "I believe you could walk inside the pearly gates and drum up friction. They's somethin' about you which makes the buzzards rise off the topmost crags and shout for a meal. Indigo, I figure you send out waves of irritation or somethin' like that. You'd ought to be

more calm. Why go out of your way to step on somebody's bunions?"

"I don't," was Indigo's severe answer. "I mind my own business strictly. But folks always got a notion they can tromp on me unrestrained. Which is shore wrong. It shore is. Yuh talk about bein' calm—hell! What's it brought you? Seems like yuh get into trouble jusasame."

Joe swept the horizon with a long and raking glance and for an instant his attention tarried on a certain point. His smile broadened. He shook his head as if his conviction had been maintained. "My motto is peace. A soft word goes a long, long ways, Indigo."

"Yeah," grunted Indigo, and stopped. His sharp eyes likewise sought the horizon, and his small body stiffened, much as a pointer freezes on quarry. Joe chuckled and rolled a cigarette.

"Somebody comin' in a sweat," muttered Indigo. And for many minutes he watched the distance with jealous attention. A rider drew out of the gray air, galloping posthaste. He bore directly toward the partners for several hundred yards, then veered almost at right angles and swept upward to higher ground. Presently he was abreast of them but a half mile on their flank. And in a little while more he dropped from sight. Indigo nodded. "Avoided us," said he with a grim satisfaction.

"Which is his right," suggested Joe.

"It ain't nacheral, though," argued Indigo. "It's impolite. They's a reason behind that, you wait an' see."

THEY went on at a leisurely gait. The day was half gone and they had no exact idea where the next town lay or where they would tarry the ensuing night. It didn't much matter. They had been going on like this for a long summer. Rolling leagues of sand and sharp mountain ranges rose in front of them, were traversed and left behind. The days fell endlessly into each other. Hot, sultry days and cold, clear nights with the mystery of the infinite for a lullaby. Joe's mellow character was in tune with all this. Cross-legged before the evening's fire he watched the blue tent of heaven and in the long silences he drew out of his memory those relics of the past which were now aged and precious. Joe was not much more than thirty-five but he had traveled the wide West from early boyhood and down that far trail were green spots with their treasured recollections. Of the night in

Abilene when he had won his spurs as a man; of a girl just across the threshold of womanhood who had looked up to him in the faint moonlight and cried. At this point Joe looked to the stars and his features always settled a little.

“Hah,” muttered Indigo with a kind of strangled pleasure. “Another gent dustin’ his pants.”

The second rider moved with about the same speed as the first had done, but he closed the distance with no attempt at shying away. The partners came to a standstill, waiting. Indigo shifted nervously and there was a hardening of his cheek muscles that surely and completely told of the battle chant rising within his small and skinny frame. He had been weary and jaded and morose all the morning. Now he freshened and sat erect in his saddle. Joe chuckled again, shrewdly studying the newcomer.

The rider flung himself directly in front of the partners and brought his pony to a squatting, sliding halt. He pushed back his hat with a fretful jerk and he hauled out his cigarette ingredients with the same petulance of spirit. And with the sack of makin’s dangling between a set of hard white teeth he stabbed the two with a flashing glance. He was youthful looking but in no manner innocent; and his bronzed face needed washing.

“Fire or disaster over yonder?” grunted Indigo. “Sudden demise, epidemical disease, peril on human hoof, or wrath o’ God? Or was yuh just limberin’ up the hoss?”

“If,” countered the newcomer, completing the masonry of his cigarette with a sidewise slap of his tongue, “that is the only direction you boys is able to go, it is just too bad.”

“Ain’t the climate salubrious?” pressed Indigo, growing brighter.

THE rider lit his cigarette, inhaled a mighty volume of smoke and delivered himself of a solemn sermon. “If that valley from which I jus’ took myself hence was the vale of Eden I wouldn’t go back. If they was a Persian maid every square yard to anoint my blistered spirit with kind words and lovin’ emoluments, if they was melons on every sage bush and a pot o’ gold hangin’ from each and sundry juniper tree, if all cow critters gave milk and said milk when sparin’ly partook of give a gent everlastin’ life, I wouldn’t go back. Boys, I’m on my way.”

He touched his spurs and boosted his horse

around them. Indigo cried after him, “Hey, what’s so doggone’ turrible about it?”

The rider flung a phrase over his shoulder. “Dead Card John is on the warpath.” And he was gone, seeming to push the earth faster around its axis with each surge of his pony’s flying feet.

Indigo blew a mighty blast from his nose and looked toward Joe with a sinister triumph. “Ain’t I been tellin’ yuh?”

“Makin’ allowances for a youthful imagination,” began Joe mildly.



Indigo interrupted with one of his rare classical similes. “Once when I was a boy I used to see a picture in a book of all the animals fleein’ from the Flood. Reminds me of that now. Joe, they’s a heap of trouble ahead of us.

Let’s go a mite faster.”

“It ain’t our trouble,” said Joe. They broke into a canter, with Indigo now and then rising in his saddle to scan the gray afternoon. “Listen, Indigo, it ain’t no trouble we got to buy or share.”

“Well,” was Indigo’s defensive answer, “I jus’ want to look in.”

The broken desert fell behind. To either side the parallel benches marched up and down and gradually sank with a falling slope. Some sort of a valley lay in the immediate foreground. Far away was the dim outline of high, sharp peaks. And Joe Breedlove who all this time had been sweeping the earth, murmured softly and drew his horse to a complete stop. The sand to one side was scuffed with the print of hoof and human shoe. And with the outline of some heavy object dragged along its surface. Joe slid from the saddle, first spending a moment’s watchfulness toward a strip of lava rock a hundred yards farther aside. “Jus’ sorter keep your eyes on that rock,” he muttered to Indigo, and bent over the broken sand.

THERE was a story written tragically on that area of earth. A horse had trotted back and forth, another horse had advanced into the disturbed circle and then gone off at a tangent. Two sets of boot tracks, one imperceptibly larger than the other; the gouge of knee and elbow and, ten feet from these telltale marks the broad and deep trail of

a dragged body. All this was elementary reading to Joe. He saw it immediately; his gloved finger dropped to a darkened patch in the sand. "That's somebody's blood, Indigo. Let's have a look over behind them rocks."

He stepped into the saddle. And out of ingrained wariness, the pair of them split and quartered upon the rock from different angles, closing again when they had a clear view of what lay beyond. Indigo was somewhat impatient. The horizon drew him like a magnet and he waited, not bothering to get down, while Joe sought stolidly from one rock barricade to another.

"Why waste time?" Indigo demanded. "This ain't nothin'. Tracks is six hours old anyhow. The main event's on ahead. Come on, Joe."

Joe's shoulders dropped. He boosted himself upright, holding a shell between thumb and forefinger. "The guy doin' the shootin' squatted right here, Indigo. And he must've figgered he hadn't killed his man with the first shot for he ejected this shell and got set for another aim." He studied the shell with minute interest. "You wasn't in the Spanish-American War, was you, Indigo?"

"No," grunted the small partner. "I had a Spanish-American girl down at Yuma them days and that was enough fightin' for one year."

"I shouldered a Krag-Jorgensen rifle durin' said scrap," mused Joe. "This is a sure-enough Krag shell. They ain't too common now. I guess we'll store this in a pocket."

"Let's go. They's a house two-three miles below."

THEY went on, Indigo's eyes growing narrower and narrower with smoldering excitement. Joe, on the other hand, was in a profound study, head dropped forward on his chest. He had just finished reading a chapter of violence. Some human being had threshed out his life in agony on that sand; and Joe's sympathetic imagination reconstructed the scene detail by detail as the tracks suggested. Men had to die. Sure. But why, under the western sky and with all the immense distances for freedom of use, did men have to ambush each other? Indigo's voice cut sharply across his pondering.

"Somebody on the porch."

They had traversed a gradual downward slope. A hundred yards to the fore stood a weathered, sagging frame shanty. Obviously a nester's home, for a fence with a single strand of wire boxed a few

barren acres, and one small patch of ground had been scratched loose for a garden. A row of sunflowers skirted the house. A man sat motionless in a rocking chair near the front door.

The partners waited a moment for the customary invitation to light and rest. None came. Joe Breedlove stepped down, smiling cheerfully. "I reckon you'll pardon the intrusion. But it is a new country to us and we're wonderin' just what direction town is from here."

The man was very old and shriveled. His clothes hung loosely, showing the sharp points of his frame; the hands resting on the rocker arms were blackened by long years of sun and twisted by long years of work. And he had nothing to say to Joe in reply. At first it seemed to the genial partner that this old fellow was a mute, or deaf, or that age had drugged his tongue. He thought so only for a moment. The rocker stirred and began a slow swinging. The fellow's head came up and Joe saw misery in his faded blue eyes. Joe had seen torture of spirit before. He knew the stamp of it; he recognized it here. The old man swayed as if to soothe and relieve pain. Then the partners heard a strangled laboring of breath inside the house; such a weird and blood-chilling suspiration that Indigo tipped on his heels and threw a startled glance at his companion. Joe circled the rocker and entered the half darkened shanty.

There was a woman huddled in a dim corner; crying dismally. She had an apron thrown over her head and her hands were spread against the wall, slowly slipping to the floor. Joe started to back away, and stopped. Nearer the door and directly under a window was a bunk, occupied now with the rigid and lifeless body of a young puncher. A single blue spot stood out in startling clearness upon the gray and settled face.

"Nesters," whispered Joe. "The kid was the support o' the family. So some outfit plugged him to keep his kind outen the land. Damn 'em, Joe!"

"I reckon it's the end of the story all right," agreed Joe, soberly. He went outside, staring into the distance. The serenity and the kindness was gone from Joe then. "Somebody," said he, "ought to be crucified for that, Indigo, somebody ought to suffer!"

"Don't worry none, somebody will."

BOTH of them turned as if pulled by the same spring to face a newcomer slouched by the

corner of the house. Where he had been the meanwhile or where he had come from they didn't know. But here he stood, a slim tall man with iron gray hair and delicate fingers and a face that seemed as cold as marble. He was dressed like a circuit rider—string tie and white shirt and a black broadcloth suit. But there was no religion on the gentleman's face. He had been nurtured on a different training. Joe saw it instantly. Along the silver-haired partner's trail there had been other men like this—solitary and secretive and coldly watchful. He studied the man with an interest that seemed to intensify with each passing moment.

Indigo shifted, growing restive and angry under the newcomer's steady stare. "Glad to hear it. But what's the idee o' slinkin' around the premises like a feline? I would also like to ask yuh if they's anything funny about my nose which makes yuh goggle at it so unmannerly?"

"Where are you strangers from?" inquired the man, bluntly.

"North," replied Joe.

"If it's any of yore doggone' business," added Indigo with an equal bluntness.

"Where to?" snapped the inquisitor.

"South," drawled Joe. His blue eyes bored into the fellow's face. He smiled and Indigo, seeing the quality of that smile, stepped promptly aside and held his peace. "I reckon you'd be the gentleman called Dead Card John," pursued Joe in the same sleepy manner. "Yore repute goes ahead to greet all pilgrims. A friend or relation of yours—the boy in there?"

All he had for an answer was a slight inclination of Dead Card John's head. Joe likewise nodded. "Yeah. And you'll maybe be writin' somebody's ticket. I'd like to ask the caliber and make o' yore rifle, mister. Just for to satisfy a curiosity."

"I give you credit," said Dead Card John, lids rising from his strange and unfathomable eyes. A man only got that kind of a fixed expression through years at one particular vocation. As well as the cold and marble pallor of cheeks that defied sun and wind. "I give you credit," repeated Dead Card John, each word the more chilly. "But I won't answer that question. If you are riding south don't let me keep you waiting. And you might tell anybody who asks you in Terese," each syllable piling up to a higher, more biting and bitter pitch, "that Dead Card John's riding. You'll do me a favor."

Joe nodded. "Maybe I'll do it, if anybody asks me. But I reckon the country may know it before we get to Terese. I'm some accustomed to the West, friend. And which way is Terese, anyhow?"

"South along the valley," said Dead Card John. As the partners swung up and turned from the house he added another impersonally polite warning. "When you get there, I wouldn't be in any hurry to declare yourselves."

"Most every county has two kinds of politics," observed Joe. He spent a last penetrating look upon Dead Card John. "I reckon, friend, I've covered some little territory in the last sixteen years. It's been a long while since I was a younker settin' out for to see the world in '95. A fellow absorbs a heap. We bid you good day."

THEY passed a horse saddled and waiting. Joe gave it a quick inspection and passed on. The rifle boot was on the far side and he couldn't make out the fellow's weapon. Indigo grumbled for a half-mile before arriving at a conviction.



"It might've been his bullet, Joe. What was he snoopin' around for? He shore registers poison to me. I've seen poker faces like his'n before."

"When we rounded the corner," mused Joe, "he'd put his hand on the old gent's shoulder."

Indigo looked queerly at his partner. "Say, for the love o' Jupiter, Joe, are yuh a-tryin' to make out a case for that stone-eyed gent? It ain't like yuh. It ain't. Usually yo're a man to ketch a fellow's disposition pretty quick. Yuh'd ought to know he was poison."

"Well, to tell the truth," confessed Joe, almost meekly, "I found points about him I liked. Yeah, I did."

"All yo're tryin' to do now is start an argument. Yuh don't mean it. But what was the idee o' throwin' dates at him like yuh did. It ain't yore habit to brag, Joe."

"Sometimes I naturally spill over with past history," murmured Joe. The blandness left him. "It

ain't so much the dead youngster, Indigo. Well, it's hard enough for them kind to go. But it's the old ones. It gets me. I won't sleep well for some nights. Why has that got to be? Whenever I hear a woman cry like that—or an old man with a dead look in his eyes—it gets me, Indigo.”

“Well, it ain't settled yet,” grunted Indigo. “I sorter feel like we'll be in this deal.” He looked at Joe from the corner of his eye, assaying the result of the remark. And when Joe nodded assent Indigo straightened and snorted like an impatient war horse. “Sometimes I understand yuh, Joe. Sometimes I do. This day shore is fadin' fast.”

They cut down a sharp wall in the graying late afternoon and struck a winding road southward. A forty-foot river ran beside the road and chrome bluffs narrowed and widened as they traveled. They accelerated pace, feeling the end of a long journey. The bluffs narrowed again and the road and river squeezed through nothing more than a slit of earth. Just beyond the valley unfolded into a gray plain. Just beyond, also, was a roadside saloon with a light glimmering prematurely out of a smudged window. An isolated and lonely place meant for an isolated and lonely rendezvous. The partners, courting the same unspoken thought, reined before it, got down and stepped inside.

They faced a crowd. They interrupted a flow of heated talk. And as they came somewhat beyond the door one of that crowd turned with a clearly defensive movement and gave them a sharp and insolent glance out of his cynically humorous face. Cattle country was filled with such faces, but Joe marked it as he marched toward the bar. There was a flurry of laugh and a murmur. “Don't get excited none, Al. Yo're a long ways from Ox Bow country.”

“Yeah,” grinned the one who had turned so quickly. “I guess. Yeah.”

Silence fell, a heavy, ill-humored silence that smothered the partners like so much foul air. Indigo's hackles instantly rose, but Joe turned to him with a mild glance and spoke soothingly to a sullen barkeep.

“A little rye, Doctor.”

The barkeep passed a glance toward the crowd and seemed to find an answer. “Ain't got no rye, friend.”

Joe smiled. “Kentucky's best, then.”

The barkeep turned his seal-fat back to them and ran a heavy eye along shelves plentifully laden.

He scanned the rows of bottles and swung. “I don't reckon we got anything you'd care to drink,” he decided with some emphasis.

Indigo's washed out orbs took on a glitter that meant but one thing. Joe checked him again, still smiling. He reached into his pocket and extracted therefrom a gold five-dollar piece. He laid it very carefully in front of the barkeep and took a pace backward, drawing his gun with a deliberateness that was outrageously indecent. And he scanned the bottles on the shelves until he found a label that attracted his eye. The gun rose, a single explosion filled the room and shook the loose window sashes. The bottle fell apart, throwing its amber liquid to the floor in successive spurts.

“A little American, then,” murmured Joe, holstering the gun. “Obliged for the hospitality. Come on, Indigo.”

THEY went out and rode through the deepening haze. Indigo poured a hot stream of invective into the damp air. Presently the lights of Terese town enfolded them. They stabled their horses and turned toward the saloon for that drink which preceded a well balanced meal.

“I'll live to pull that roadside dump into the crick,” fumed Indigo, breaking out afresh. “I'll see it lyin' in charred ashes. Yuh'd think we was greasers the way our money don't talk.”

“Wasn't that,” murmured Joe, pushing against the saloon's swinging door. “That gang was up to somethin'. We walked into a private meetin'. That dead boy is only a chapter, Indigo. It ain't the whole story—only a chapter.”

The saloon was a glittering and gaudy Western palace. It was a three-ringed circus where a man might at the same time drink, gamble and be entertained. A bar ran the full length of the place, a stage jutted out from the far end and there was no limit save the sky on the amount of money to be played across the rows of tables. A sign above the bar said as much. Around the ornate paneling were the fighters of three generations and the dancing girls and soubrettes beloved of the land; a goldfish fiddled wearily around an immense glass bowl, a piano chattered “Dixie” in different keys. And a gentleman of ample proportions and expensive broadcloth clothing raised a hand to the partners as they slouched to the bar.

“Strangers here?”

“No formal introductions yet,” gravely

acquiesced Joe.

The gentleman crooked his finger at a near barkeep. "First drink is always on my house. I serve good drinks, boys, I keep the crowd entertained. And I don't talk politics much. From which direction did you sift in? The question ain't meant personal."

"We met a fellow called Dead Card John," murmured Joe and raised a ruby glass. His blue eyes met those of the saloonkeeper blandly. Yet by that one glance he made known to the saloonkeeper the kind of a man he was. Through the years Joe Breedlove established friends on that short a notice. The saloonkeeper rolled his cigar and crooked another finger. He poured himself a drink and lifted it ceremoniously. "I will wet the occasion with you. The person with the blue chin and red pug face over yonder is Crowheart Ames."

Joe eased himself around and passed a mild, incurious glance through the room. His attention fell aimlessly on the designated citizen, lingered inconspicuously and returned to the saloon proprietor. "Does he own this town or did nature put that look on his geography?"

"Sheriff of Terese County, friend," said the saloon man softly. "I don't talk politics much."

"I'm so hungry," sighed Indigo, "that I feel like a post hole which ain't been filled up. Le's eat."

"Yeah," drawled Joe, not at all following the import of his partner's words. "They's a table over by the sheriff gent. We sit there a minute, Indigo. Just to rest and ponder."

They rolled casually through the crowd and sat down. Joe relaxed like a man very tired, and his eyes seemed to be closed. But Indigo knew better and he fidgeted in the chair and composed himself to follow Joe's game, not knowing what it was, or why it should concern Crowheart Ames. Joe's left eyelid fluttered and rose to command the sheriff's table. The sheriff was not alone. A dancing girl sat opposite him, dressed in a hoop skirt. That skirt and the tune of "Dixie" being thumped out on the piano indicated the variety of play that was about to be brought forth upon the stage. But the girl, Joe decided, was not Southern. She had yellow hair and her eyes were gray in the lamplight. She was young, she touched a glass before her with a gesture of refusal, and she seemed uncomfortable in the company of Crowheart Ames.

Crowheart looked to be a politician nurtured on whisky. The man's face dished like that of an

English bull; it was broad and pudgy and somewhat red. He slouched in his chair, with a puckered grin on his cheeks. Joe didn't care much for the grin and from what his eyes gathered, neither did the girl. Indigo kicked his foot under the table and looked significantly toward the door. Joe turned to see two newcomers enter the saloon. One was a stunted and sheepish puncher better than half drunk. The other man Joe instantly recognized. It was Al, he of the cynically humorous face, who had so quickly turned to inspect the partners at the roadside joint.

The sight of these two affected the crowd in the saloon queerly. The droning of talk rose to a higher note as man after man turned to look at the pair. Joe's shrewd eyes skipped from table to table, marking the nodding heads and the sudden twisting of lips in whispered speech. Through the rumbling and through the heavy smoke floated a name. "Praygood Nuggins." It reached Joe. It reached the sheriff, whose fat jowls settled. He had been talking to the girl but he broke off instantly and twisted in his chair, scowling.



The man whose name Joe knew to be Al, swung toward the bar, refusing to look at the sheriff, but the half-drunken puncher seemed to catch hold of Crowheart Ames's pug face as a familiar and friendly beacon. He made for the sheriff, marvelously navigating the twisting lane between tables. And he fumbled in a bulging pocket and caught something in his horny hands. Crowheart Ames shook his head. "Get away from here, Snipe. Yo're drunk, disgustin' drunk. Get away from here before I lock yuh up."

Snipe's fist fell to the sheriff's table and opened. A pair of bullet slugs rolled along the surface; Snipe grinned and waggled his finger. "Fooled yuh that time, Mister Ames. I'm on 'ficial business. Tha's yore invite to Rube Mamerock's fandango tomorra night. Don' forget to bring them invites or yuh'll be turned back cold at the bridge. Them invites is marked. They is also sleepereed and no son-of-a-gun can forge an invite. Yuh may be sheriff, Mister Ames, but Rube Mamerock's fandango starts at dark tomorra. You be there. Throw me in jail? Not when I'm on Rube Mamerock's 'ficial business. Yuh'd shore regret it,

Mister Ames.”

HE TURNED away with a grand and final gesture of his twisted arm and started back. His attention centered upon the partners and he stopped immediately and stared at them long and profoundly. “Lessee—don’t guess I give yuh an invite.” Down into his pocket he went. Two more leaden slugs rolled across the table top and were caught by Joe’s flat palm. “Invite to Rube Mamerock’s fandango. Tomorra night. Don’t forget them invites. Got to have ‘em to cross the bridge. You be there.”

“Thanks,” said Joe. He studied the slugs carefully. Upon the rounding top of each was a rough cross. And around the body of each was a deep furrow. He raised his mild eyes to the puncher. “What outfit is this, friend, and where’s it at?”

The question seemed both to sober and insult the messenger. He made a move as if to retrieve the slugs and failed because Joe Breedlove’s palm closed securely over them. He straightened and spoke with a tremendous dignity.

“I nev’ thought a soul in this county didn’t know Rube Mamerock’s Ox Bow outfit. When yuh die, mister, an’ step inside the gate uh paradise yuh’ll see some fine range. But it won’t compete with Ox Bow. Ox Bow ranch is half o’ Terese County, stranger. An’ the other half ain’t worth botherin’ about. When it’s roundup time on Ox Bow the state stops to listen to the rumble o’ hoofs. When Ox Bow ships, they’s a solid string o’ cars from here to Omaha. Ox Bow leather is on yore boots an’ Ox Bow beef has foddered yuh since yuh was a child, no matter was yuh raised in Arizona or Montana. I’m an Ox Bow rider and though I may be drunk I will rise to state calmly I’d ruther peel spuds on said ranch than own the brand of any other peanut outfit in Terese. Texas is a big state. Ox Bow is bigger. Rube Mamerock made it thataway and when”—he paused and turned a complete circle, feeling the focus of a hundred eyes and the complete silence of the room—“an’ when time comes for old Rube to hang up his saddle an’ lay away his rope; when said time comes hell will shore be a mild climate compared to Terese County!”

Crowheart Ames roared savagely. “Get out of here, you soak!” The dancing girl’s face whitened and she leaned across the table, speaking softly.

Crowheart’s sudden, blunt speech cut from corner to corner of the place.

“Why hold it back any longer? Everybody knows but you, Ray. Girl, Sam Trago was shot to ribbons out by his daddy’s shanty this mornin’. He’s stone dead, kid.”

A SCREAM slashed the heavy air and tore like a knife through Joe Breedlove’s heart. To a man the crowd rose up, chairs squealing across the floor. And speech roared from wall to wall, heavy and profane. The dancing girl had fainted, her yellow head lying on the table top. Crowheart rose and circled beside her. The saloon proprietor plunged against the milling bodies, spitting ire at the sheriff. “Keep yore paws off her. Did yuh have to bust it on the girl like that? Yuh damn’ fool!”

Crowheart had the girl in his arms. And then, from a different angle of this room, Joe noticed the slim figure of Dead Card John threading forward. He had not been in the place until now, that much was certain. Nor had he entered by the front way. But here he was in front of Crowheart Ames, marble cheeks cut with deep lines, eyes burning incredibly bright. He extended his arms and Crowheart, saying no word and making no protest, surrendered the girl. Joe Breedlove sighed when he saw how Dead Card John looked down upon the dancing girl’s yellow hair. “By God, Indigo, I like that man!” A lane opened and closed. Dead Card John disappeared with his burden.

“Who’s Sam Trago?” asked Indigo.

“The boy we saw dead.”

“Yeah, I know that. I guessed it. But I wonder who he was.”

“Just a chapter, Indigo. Just a chapter, not the whole story. Have you observed how quick this dude Al and also Dead Card John reached town behind us?”

Both partners were diverted. Once more the name of a man swept through the place, the name of Praygood Nuggins. The saloon entrance was blocked by a figure; and Joe, whose whole training had made him sensitive to mob sentiment, knew then and there that Terese was afraid of the newcomer. A tremendous struggle unfolded while the raw and uncertain night closed down.

CHAPTER II
RUBE MAMEROCK

FIFTY-ONE years, lacking a day—the anniversary was more religiously remembered and celebrated on Ox Bow than the Fourth of July—Rube Mamerock had ridden his jaded horse to the edge of a bluff and looked down upon a river and a flat and fair land rolling away beyond the river. Rube Mamerock had been very young then. Very young and poor. Fever was in his native Texas, the fever that racked men's bones; Rube, stopping to rove the far reaches of this new country with his hungry eyes, was a gaunt and malarial scarecrow seeking for a home. The War of Sections was just over and in the deep Southwest it was being rumored that railroads were building across to Kansas and that cattle could be driven northward, to be fattened and shipped. Rube had left Texas with the rumor in his ears and he had traveled until he witnessed with his own eyes the twin steel rails creeping across the Kansas prairie. And so, seeing the virgin lands marching beyond the river, he got down from his horse, squatted in the sand and traced his initials.

"I reckon I'll stick here till the Indians drive me out."

He was the first cattleman in the region. He antedated the state government. He himself had named Terese County and town after the single drab woman ever to cross the undeviating path of his career. And she had tarried but a moment, for Rube Mamerock had starved so long as a youth that all his adult years were marked by an incessant hunger after material possessions. He wanted nothing else, worked for nothing else. Now, with a full seventy years upon his shoulders, he sat on the veranda of his house and looked out upon the same scene he had discovered so long ago. And all that he saw was his property. Land and cattle and barns and corrals. No other ranch in Terese was an eighth as large. He had arrived first, taken the best and the most; and the result was a virtual kingdom at once the wonder and the envy of the surrounding country.

Rube Mamerock made it; and it, in turn, left a mark on Rube. All the labor and the fighting and the riding showed on this old man. At seventy he was done. In fact he had been coasting for several years; watching the distances from his porch—a heavy, white-haired gentleman with incredibly

deep lines upon his face and with muscles half useless. When he tamped down his pipe, the fingers of his hands trembled with a palsy. He had created a small empire, his job was done. Yet, in all the breadth of the land, Rube Mamerock knew of no kin, no relation of any degree to whom he could surrender his achievement. There was none of his own blood to keep the Ox Bow going.

A stunted, diffident puncher rolled awkwardly up from the corrals. "That claybank hoss ain't no good in any manner, shape nor form, boss. Might jus' as well turn it back to the wild bunch."

Rube Mamerock ducked his white head. "All right. And when you go by the sheds, Snipe, send Sam Trago up here."

Snipe looked at his boss questioningly. "Why, Sam he went over to his folks' place this mornin'."



Mamerock frowned at his pipe. "Sure. Why didn't I remember that? Sent him off myself." He pushed his unsteady frame out of the chair and limped to the steps with the gait of one whose bones were

brittle. "I'm gettin' some old, Snipe. Even my mind's fallin' back on me." He propped himself by a post and watched the distant hills wistfully. "Rain over there. Goin' to be a wet winter, Snipe. I always said I wanted to be buried in warm ground. It'll be damp, Snipe, damn' damp, when you boys put me away."

Snipe twisted, uncomfortable. "Shucks, that's no kind of palaver for Rube Mamerock. Yo're good for a lot o' wear yet. Say, what would become o' Ox Bow—?"

Mamerock's black eyes turned thoughtfully on the diminutive Snipe. "My boy, I figgered that question five years before I found an answer."

Snipe muttered an astonished, "Son-of-a-gun! Didn't know yuh had any heirs."

"None," growled Mamerock. "Now shut up. I'll be announcin' all details to Terese County tomorrow night. Get busy, Snipe, How's she stand now?"

"Barbecue pits is dug. Ten three-year-old steers in the pen. We slaughters an' dresses 'em first off in the mornin'. We got twenty gallons o' rye and thirty o' Kentucky corn likker comin' out late today. Doctor is hollerin' his head off about the

cookin' he's got to do but they's a heap o' provisions he's turned out. Nothin' short I can figger."

"Invitations?"

"Done," said Snipe and turned up the palms of his hands. "Yeah, that labor is likewise finished."

"Put them in the usual sacks, Snipe. Hitch the buckboard. I'm sending you around to distribute them this year. Sam Trago's goin' to be too busy. Come back here when you're ready to go."

SNIPE went off at a gait half between a limp and a run. Rube Mamerock filled his pipe and walked away from his house toward the rear. Fifty years gone he had built his first log hut at the same spot, facing the bluffs; for at that time the river ran directly below the high chrome walls. Later, in his flush years, Rube Mamerock had carted stone seventy miles from the railroad to build the tremendous and lonely pile of masonry he now tenanted. And the porch was moved around to face the other way. The river no longer crept by the foot of the bluffs. It had gouged another channel. Across that channel was a long wooden bridge, battered by the years of usage, connecting Mamerock home quarters with his range and the outside world. The bluff hemmed him in at the rear; and though the old channel was dry, there were occasional wet winters in which water coursed through it. At such times the Ox Bow home ranch was on an island. The porous sands of that ancient course were damp this afternoon with the seepage of a rising main channel. Mamerock watched the ragged clouds up in the peaks.

"First time in seven seasons I've had wet weather for the fandango." He tried to light his match and was balked by his unsteady fingers. Once, such a physical defect would have put him in a towering rage. Today he shoved the pipe in his pocket and raised his white head to the horizons. "Rube, old man, what are you kickin' about? Ain't it been a great life? I remember when I carved my initials in the sand up on that bluff top. Hell of a long while ago. Said I'd stay till the Indians drove me out. Indians all gone. Pretty soon old Rube'll be gone. Well, when a man starts looking at the trail behind him it's high time he did go. Only I had to wait till Sam Trago grew up an' got hardened in." Habit caused him to reach for his pipe again. This time he got it lit. "Sam'll take care of the buzzards. By St. Mary's bells they been waitin' a long time

for me to die! Sam'll fool 'em."

Snipe drove across the yard with the buckboard and stopped. "Any orders?"

Mamerock shook his head. "You know the folks I always ask to come. Find 'em and leave an invite. Don't get drunk. And don't pass out any invite to the buzzards. Remember that, Snipe. It's been a pride o' mine to honor every invite presented at the bridge. They're the same as old Rube Mamerock's word, no matter whose fists they get into. The buzzards know that, Snipe. So see you don't give any the wrong way. And don't get drunk. Hustle on. And say—"

His cheeks fell away from the accustomed hardness; he almost smiled. "You might stop in at the saloon or the hotel and find Ray Casteen. Say to her I'm countin' time till I hear her sing tomorra."

"Leave a invite to her?" questioned Snipe.

"No, you fool brute!" snapped Mamerock. "What's she need one for? She's Sam Trago's girl, ain't she? He'll bring her. Go on, drag a line."

Snipe tooled the buckboard down the drive and across the insecure bridge. The old baron of Terese watched the puncher go eastward! And when the vehicle was but a dim blur in the distance he turned about and walked to the house. "The buzzards will shore be disappointed when I announce tomorrow that Sam Trago inherits the Ox Bow, lock, stock and barrel. They been waitin' to pick up the pieces. God condemn 'em, they ain't powerful enough to hurt old Rube Mamerock when he's alive an' they won't dare touch Sam Trago when I'm gone! I'd been dead long ago if I didn't know I had to hang on till Sam got hardened to man's work. Now I can die."

He got to the porch and sat down, letting his eyes roam away into the southern distances he knew and loved so well. Over a half century Rube Mamerock had watched the horizon in all its rounding moods. It was as much a part of him as his right hand. "Heaven," he murmured, "may be a fair country, but I'll sorter miss this." He struggled with his pipe and looked at his trembling fingers with mild disapproval. "Just fallin' to pieces. Worse the last three weeks. A heap worse. Well, one more chore done and I'll sleep well. I want Sam should wed Ray Casteen in my place right sudden now. I misdoubt I'll last a week after that event. Nothin' to keep me goin' then. Rube, you been a tough one. I'm sorter proud of what you did. Anxious to see what Gabriel's got tallied ag'in me

on the book. Sam an' Ray—they'll do well. Yeah, right well. The buzzards will sure go hungry."

SO HE pondered, smoking his pipe, feeling the cold tide of dissolution creep inexorably along his body, knowing that for him the race was all but run and that in just a little while all there would be of Rube Mamerock was a scar on the earth and a pine board with his name and a single date.

Snipe drove briskly east in the direction of Terese town, gloomy and cheerful by turns. Snipe was a simple soul and worshipped his outfit and his boss with a single-tracked devotion. So he was cast down when he thought of the boss passing away, and he whistled the Cowboy's Lament until he remembered he hadn't had a drink for going on two months and he hadn't bucked roulette for even longer than that. "Gosh, but I'm scandalous thirsty. I'll go get me a drink. Just one little drink. Then I'll spurn the redeye an' be on my way. What was that system I doped out for buckin' roulette, anyhow? Shore was a hummer. Got to remember that."

He held the reins between his knees and with a stub of a pencil and a fragment of wrapping paper, plunged into an intricate system of gambling. The team put the miles behind, the land rose and fell with its endless sweeping billows. They passed a shanty, they galloped over a bridge. A horseman, unseen by the preoccupied Snipe, raced parallel on a remote bridge and drew gradually inward, arriving at the road some little distance ahead of Snipe. As the rig passed, the horseman had a clear look of the canvas bags and since he was an old hand in the country, he knew what Snipe's mission was. He galloped in pursuit.

"Hey there, Snipe!"

Snipe bobbed in the seat and looked around with a half guilty air. The horseman waved a hand. "Pull down, kid, pull down. What's the idee o' snubbin' a friend thataway?"

"Oh, hello there, Al," muttered Snipe weakly. He stopped the rig. "Say, I wasn't snubbin' nobody. Jus' a-doin' some personal bookkeepin'. Yeah."

Al grinned; and that grin made his slack and cynical face even more unlovely. He had a mouth the size and shape of an Indian's and it sat unbalanced between a hatchet chin and a grotesque Roman nose. Snipe shifted his weight uneasily under Al's long and knowing stare. "Listen, Al," he protested, "yo're allus makin' fun o' me. Cut it out.

Ain't I got a right to bookkeep?"

"Where yuh goin', Snipe?"

"Town," mumbled Snipe and fiddled with the reins. He wanted to be on his way, but he was too mild a soul to achieve bluntness with a man like Al.

Al looked at the canvas bags and winked. "Peddlin' invites to old Rube's party, uh?"

"Yeah," said Snipe and stared absently at his feet.

"Well, that's shore fine. I never did have drag enough to get an invite from him yet. But seein' yo're a friend o' mine, why gimme one, Snipe."

SNIPe colored a little. "Now look here, Al, you an' me is friends. I know we used to ride together. But I got strict orders about these invites. It ain't my place to pass 'em promiscuous. I don't believe I better do it."

"So I ain't good enough for yuh, huh?" snorted Al, manufacturing a presentable show of anger. "I never figgered a friend would ever toss me like that."

"Aw, hell, Al, you know better," protested Snipe, feeling pretty miserable. "Ain't I said I got orders?"



"What's the matter with me?" demanded Al.

Snipe fidgeted. Diplomacy was no part of his training, yet he had need of careful words here. "Well, I ain't got the slightest doubt o' yore character, Al. Say, I'd lend yuh ten bucks—if I had ten bucks. I ain't forgettin' we got drunk many a time, side by side. But yo're trailin' with Praygood Nuggins. My old man shore has got a canker against Praygood. Yuh know it same's me. Well, how would it look if I give yuh an invite? Nossir, I don't dast."

"Nuggins," was Al's severe retort, "is a man o' integrity."

"Shore, shore," Snipe hastened to state. "I ain't castin' no aspersions on his character, am I?" Privately, Snipe thought Nuggins to be a thorough scoundrel, but he skipped and slid nimbly around his inner convictions. He was afraid of rousing Al's wrath. He stood in fear of Al, as a matter of fact. In other days, this grinning chap always had managed to bully or cajole or trick Snipe into meek obedience. Snipe was no warrior, when sober.

“Well, I’m shore glad to hear yuh ain’t,” Al muttered, with an ominous note. “Goin’ to town? Yeah, well move over and I’ll ride on the seat with yuh an’ lead my hoss.”

Snipe disliked this but he gave room and clucked his tongue. The team went on. Al made a gesture toward his pocket and brought out a flask. “Have a drink, Snipe.”

Snipe gave birth to a feeble groan. “Al, I oughtn’t do it. Honest, I oughtn’t. Yuh know me. Either I keep offen it total or else I get so drunk I’m filthy. An’ considerin’ what I got to do yet—”

Al raked him with a shrewd sidewise glance and appeared tremendously outraged. “Listen, Snipe, yuh wasn’t too good for me once. I take that personal. I shore take it personal. By gravy, I got a good notion to resent it!”

“Well, Al,” mumbled Snipe, “yuh got me wrong complete. An’ jus’ to show yuh I’m the same big-hearted fella I allus was I’ll take a nip. Gimme the bottle.”

“Fine. I knowed yuh was a friend. Let it trickle down.”

Snipe seized the bottle, tipped it to the gray afternoon’s sky and made a bow. He drank and looked around to Al, a different man. There was a quality in corn liquor that had the power of transforming Snipe almost instantly. At heart, this small and meek puncher felt unequal with the world. His very stature, contrasted with those robust riders continually around him, put a handicap on his pride. But once he resorted to the bottle all barriers of size, distance and time fell. Snipe, when sober, had his dreams of making a lion of himself. When drunk this remote and well-buried ambition flamed up like a crusading torch. His voice changed, his glance became more severe, he spoke gruffer.

“Listen, Al, is this the only bottle yuh got?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s too bad,” stated Snipe. “It shore is too bad. I aim to drink it here an’ now.”

“Save a mite for me,” protested Al, though the protest was half-hearted.

“I’ll save the bottle, that’s all. Here’s mud in yore eyes.” Half of that flask’s contents vanished. Snipe’s cheeks took on color. His eyes glittered; he tipped his small chin upward and gave Al a hard, hard look. “Al, move over in this seat. I don’t like to be crowded.”

“You an’ me used to be friends,” mourned Al,

giving room.

“We still is,” declared Snipe crisply. “But as for that sheep-stealin’, wolf-hearted, stone-eyed Praygood Nuggins you is chummin’ with—I wouldn’t touch him with a ten-foot pole. He’s the biggest skunk in Terese. He’s skulkin’ around Ox Bow like a yaller mongrel, waitin’ for old Rube to kick the beam. Well, he shore has got some astonishment comin’ to him.”

Al’s interest focussed. “What’s that?”

“Don’t spit at me thataway or I’ll kick yuh offen this vehicle.”

“All right, don’t get sore. But what’s on Rube’s chest?”

“None o’ yore business. Yuh’ll discover in proper time. Al, I ain’t goin’ to tell yuh but once more to move over in this seat an’ gimme room.”

“Hell!” exploded Al. “I’m sittin’ clear off in space now! Well, I never figgered a day like this to come. You an’ me was friends once.”

“We still is,” asserted Snipe irately. He leaned back and ripped open the top of a canvas bag. Quite impressively he brought forth a single leaden slug. “I tell yuh—I’m goin’ to give yuh this invite. It’s an act o’ pure kindness on my part which yuh ain’t sensible enough to appreciate. Sometimes I like yuh—sometimes I don’t. Yore good instincks is good—but yore bad instincks is manifold and plumb putrid.”

AL ACCEPTED the slug with patent eagerness. He grinned broadly at Snipe and relaxed. “I won’t ever tell who give it to me.”

“That’s right—keep it dark.” Snipe drained the remaining half of the bottle and threw it into the sagebrush with great violence. There had been only a pint in it to begin with, but Snipe’s last drink had been a month previous and moreover he was of that unfortunate breed to whom a swallow was as deadly as a gallon. He clutched the reins and shouted a shrill “Eeeeyip!” He threw his hat after the now distant bottle and swayed in the rocketing buggy. He seized the brake handle and seemed about to tear it away from the vehicle. “Say, what makes us go so doggone’ slow? Al, quit draggin’ yore feet on the ground or I’ll kick yuh offen the stage!”

“Yo’re goin’ faster’n the law allows right now,” said Al. “Better slow down a little.”

Snipe stood up, thus imperiling his life; he lashed the rumps of the horses with the rein ends

and cried weirdly into the deepening dusk of the afternoon. Al pulled him into the seat, at which Snipe launched into a long and detailed account of Al's ancestors. All of whom turned out to be extraordinarily depraved in the narrative. Al bided his time, seeming to weigh the quality of Snipe's drunkenness. Now and again he stole a look at the open bag of slugs within easy arm's reach and once he dropped a casual fist in that direction. But Snipe saw the move and challenged his friend with unmistakable sharpness. "Cut that out!" Al desisted, knowing from experience just how far it was safe to trespass with an inebriated Snipe. Presently he tried another tack.

"Say, Snipe, ain't yuh goin' to give me an invite?"

Snipe gravely debated this. "Didn't I give yuh one jus' now?"

"Nope. Yuh only said yuh was goin' to give me one. I ain't got it yet. Yo're drunk."

"I ain't drunk." He fell into a profound study, emerging with this definite conviction. "About that invite—I figger I give yuh an invite. If I did give yuh one, that's all right, though I oughtn't to have done it. But if I didn't give yuh an invite, that's all right, too, because yuh ain't got one comin'. Both ways don't make no difference. I ain't goin' to do neither. Is that Terese up in the distance? Shore enough. Pile out and ride yore hoss into town. I got a reppitation to maintain and I don't allow no Nuggins hirelin's to be seen with me."

Al departed from the vehicle, mounted his pony and galloped headlong into the prairie, skirting Terese and continuing toward the high and colorful ramparts some two miles or more ahead. Snipe entered Terese with the team at a dead run. He stabled his team, filled his pockets with the unique invitations, hid the rest in the hay, and sallied forth to do his chore. He did it with commendable exactness, too, for an hour or better. But around dusk an unquenched thirst drew him to the saloon. Al appeared out of the shadows and the two of them entered together. The hot air made Snipe's head very woolly and from that moment onward he lost his bearings. He marked the sheriff with a glad heart. He saw the partners and gave to each a slug, thinking them to be somebody else. He delivered his oration and proceeded to the bar, glowing with pride of achievement. Thenceforth he was a lost soul and the buzzards—lying in wait—began to close in. Al kept at a discreet distance, supplying

Snipe with whisky.

CHAPTER III

THE WEAVING OF A TANGLED WEB

PRAYGOOD NUGGINS stood inside the saloon only a moment; but in that moment Joe Breedlove knew that he had accomplished some definite purpose, sent out a clear warning to somebody. He turned toward the full light of the room and Joe's eyes, half-closed, caught an unforgettable picture. Nuggins had the body of a veteran cavalryman; he carried himself like one. A silver-yellow mustache guarded a thin and grimly-set mouth—the mouth of a man who first had conquered himself before setting out upon a hard career. Above the mustache was a thin and swooping nose. His cheekbones were high, on a line with a pair of almond-shaped eyes that, catching the lights of the room, threw back an immensely cold gleam. Joe, who loved to draw figures out of the past and compare them with present actors, found no face in the long gallery of his memory to match that of Praygood Nuggins. It was flinty and dominant and with no single spark of compassion upon it. A hush fell across the saloon. Indigo, instinctively hostile on sight of such a man, muttered a sour phrase. Praygood Nuggins made a precise half-circle on his heels and was gone. It were as if a heavy hand had been lifted from the crowd. Voices rose.

"Let's go," grumbled Indigo. "How many times have I got to tell yuh I'm slowly passin' away with hunger. I got to have nutriment. Joe, they is somethin' almighty big smokin' up hereabouts an' somehow I don't feel equal to the occasion. I feel sorter like a two-bit ante in a thousand-dollar pot."



"You spoke words of wisdom," murmured Joe, filing away in his mind the fact that the cynical-cheeked Al was making his exit with a leisured and apparently aimless manner. The partners sauntered toward the door. Joe pulled toward the counter and signaled for another drink. It was not entirely accident that he slid into a space beside the saloon proprietor. That gentleman dropped his head a

scant half-inch in recognition of the maneuver. "The gent was Praygood Nuggins. I don't talk politics much."

"I reckon we've seen pro and con hereabouts in the last ten minutes," drawled Joe.

"A fact," assented the saloon man. He studied Joe with a closer interest. "I could stand to see more of you, friend. Drop in for a quiet drink some mornin'."

"Who was Sam Trago?" asked Joe, hoisting his glass.

"Rube Mamerock's right-hand man," grunted the saloon proprietor. "That's the Ox Bow, for which I note you received an invite. Figger to be some present tomorrow night?"

"Yeah."

The saloon man shrugged his ample shoulders. "I'm goin' also. It's the fifty-first year o' Rube's rule in these parts. And"—with a gentle slurring of the words—"his last."

Joe drank and turned the glass between his fingers. "A tough old duck, huh?"

"A square old duck," added the saloonkeeper with emphasis. He frowned and looked around him. "It's been said, friend, that Rube ain't got no heirs. I have also heard it passed he might pass the outfit on to Sam Trago." Then, as if he had gone beyond the limit of discretion, he covered the statement with a quick phrase. "You know how them things is speculated. Judge for yourself. You know cattle country."

"Yeah," drawled Joe and looked the saloon man directly in the face. "What might be that fine girl's name?"

"Ray Chasteen. She was to've married Sam Trago nex' week." The saloon man's anger swelled out of him. "Damn that clumsy Crowheart!"

"A pretty name," mused Joe, shoving the glass away from him. "I shore like yore layout here, friend. Reminds me of Abilene a long time back. When I was a kid once in Abilene—" He nodded at the proprietor and moved away with Indigo.

THE partners stepped into the deep night. It had begun to rain and the gentle patter sounded on the shingles and in the dirt soothingly. There was a fog sifting through Terese. Lights made round crystal sprays in the gloom. A restaurant's door was wide-open across the street and the partners entered and slouched by the counter. Joe seemed drowsy.

"Who was Sam Trago?" grumbled Indigo, repeating the question for the third time in the last six hours. "Yeah, I know what we've picked up, but it don't make much sense to me."

"He's through," said Joe and waved his hand with a flip of finality. "But the rest of it ain't hardly started. We're in on this, Indigo."

"I see a sign ten foot high which reads—Keep out," countered Indigo, his unlovely face overladen with a dyspeptic pessimism. "You know me, Joe. I ain't usually a fella to keep outen trouble. I wades in it some often. But this is shore swift water. It's over my head—and I ain't able to swim a lick."

A weary waitress dropped platters and cups before them, spilling coffee on the counter. And her only apology was a sharp demand for money. "Two bits each, in advance. We don't feed boomers free."

Both of Indigo's hands were busy with his provender. Joe slid a half-dollar toward the girl. His gray eyes touched the girl and he smiled, the rare and mellow sympathy and humor of the man crinkling in the sun-etched furrows around his temples. The girl lowered her chin. Twin spots of color spread over her cheeks. And she smiled back at him wanly. "I get tired sometimes, Whitey. Forget it. When you empty that coffee cup I'll bring more."

She retreated to the kitchen. Joe tackled his meat. "Nevertheless, it's our party, Indigo."

Indigo wagged his head in astonishment. "Sometimes yo're a mystified puzzle to me. What was that remark about peace bein' yore pet horse?"

Joe turned to his partner, all the bland pleasantry gone. A grim, tremendous anger blazed in its place. The transformation was so startling that even Indigo, who had before seen the destructive power of this tall and even-tempered man, was set back. "Indigo, it sticks in my throat! That old gent sittin' on the shanty porch. That lady cryin' in the shadows with an apron over her head. By God, I'll kill somebody for that! It ain't right to strike folks like them so hard that they're cut clean to the bone. Sam Trago's dead. A bullet don't hurt when it drills straight. But the old folks is on the rack. It'll kill 'em by degrees. That's what gets me. Somebody's goin' to satisfy me for doin' that!"

Indigo swashed the coffee around the rim of his cup and downed it. He had finished, and there was nothing but wreckage to mark the course of his swift and devastating hunger. Sated, he relaxed, rolled a cigarette and filled his chest with smoke.

“Hope I never git that hollow again. I feel more like m’self. Well, if yuh feel thataway about it I’ll play a hand. But when we ram into grief and have to run out hell bent for election, I don’t want no sassy remarks about my ungoverned temper. There’s my insurance. Now which?”

“Better sleep on it, I guess,” said Joe.

THEY went out. The rain had strengthened, pouring out of a dead black sky in heavy sheets. The shimmering lights fell across a street half awash. Roofs boomed, thunder rolled in from the distance. All other sounds in Terese town were muted. Men ran clumsily for shelter. The partners hugged the building walls in their progress toward the hotel. A phrase of Spanish and a stale smell of whisky and tobacco lifted against their faces; Joe’s arm extended to warn Indigo. They stopped in the thick shadow of a porch.

Ten feet onward a door opened into a dim-lit Mexican saloon and cafe. A familiar face crossed the threshold and was lost in the street. Directly afterward they heard Snipe feebly protesting. He, too, was nearing that entrance; boots ripped the insecure planking of the walk and then the partners saw his shrunken, swaying body pilloried in the doorway’s yellow square. There was a man holding him upright but they couldn’t see who Snipe struggled.

“Hey, Al, cut it out. Lay loose yore doggone’ paws or I’ll belt yuh. I ain’t had a drink all night an’ yo’re—whup—keepin’ me from ser’ous business. Lemme go.”

“Want you should meet a particular friend o’ mine,” said Al, voice rising against the swashing echo of the rain. “Best friend I got, outside o’ you, Snipe. It’s sorter hurt him he didn’t get no invite.”

“Who’s it?” plaintively demanded Snipe. “Keep y’paws offen me. Git away from my pockets. Tell yuh, I’ll give yore friend a invite. Keep yore paws offen me! Where’s this dude?”

“Meet my friend. Give him an invite like a good fella.”

All the partners saw of this third man was a long arm that extended out of the dark, reached into the lighted area of the door and took Snipe’s veering arm. After that Snipe was shut from view. A flurry of words went up to the sky. Thunder roared. Al and Snipe had vanished; they were coming toward the partners, arguing. Joe and Indigo flattened themselves against the building wall to let them

pass on. They were swallowed up. Joe’s grip on Indigo’s arm constricted. “There’s friend Al’s mos’ particular friend. They argued that little play very well.” Praygood Nuggins’s gaunt frame slid into the Mexican joint. The door closed.

“Why hold a meetin’ out in this wet?” grumbled Indigo. “Was the gent afraid to show his face to that warped little Snipe runt?”

“I reckon Nuggins wanted an invite pretty bad,” observed Joe, “and couldn’t get it any other way. Nuggins staged all this. Guess he’s not popular around Ox Bow. Even so, what’s the idea of practically stealin’ an invite when he ain’t welcome on Rube Mamerock’s premises? It ain’t quite clear. Indigo, tuck this fellow Al’s face in yore vest pocket. Nuggins owns his shirt.”

“Not in my vest pocket,” muttered Indigo. “I got a forty-dollar watch I don’t want stopped.”

THEY left the shelter and plunged across the street to the hotel, signed for a room and went up the stairs and down a dismal hall. The room faced the street and was a cheerless cubicle with flimsy, unpainted walls. Water dripped from a spot in the ceiling, windows rattled. They lit the lamp and set it in a far corner where the passing spurts of air disturbed it least. Indigo sprawled on the bed while Joe settled in a chair, rocking it back and forth to assemble and digest the strange, mysterious things he had seen and heard this long afternoon. Indigo closed his green orbs and addressed the ceiling.



“I figger this much. Rube Mamerock’s got a nice lush outfit. He’s about to blow out the candle an’ ascend to them sweet realms where they’s music an’ rest. He ain’t got no heirs. It’s hinted his ridin’ boss, Sam Trago, is the lucky man. But they’s orders in the county which hone to steal, control or assume said ranch. So, Sam Trago dies. Am I right?”

“Yeah,” drawled Joe. “Now proceed to the interestin’ part.”

Indigo threw up his hands and rolled face down on the bed. “Hell, it’s got me exhausted to git that far. The rest is all gummed in mystery. Mystery’s yore dish, not mine. You do the guessin’. Tell me

how these other gents fit in.”

Joe swayed in the rocker, staring through the wet panes. “Nuggins,” said he, drowsily, “is a proud man. That girl loved Sam Trago, which is certain. They say Rube Mamerock’s word ruled Terese. If he owns more’n half o’ the real estate in it, why shouldn’t he have the say-so? Well, wolves allus travel after a steer in packs. In packs, not single, Indigo. And a prize like this Ox Heart is shore to draw the greedy an’ the overweenin’. Crowheart Ames—now there’s a man I wouldn’t trust. I don’t like that whisky smile. Did yuh observe how narrow his eyes were set, Indigo? As for Dead Card John, it looked this afternoon they was plenty of riders in Terese scared of him. I wouldn’t be surprised none. Two gents the county’s scared of—” He bent forward, nose against the window pane. “Two that we know about—Dead Card John and this Praygood Nuggins.” His body went out of the rocker as if shot by a catapult, his big brown hand whipped across the lamp globe’s top and plunged the room in darkness. Indigo reared from the bed to find his partner’s shoulders outlined dimly against the blurred window.

“Doggonit,” protested Indigo, “I’m beginnin’ to get goose pimples. What’s out there in the rain yo’re so excited about?”

“Crowheart Ames jus’ slid into that Mex joint,” muttered Joe.

“Which proves he ain’t got much taste,” said Indigo. “I quit drinkin’ raw alcohol some time back.”

“Nuggins is in there, remember that?”

“No law against it, is they? Light the lamp, Joe, before I get separated from my status quo. Now who’s cookin’ up trouble?”

Joe fumbled with the lamp. The wick glowed against his bronzed and handsome face. Excitement flickered in his eyes. Indigo groaned, for he knew the signs; Joe was slow to rouse, yet when his imagination and his temper were alike fired by chance events he became volcanic, he moved with a tremendous impatience and was as crafty as an Apache on the war trail. Indigo exploded very easily and was as quick to cool. Not Joe. There were no lengths to which he would not go, no distances he would not cover, hardly any risk he would not take in order to satisfy the awakened warrior in him. “Once,” he murmured, “when I was in Abilene—”

Indigo punched a pillow and began to protest.

“Now listen, Joe, let’s get some sleep. My mature judgment says I should get out o’ Terese prompt. I’m stayin’ because I ain’t got no sense. But I shore need sleep before I start follerin’ you from hell to supper. Le’s—”

He interrupted himself, turning his waspish face toward the door. The stairway creaked, steps drummed irregularly down the hall and a door squealed. Someone entered the adjoining room; and through the paper-thin partition came the choked, terribly intense sound of a woman laboring with tragedy. Joe’s face drew tight and bleak. He had heard women cry before; crying from temper, from broken dreams, from those unfathomable impulses that neither Joe nor any other man could comprehend. Here, for the second time this eventful day, he was witness to a woman’s heart being torn apart. And the sound tortured him until the room grew too small and the outrage smoldered like a forge fire. It rose and fell, weird and muffled. It died to the smallest suspiration and rose again to a pitch of frenzy. Joe paced the room and threw a haunted glance at Indigo. “By God, Indigo, Terese is a hard county! What’s that poor soul troubled with?”

Indigo reached for his cigarette papers, frowning heavily. “The more I see o’ these parts the better I’d like to be on the trail. Where yuh goin’?”

JOE had reached the end of his rope. He strode to the door. “I got to see if I can’t help a mite. Hell, Indigo, nobody’s got a right to stand back an’ listen to that!” He ducked into the gloom-ridden hall and went to the adjoining door. He thought he saw the shadows shifting strangely near the stair landing but he was so preoccupied that he violated a lifelong rule of look-and-see. He stood a moment by the woman’s door, scarcely knowing what to do. He shook his head, raised his hand and drummed the panel lightly.

There was no answer. He knew there wouldn’t be. A woman crying like that wouldn’t hear anything. So, dropping his hand to the knob, he violated another rule of his life, as well as breaking an unwritten commandment of the land, and pushed the door before him. A deep-rooted sense of propriety caused him to tarry on the threshold. But when he saw the girl of the dancehall, Ray Chasteen, lying on the bed, her clothes rumpled and wet, he closed the door behind and broke the

unendurable silence.

"I'm beggin' yore pardon, ma'am. I ain't got a right in here. But—but I'm almost old enough to be yore dad. And it hurts me to hear you cry like that."

She turned on the bed and rose. In the dim, fluttering lamplight all her features were softened and blurred. There was a golden radiance around her disheveled hair. She was dead white and the color of her eyes was quite lost in the upheaval of spirit. But to Joe she was a figure of beauty, wistful and crumpled beauty. His presence didn't frighten her, but it stopped her crying, it hardened her and brought a sullen resentment to her face. She threw back her head.

"I didn't ask you to come in. I don't want to see you. I don't want to see any man! You're all a pack of coyotes, you're all yellow and afraid of your lives. You slink around the strongest beast and do what he tells you to do! What right have *you* got to be proud of yourself! Oh, if I were a man tonight I'd kill!"

Joe dropped his head. "Yes, ma'am. I reckon you would. But you're not a man an' so you can't. I guess I'm intrudin'. But I wanted to say that maybe I can help. Also wanted to say that I will personally account for the man who killed Sam Trago. I will personally see to it. Just wanted to say that, ma'am."

It only roused her fury. "Go back to Praygood Nuggins or to Dead Card John and tell whichever of them you take orders from that you came up here to torment me! Tell them you found me crying. Crying! That will please them! But they will suffer. If there's no power on earth to make them pay, then there will be in the place they go. Get out. I don't trust you!"

Joe shook his head slowly. He straightened, a fine, soldierly figure. The dim light accentuated the silvering crust around his temples; shadows sank into the lines of his face and lay heavily against his eyes, making him appear weary. Yet nothing could obscure the kindly mellowed sympathy on that face. There was a quality about Joe Breedlove that, once known, was never forgotten. And because of it a thousand friends along his long trail had regretted his passing. It seemed to be that Joe, old in no sense of the word, appeared to people as a gallant figure against the sunset; a rugged and straightforward man, swept clean of youthful egotism and youthful intolerance. Life had sweetened him and the full savor of his serene,

robust temper radiated outward and drew others to him swiftly and surely.

"I wish, ma'am, you'd look at me. Yeah, I know you're lookin' already. But you're not seein' me as I am, but as you figure I must be."

"Why should I trust you?" she asked, the anger slightly thinning.

"Well, men have trusted me, I reckon."

"Men? Why should I follow after fools?"

JOE drew a breath. His words made a resonant, musical echo in the room, beating against the slashing, battering note at the storm. "I'll ask you, then, to trust me as some women have trusted me."

Thunder crashed upon the town, shaking this frame structure like a rag. He saw the anger die, he saw her lips part but he couldn't hear what she whispered. And then her despairing cry filled the room. "They killed Sam because—because he was a good man!" Joe stepped forward, his arm raised. The girl's will gave out and she fell against him, the hot tears scalding his hand. And Joe held her up, murmuring the same small comforting words he would have used for a child; saying them over and over again until the very monotony seemed to soothe her.

"The boy is dead. But there'll be a man to pay me for that in the next forty-eight hours."

She drew back, drained of emotion, and she spoke with a weariness and a finality that Joe was to remember all the rest of the days of his life. "That won't bring Sam back to me."

"God bless you, ma'am. Now yo're talkin' like a woman, and I'm only sayin' what any fool man would say. Still, the ledger's got to be balanced. And there'll be red ink in the book before tomorrow night's through.

There's more killin's to come out of this. Terese is set for a struggle. Ma'am, there are jus' two things good for a sore troubled spirit. One is sleep, which I've tried myself. And the other is prayer. I bid you good night." He turned his back to her abruptly, dreading to meet her eyes again; and he closed the door softly and groped back to his own room. Indigo still sat on the bed, with a litter of cigarette butts around his feet. He looked to Joe out of red and sleepy and dubious orbs. "Well?"

Joe only shook his head.



Indigo started to fashion another smoke. Joe walked to the window and stared into the rain-lashed night, thoroughly buried with his thoughts. The door latch clicked, Indigo sprang from the bed with a warning grunt and reached for his gun. Joe swung. The door was wide and Dead Card John stood framed in the opening, seeming thinner and taller than before. Out of the turbulent, stormy night he had emerged without a crease or a spot on his black broadcloth suit; the marble pallor of his cheeks appeared more pronounced, a severe set expression—only such a fixity of features that a man of one particular profession could assume so well—was on them. And he looked directly at Joe, disregarding Indigo's poised arm.

"You were a dead man," said he, "when you opened that girl's door."

JOE'S head dropped and rose. "I reckon you had a right to shoot me then. It was steppin' over a tall fence—which ain't always a fault o' mine. Lay back, Indigo. The gentleman carries his gun under his shoulder." Indigo relaxed; these two tall characters, so dissimilar in every outward respect, matched glances across the room. Joe went on, dropping into the lazy and musical drawl that, at times like these, hid the fermentation inside of him. "Thought I noticed somethin' down that hall. Well, havin' heard what conversation passed, what's yore opinion now?"

"I regard you as a friend," replied Dead Card John in the same level, frigid voice. "Don't let it worry you. I never ask a man's good opinion."

Joe nodded. "After our first meetin' I would say you wasn't in the business o' answerin' questions. Still, I reckon I'll ask if Sam Trago was a friend o' yores."

"I never ask a man's good opinion," repeated Dead Card John with emphasis. "Trago shared the county's opinion of me, friend. I let Trago alone—I let his folks put a fence around a few acres of hard scrabble."

"And it's yore territory up that way," mused Joe. "Which is to say that others may own it but yore word goes."

Dead Card John said nothing.

Joe shifted the subject. "Ray Chasteen. It's a pretty name. I was wonderin' if they wasn't somebody near to her. Where's the girl's folks?"

For the first time Dead Card John permitted a trace of animation to escape through his eyes. "Ray

Chasteen's mother, friend, is sleepin' out yonder on a hill. Once she was the greatest singer in the West."

"What about the dad?" asked Joe, his head moving imperceptibly forward. Dead Card John stood like a post. "She ain't known a dad since she was four."

Joe's sleepiness dropped. He moved nearer. "I'll ask another question, mister. How bad do *you* want Ox Bow?"

Indigo looked at his partner with an incredulous surprise. It wasn't like Joe to so flagrantly violate etiquette. Then he fastened his attention on Dead Card John with a greater intensity than he had thus far. But Dead Card John showed no resentment. "I'll expose my hand to you, friend. As long as Sam Trago lived I didn't want an inch of Ox Bow. Sam Trago never knew it, but I was behind him. And the man who tried to run Sam off would have had me to look at. But now, friend, I'm fighting for Ox Bow. Let it lay like that."

"Why should you be tellin' me?" asked Joe.

Dead Card John didn't answer the question directly. "You're nobody's fool, friend. You know what's going on hereabouts, don't you? I would lay a bet on it. I have never asked a favor of Terese. But if you'll ride a piece with me tonight I'll show you something else."

"Why?" drawled Joe.

Dead Card John moved his shoulders. "You bought a hand in the deal I saw happen this afternoon. The ride will be about two miles."

Joe nodded. "Come on, Indigo."

"Meet me down the street by the stable," said Dead Card John and disappeared in the hall. Indigo groaned.

"Doggone it, Joe, there's a fine bear trap. Dark—rainin' like sixty—two miles out to some shanty full o' leather scratchers. Yuh ain't usin' good sense."

"The man's proud," said Joe.

"Hell, so'm I," grumbled Indigo. "But I—"

"He's proud," interrupted Joe. "It breaks his back to ask a favor. I'd say he ain't ever had to do any such askin' recently. But he shore was puttin' in a call for help right now."

"I didn't hear no such words."

"No, but he was askin' just the same. Come on, Indigo."

INDIGO the fighter, Indigo the trouble-hunting bantam rooster, looked at the bed with mournful eyes and tried a last argument. “Ever strike yuh some peculiar he picked on total strangers for help? Why don’t he get home talent. I like to sort around and find my own grief.”

“Maybe strangers is the only help he can get. Come on.”

“Oh, all right,” said Indigo wearily. “I thought I was some hound for misfortune before I met you. But them days was like summer weather when I figgers back. Yuh got me worn to a thin shadder.”

Joe was half down the hall. “Shucks, Indigo, you was nothin’ but skin and bones when I found yuh. The summer’s made yuh seal fat.”

Indigo’s hot and personal protest punctuated the gloom. They crossed an empty lobby and let themselves into the rain-whipped night. Fewer lights burned in Terese; and those sent ragged beams across a flooded street. The partners beat against the wind, Joe in the lead. He heard a queer wailing down in the mud nearby, an unearthly caterwauling sound that suggested somebody gargling poison. Joe crouched at the mouth of an alley, hands touching a body. The mournful dirge grew more energetic.

“Who’s this?” asked Joe.

“It’s me—Snipe. Go ‘way, I ain’t fit to be talked to. Go on ‘way.”

“What’s persuaded yuh to come out here and catch consumption?” Joe wanted to know.

“Sam’s dead. Just found it out—gosh, I can’t tell the old man that! I’m drunk, but I wish I was a heap drunker. What’s to ‘come o’ Ox Bow now? Hell, I ain’t got nerve enough to go back home. Go ‘way.”

Joe tarried a moment. “Better let me boost yuh up—”

“Keep yore paws offen me!” protested the unhappy Ox Bow messenger. “A fine fandango it’ll be.”

The partners went on to the stable, got their horses and rode toward the street’s end. Dead Card John waited in the driving rain for them and the trio traveled silently away from town, quartering across a dead black desert. Joe’s sense of direction told him he headed approximately back up the afternoon trail, but he didn’t get his exact bearings until he saw the desert narrow and squeeze between tall, precipitous shadows. And a light glimmered by the road. They were at the lonely tavern wherein

drink had been refused them. They rode abreast it and halted; Dead Card John disappeared for a full minute’s interval. He came back afoot, raising his words against the plunging elements. “A man’s in there to see me. If you’ve got stomach for eavesdropping go to the back door and come in the small room. It opens to the bar. You’ll hear something.”

“I practice deception because it’s a crooked world,” said Joe. “All right.”

THE partners left their horses standing on the lee side of the building and groped along the wall until they struck a door. It let them into a room dark and stagnant. But a point of light came through a remote keyhole and, guided by it, they reached that inner door opening upon the bar. Joe turned the knob with caution and left the door slightly ajar. The same barkeep slouched behind the mahogany; over at a table with a lamp between them sat Dead Card John and the county’s sheriff, Crowheart Ames. The latter’s hands were flat on the table, palms up. He was smiling as he asked Dead Card John a question.

“Where’s all yore men?”

“You know the answer to that,” replied Dead Card John. “Nuggins has stolen part of them. The rest of them are no good to me—I’ve got no faith in any.”



“Why blame me?” countered Crowheart Ames.

“You’ve been mighty polite to Nuggins lately, Crowheart.”

“Got to make it appear as if I’m impartial, don’t I? But you know how I stand. You know exactly.”

Dead Card John’s face was marked with lines, as if he held back some terrific temper. “Do I know? I’m not so sure, Crowheart. Listen. I made you. I took you out of that saloon and made you. Hear that? I kept you in office, Crowheart. And you licked my boots as long as you knew you were safe.”

“Say, I don’t care much about that kind of—”

“Shut up. You’re a lickspittle. Been one all your life. You stuck fast with me as long as I looked good. But you’d jump the traces in a minute if you thought Nuggins could take the power away from

me. Now you don't know whether he or I'll get that ranch. And you want to be on the right side."

Crowheart struck the table with his fists. "I got to appear neutral, don't I? You know me better. Tell me a Nuggins man you want in jail. I'll put him there. Tell me what yuh want done, I'll do it. But yuh got to start slashin' the whip on yore boys. Slack reins won't do. I been hearin' some growlin'. I'd be in a pretty mess, wouldn't I, sittin' on the wrong side of the fence? Yuh got to move fast. It ain't right I don't help. I do help. The gate's wide open as far as Ox Bow is concerned. You get busy. I'll back yuh up with every legal trick there is. It's yores, John. Yours and a little cut for me. But yuh got to get busy. Now I'll do what yuh say. Name it."

THERE was a wheedling, uneasy note in the man's voice. Dead Card John almost spat at him. "Well, why haven't you got Sam Trago's killer in jail? Why haven't you got posses out? You're trimming to the winds, Crowheart!"

"Tell me who killed him. I'll get the gent if yuh name him. Besides"—and Crowheart's words were heavily significant—"why raise a ruckus about that? It opens the ranch wide to all comers don't it? You get busy."

"Rube Mamerock isn't dead yet, Crowheart."

The sheriff nodded his head. "I'm leavin' that to yore judgment. Since when did yuh get religion?"

Dead Card John got up and turned. It was the signal for which Joe waited. He pushed into the room, glad to have this part of the deal over with. Crowheart kicked the chair from under him, growing red and excited. "Tricks, huh?"

"I practice deceit because it's a crooked world," said Joe. "I don't like it none, so I'll just clear myself by sayin' I heard most o' what you said."

The sheriff shook his fist at Dead Card John. "Yuh can't play me like that! Yore boat's sinkin'. Yuh know it. Draggin' in strange alley cats ain't goin' to help none! I'll drive 'em out o' Terese faster'n hell!"

Dead Card John stared the sheriff into silence. "When I have to kill a man, Crowheart, I want witnesses to tell why I do it. You're about to follow Nuggins's kite. You figure there's where the money is. All right. Nuggins dies before he gets Ox Bow. Mark that, Crowheart. I'm the man who takes Ox Bow. And God help you if you guess wrong and cut me!"

Crowheart backed toward the door, his pug face set in a defiance not quite free from fear. He swept the partners up and down. "Yo're out of this quarrel, pilgrims. Better leave Terese behind. John, I ain't takin' no war talk from yuh. I don't want to fight yuh. Get busy and I'll do my share. But don't ride me. Yuh ain't so broad in the pants as yuh used to be." He backed into the darkness.

Dead Card John turned to Joe. "Friend, I'm obliged for your coming. Have a drink. I never ask a man to drink with me. You saw Crowheart's hand."

Joe and Indigo tipped their glasses solemnly while Dead Card John stood back, fingering the fob hanging from his vest. Joe faced the man, slightly smiling. "I'd say the next excitement was due about tomorra night at the Ox Bow. Maybe you've got an invite?"

Dead Card John shook his head. "Rube Mamerock would cut off his hand before he took notice of me. But I will be there."

Joe reached into a coat pocket, raised his fist and dropped a half-dozen of Ox Bow's leaden invitations on the bar. "One for yoreself. Better bring some competent help with you."

Indigo stared in wonder at the shells. Dead Card John swept the room with his arm. "Once I had men who never left this place unless I told them. Where's my help now? I am obliged for the shells. I'll be there."

JOE nodded to Indigo; and both of them started for the front door. On the threshold Joe turned back with a last word. "I reckon we've seen everybody's hand in this deal but yores. Don't let that worry yuh none. I know what yore hole card is."

"I doubt that, friend," replied Dead Card John somberly.

"It's a trick I learned when I was a kid—down in Abilene." He saw the man start toward him, eyes blazing against the white skin. But he pushed Indigo before him into the darkness. And in a moment they were riding back for Terese.

"He's askin' for help," said Joe, bowing his face to the slantwise rain. "And he knows we're in on the deal."

"Who said so?" snapped Indigo. "I didn't hear no words to them sentiments."

"What do you figure I gave him the slugs for, Indigo?"

“Yeah? Say, when did yuh get them anyhow?”

“Out of that Ox Bow man’s pocket, when he was wallerin’ in the mud. Don’t chew yore words so bad, Indigo.”

“More pious robbery!” howled Indigo. “My, but this stinks. So we’re helpin’ a notorious son-of-a-gun steal a ranch. Joe, yo’re crazy! Yo’re plumb lunatic. How far have I got to singe my whiskers in this mess? I don’t get yuh a-tall.”

“It’s this fellow Dead Card John against Praygood Nuggins. Somebody’s got to drop.”

“What difference does it make?” asked Indigo, thoroughly roused. “They’re both so crooked a snake’d break his back tryin’ to foller their shadders. Let ‘em drop. It can’t be done—said stealin’—unless this Rube Mamerock’s plugged. And further unless one bunch wipes out the other bunch. And still further unless they’s a lot o’ corruption in holdin’ the property from rightful heirs. Yuh mean to tell me yuh deliberately aim to dirty up yore reppitation with this? Say—!”

“If Rube Mamerock dies, it won’t be by Dead Card John’s bullet,” stated Joe. “I’m layin’ all my spare cash on that. But if the old duck does die and there’s a fight for the outfit, then Nuggins has got the drop on Dead Card John. That’s what this skate Al was doin’ up at that roadside honky-tonk tonight when we first rode through. He’s Nuggins’s way o’ tinkerin’ with John’s riders. Yeah, Dead Card John is blame’ near licked now.”

“Let him get licked. You and me had better eat breakfast a long ways south o’ Terese.”

“We eat barbecued meat at the Ox Bow tomorra night, Indigo. And if trouble starts we’re standin’ beside Dead Card John. Sleep on it. I know what his hole card is. It’s a good card.”

Indigo punctured the gusty, wet night with the sulfuric outpourings of a ridden soul. They came to Terese again and slept.

CHAPTER IV

NIGHT AT THE OX BOW

UNLESS a man wished to break his neck in trying to descend the rear bluffs, there was but one entrance to the Ox Bow home quarters and that turned from the Terese trail and crossed the river at the trembling and narrow wood bridge. When the partners arrived at the turn-off, lanterns made a flickering and uncertain cluster in the very middle of that bridge. They embarked upon it single-file;

the river, swollen by the steady rains, boiled a foot beneath the planking and the whole structure swayed as if it were a raft. It gave Indigo a very queer feeling in the pit of his stomach; he was no sailor and he disliked leaving the firm underfooting of land. “It’s like the rest o’ Terese,” he grumbled; “held together by rotten string. This thing ain’t apt to be here by mornin’ if it keeps on rainin’. Hustle on, Joe, before she buckles.”



Other travelers came behind, likewise in single-file, and the bridge shook with each hoofbeat. Midway, lanterns flared against Joe’s face; he was challenged by a pair of slickered cowhands.

“Tickets, gents.” Joe produced the slugs and the pair gave the leaden invitations a severe, close inspection. The lanterns rose again and fell more fully upon the partners. The nearest of the bridge guardians spoke dubiously. “Strangers here?”

“Yeah. But yore messenger struck up a close friendship with us last night.”

“I reckon,” was the spokesman’s dry answer. “Most o’ Terese was Snipe’s friends about then. How in hell—?”

The other cowpuncher ended this. “Let ‘im pass. He’s got an invite. An invite is an invite.”

“What would stop some unasked gent from manufacturin’ his own invite?” asked the curious Joe.

“It’s been tried before,” was the laconic answer. “The results ain’t usually fatal, but they’s painful. Pass on, stable yore brutes and assume total freedom of the premises. But how in hell—?”

The partners moved away, hearing the brace of punchers pass dire words concerning Snipe. “That’s about the ninth mistake Snipe made. The old man’ll shore kill the weaselly little runt if he ever shows up here again. Ain’t had good sense at no time. We better start refusin’ some o’ these invites. Rube nev’ meant ‘em to get scattered around like handbills.”

“Invite is an invite,” argued the other. “Anybody that shows one here gits acrost the bridge, if it’s a Chinese, shepherder or spaniel dawg. Yuh know Rube never dishonors his invites. That damn’ Snipe had better keep headin’ away from Terese, no mistake. Invites, gents.”

THE partners went on, reaching an enormous open shed. More lanterns confronted them and roustabouts led away their horses. They ducked around a dark corner of the house, climbed the steps and were again halted by ever-present Ox Bow men. "Guns, gents." Joe surrendered his own without argument and saw it hung on a peg beside twenty others. But Indigo was reluctant, and only a prod of Joe's thumb stilled his protest. "What kind of a party is this, anyhow? Without my gun I feel sorter naked, and some giddy."

The custodian of lethal hardware stabbed his thumb toward a corner of the room. "They's a keg over there with the head knocked out. Drop a dipper into it, fella, an' yuh'll either recover from said giddy feelin' or yuh'll get so worse it won't make no difference."

They strolled into a room as immense as a barn. Oak beams stretched across it, two stories high; a dozen bracketed lamps flooded the place with light. At one end a fireplace wider and more massive than the partners had ever seen was choked with blazing logs. Doors opened from this room on three sides and the partners had a partial view of long rows of tables set for a feast. Already a substantial gathering filled the ranch-house. Men arrived, gave up their guns, and circled past the welcoming kegs; men drifted casually through the room, singly and in pairs; they clustered in groups, the smoke of their pipes spiraling to the beams. Joe took a sparing drink, but Indigo plunged a tin cup into the very bowels of the barrel and drew it back dripping full. He drank it like water and hung his cheerless, brooding face over the open barrel's mouth.

"I rise to remark this Mamerock fella ain't niggardly in no proportions. Joe, what makes a keg full o' liquor look so much better than the same amount in bottles? It just makes me thirsty. Yuh could drive a herd through this joint without scrapin' paint."

"Hit that keg easy," warned Joe. "We got a good use for temperance tonight."

Indigo threw an exasperated stare at his partner and surrendered the cup. "I thought there'd be some sorter ketch. Joe, if I found a fifty-pound nugget lyin' on the prairie I'd prob'ly have two busted arms an' couldn't pick it up. Or I'd go color blind an' pass it by for a plain rock."

THEY ambled toward the fireplace. There was a white-haired man standing with his back to the

flames, a powerful figure overladen with fat and crippled and twisted by an apparent rheumatism. Others flanked him and presently Joe heard his name called. It was Rube Mamerock. Joe watched the Ox Bow owner's shaky fingers struggling with a match and his sympathy, never far below the surface, was instantly enlisted. All men had to die, but it was a pity they couldn't go out before they felt the helplessness of old age. Here was one who had been a tremendous fighter. And now the wolves were snapping at his heels and he had his back to the wall; a man who, on the eve of an anniversary, had a gray and discouraged and troubled look upon his cheeks. The white head bobbed up and down in answer to a low spoken comment.

"You boys know I been a good neighbor," Joe heard him say. "I never set a heavy hand on my friends. I've had a good time livin'. What more can anybody ask? Smoke an' drink an' eat hearty. It's a cold night out. Reminds me of seven years ago. The year of the big drive north. Keep warm, boys. Like to see yuh enjoy yoreselves. Like to have it feel like old times. Old-timers go pretty fast. This is the last fandango Rube Mamerock ever gives at Ox Bow."

"Who killed the boy, Rube?"

Mamerock's eyes flared; and as quickly lost the momentary anger. "God knows. But if I was ten years younger I'd rip Terese upside down and put the fear o' death in some certain hearts. They know they got me hamstrung. Just waitin' now to rip open my neck. With Sam gone they won't have to wait long. Only, they better do it quick. I ain't useless complete."

The wolves, Joe repeated to himself, were snapping at the old man's heels. And, hearing a sudden hush cross the room, he turned toward the door. The wolves were growing braver. Praygood Nuggins stood on the threshold, and beside him was the henchman, Al. Nuggins carried himself as erect as a soldier, his stern eyes and thin compressed lips half hidden by the dripping hat and the flowing yellow mustache. He looked directly at Rube Mamerock and started toward the old man, Al trailing. Praygood Nuggins looked sidewise and jerked his hand. Al retreated, exactly as a dog might have been ordered home. In the adjoining room a man laughed boisterously, the sound jarring the almost complete silence here. Nuggins paused in front of Mamerock, dipping his head with exact

courtesy. "I am obliged for yore kind invitation. It's the first time yuh have honored me. I reckon folks soften some as they get old. I thank yuh kindly."

Mamerock was as gray as cold wood ashes. He matched Nuggins's bow and Nuggins's severe politeness. "An invite is the same as my word, sir. I will not deny it, nor never have. You are on Ox Bow premises for the first time. I bid you enjoy yoreself."

"I'm obliged," drawled Nuggins. "I shore trust that though it's the first time it won't be the last."

Some of Mamerock's dying vigor colored his eyes. "The evenin' is apt to settle that, Mr. Nuggins."

NUGGINS wheeled and made for the whisky kegs. Joe saw the man barely wet his lips on the dipper and retreat through the door again. Five swart Mexicans filed into a corner and fiddled with their guitars; the place hummed with a stirring, vivid music, a puncher came out of the dining room and shouted, "Come an' get it!" The crowd shifted. Crowheart Ames entered the place and alone of the guests forbore checking his gun. Behind him ranged a compact group of punchers, seeming more or less attached to him. His pug face bowed low to the whisky kegs and he saluted Rube Mamerock jovially. The Ox Bow owner nodded and walked away from the fire, followed by others eager to precede him. Ray Chasteen was on the threshold.

"Pretty," breathed Indigo. "Sorrow becomes that gal. Pretty, by Jupiter!"

Rube Mamerock's awkward arms folded around her and Rube's heavy voice soared above the music. "God bless you, daughter, for comin' to an old man's last fandango." Ray Chasteen's eyes flashed in the light and Rube, holding her arm with a fatherly gallantry, led her away from the men. The two of them disappeared in some other part of the house.

"Daughter?" grunted Indigo, following Joe into the dining room. "This Dead Card John Jasper said she didn't know no dad."

"A figure of speech," drawled Joe. "She ain't his daughter, but he wishes she was. And mebbe she might have been a daughter by will, if she'd married this Sam Trago. Look around yoreself, Indigo. You'll never see another gatherin' where they's so many broken hearts and so many slant-eyed gents with itchin' fingers."

"Beans," muttered Indigo, seizing a plate. Great

haunches of beef, barbecued to a golden, steaming bronze lay on mammoth platters; tall crocks of beans, unearthed from a twenty-four-hour baking beneath a coal-heaped grave, studded the long tables. The Ox Bow doctor bustled in with smutted pots of coffee, a glum and unapproachable figure within all this joviality. The room filled, drawn by an incense that surpassed all the aromatic spices of the Indies. Cattleland loved this sort of provender. Indigo helped himself, not scorning to use force and deception in beating another man to the carving knife and the ladle; for Indigo was one whose thoughts were never scattered over a variety of subjects at the same time. When he fought he did so to the utter exclusion of everything else. And when he went to the trenchers it was with the same single-minded intensity that characterized his trouble-checked career.



Not for Indigo was the subtle weaving of treachery and defiance within Rube Mamerock's ranch-house. But Joe, eating thoughtfully, stood back against a wall and saw what most men missed. Joe was a natural born spectator of life; he loved to weigh and judge men from their speech and from the impress of emotion upon their faces. One by one he checked them over, his serene blue eyes roaming above the rim of his coffee cup. He saw the more substantial of them—the old-timers and the ranch owners—imperceptibly draw to themselves. And he knew they would support Rube Mamerock because they were his kind. They would back Rube by the weight of their numbers. Elsewhere, the same sort of division went on. Ranch hands of particular outfits stood side by side; groups of young bucks heady with drink; and two small bunches of men who held strictly aloof from each other and said very little. Rube's own punchers slouched at odd angles of the place and upon these Joe fastened his penetrating philosopher's eye. Loyalty to an outfit was a powerful thing; still, threat and bribery were almost as powerful. Joe looked into the depths of his cup and shook his head. Rube Mamerock's kingdom was crumbling.

EXCITEMENT laid its suppressing hand over the room. He saw it etched upon every face.

He saw it in the unconscious snapping of jaw muscles, in swift and turning glances, and the short, cautious exchange of words here and there. Every one of them knew a showdown to be approaching. Even Rube Mamerock, who was out of sight in this rambling house, knew it. Joe laid down his cup and turned to Indigo who rested against the wall in the manner of a thoroughly gorged python. "Let's amble, Indigo."

They passed into the main room. Only a few were here. But there was one newcomer. Dead Card John stood alone in a remote corner, dressed in the same faultless black and white. His severe ivory-colored face made a queer outline in the shadows. His eyes caught a beam of light and the flash of that impact was like the reflection of sun on ice. He saw the partners, giving no sign of recognition. Indigo bristled a bit, but Joe pushed him toward the whisky barrels. "Fortify yoreself, Indigo."

Indigo stared at his partner, astonished. "What's comin' off here?"

"Warm up. It's chilly outside and that's where we're goin' for a spell."

Indigo hooked his chin over the keg's rim, hypnotized by the amber depths. "A pretty sight," he muttered. He took a cup and swashed it along the surface of the whisky much as a small boy would run his hand across a pool of water. He drank soundly and hitched up his pants, glaring at the distant Dead Card John with the pale light of hostility flickering in his green orbs. "Let nobody tromp on my instincts," said he.

They went past the checked guns, Joe scanning the rows of massed artillery with intent interest; they stepped into the night and rounded a corner of the house. The rain beat slantwise out of a dead black sky; the wind ripped across the open desert, shrilling at the touch of corral post and building eaves. They heard the river splashing against its sandy banks, they heard a high-pitched phrase beating across the blackness. A single lantern weaved out there on the bridge. The lights around the sheds were fewer and dimmer. Indigo and Joe crouched against the wall of the house.

"Now yo're up to some o' that Eyetalian embroidery again," complained Indigo, raising his voice.

"Come on—we're goin' to see how that dry channel back of the house looks."

THEY stumbled across the uneven ground, avoiding the sheds. Within its shelter they saw four men crouched beneath a lantern and another figure standing just beyond its revealing rays. Fifty yards farther they came to the margin of the abandoned river channel. This night it sighed and rumbled to the overflow. The abraded banks were crumbling, the scouring side eddies rose above and poured across the level land on which the partners stood. Joe explored along the edge gingerly. "Nobody's comin' to the fandango from this way tonight, Indigo."

"Yeah. Well, when yo're through with all them natural observations le's get to cover. I'm drippin' like a faucet."

"We slide around toward the bridge next. Don't shout so loud."

They circled back, traversing unfamiliar ground. Light poured out of the ranch-house windows and a commotion rose by the front door. The partners halted. Around the corner veered a lantern, held high over four men struggling with a fifth. The fifth was howling like a lone wolf in the hills; he bucked, broke loose and created havoc, the tenor of his speech scandalously profane. They caught him again and rushed him forward to what, in the advancing light, appeared to be a root house depressed almost level with the earth. One of the party drew open the slanting doors and the protesting individual was hurled through. The door closed, a last weird howl beating out of the depths.

"First drunk," said one of the party. "That cellar will be crawlin' with 'em afore mornin'." They disappeared around the house corner.

The partners made a cautious detour of the lights and quartering against the wind. The temper of the storm rose steadily. A sage stalk struck Joe, a shrill yell slid by and they saw a second lantern waving crazily in the night, borne toward the bridge by a stumbling figure. Joe muttered "hurry up," and aimed in that direction. They arrived near the bridge end as the guard of the structure drew landward to meet the man approaching. Neither of the partners heard anything of the moment's parley but, watching the lanterns closely, Joe noticed the erstwhile guard retreating toward shelter while the new man walked out upon the weaving structure.

"Hear that water grumblin'," said Indigo. "This bridge won't stick, Joe. The guy ought to get offen it."

"He will in a minute," replied Joe. "But he's got

particular business right now. Watch.”

The guard’s lantern dipped thrice as if in signal; then the light of it winked out.

“Wind snuffed it for him,” said Indigo.

“No, he’s hidin’ it inside his coat. We got to get closer to this shebang. Here’s the guard rail. Flat on yore stummick, Indigo. Hug the underside o’ these planks.”

“Hell!” exploded Indigo. “I’m wet enough now.”

HORSES drummed along the bridge, a man ran behind. Joe looked around and up from his shelter to see a point of light seeping out from the guard’s coat. Those in the saddle were halted. Whether they were two or six Joe couldn’t tell, but he heard them talking.

“Where’s the rest?” asked the guard. “Better get the whole bunch over now. If she keeps risin’ the bridge’ll wash down the crick.”

“Nuggins give orders. Just us boys to hang around here, out of sight. The main bunch waits till he sends for ‘em.”

“They mebbe won’t be able to cross in another hour,” persisted the bridge tender.

“You go argue with Nuggins if yuh want. I aim to keep my health, so I’m obeyin’ directions. How about us goin’ into the sheds?”

“Nope. Yuh wouldn’t be welcome. Go to the barn.”

The partners waited until the bridge end was deserted again before rising from their concealment. Indigo’s temper was ragged and his sense of pride had been assaulted by this burrowing into the mud. He said so in blunt, gloomy words. “And I’m too old a hand, Joe, to take chances with rheumatics any more. This is a hell of a place for you an’ me. Le’s ride.”

“Let’s go back and get a drink.”

“Well—that ain’t such a bad suggestion either.”

They raised their shoulders against the stinging rain and retreated for the house. Ten yards from the door they were met by another squad of semi-sober men conveying a drunk to the root cellar. Praygood Nuggins stepped after them and turned into the darkness. Joe laid a detaining hand across Indigo’s arm. One flat and angry word cut over the noisy air. A cry of pain came hard after it and presently Nuggins reappeared on the threshold of the house and went inside. But somebody out in the darkness was cursing blackly. The partners entered and went

quickly toward the whisky kegs.



In the space of time the two had been wandering around the storm a change had come over the crowd. More exactly it was a tightening of the nervous excitement already existing. The room was warm, smoke lifted in clouds, thick enough to eddy and swirl behind the moving bodies. Drink touched them all and the fast, thrumming music of the Mexican guitars stirred the blood. Even the cool-tempered Joe felt himself swayed by it, felt a turn to recklessness. Eyes about him were hard and bright; men were watching each other with a telltale caution. Dead Card John stood in the same corner, still alone and still maintaining the marble severity of face. But his attention was fixed upon Praygood Nuggins across the room and Nuggins, erect and grim, returned the glance. This man’s features were half hidden by the low setting hat and the drooping yellow mustache. All that could be seen with any degree of clearness was the bold nose and the angular, slanting eyes. He appeared to be standing guard, such was the fixity of his muscles and the unvarying cast of his cheeks. And the henchman Al stood a few paces removed in a similar posture though he could not erase the slack and cynical grin from his face. Joe noted that other men, some of them Ox Bow hands, seemed too casual as they draped themselves on Nuggins’s side of the place.

THOUGH the talk rolled on and the music drummed along the rafters, all men were waiting. Waiting for that certain yet unguessable move that would set fire to this pile of tinder. Alone of the crowd, Rube Mamerock seemed unmoved. He had taken seat by the fireplace, hands folded over his paunch. And there was an air of weary, discouraged sadness about him that tugged at Joe’s heart. Mamerock’s race was run. He had made his mark, built up his empire. Now, with the shadow of death casting a long, long shadow before him he saw the forthcoming dissolution of all that he had labored to gain. With the passing of Sam Trago there had also passed his last hope of leaving

the Ox Bow intact. His chin dropped to his chest and the silver hair gleamed in the light. He was beaten.

Dead Card John moved away from his corner, approaching Rube Mamerock. And such was the growing tension that the talk stumbled and fell to a small murmuring. All the henchmen shifted and looked toward Praygood Nuggins; but the latter never stirred. His eyes were fixed upon Dead Card John with a sharpness that photographed every ripple of expression of the latter's graven face. Dead Card John bent over Mamerock, lips barely moving. Mamerock shook his head, not looking up. But Dead Card John bent lower, speaking again, the ivory pallor giving way to a taint of red. Mamerock reared back and stared fully at Dead Card John for long moments. Complete silence came to that room, the guitars stopped and the singing of the fire through the oak wood made a queer melody against the rumble of the storm. Mamerock's head fell and rose. He hoisted himself from the chair, pointing to an inner door, the meanwhile looking about him.

"Play up," said he to the musicians. "I don't expect to hear much music by-and-by. Play up, boys." And he waved his hand around the room. "Friends, if you'd please an old-timer, hit those kegs and look as if you were enjoyin' yoreselves. Rube never spread a poor fandango yet and I don't want it said the last one was dull." He opened the designated door, let Dead Card John and himself into another room, and closed the portal behind.

Still Praygood Nuggins kept his exact place, his flinty and angular cheeks turned to the recently closed door. For once the henchman Al's face was bereft of its slack grin. The man shuffled nervously to the kegs and drank, setting up an example that struck the crowd appropriately. The tension snapped, talk soared to the dark beams, the whisky kegs were plumbed to the bottom. A brace of Ox Bow men rolled in a fresh vessel and cut away the top. One elderly rancher with a gloss-black beard and a steel eye raised the dipper to the room and spoke resoundingly. "God bless old Rube. God condemn the man who sets his loop for the Ox Bow!"

The room filled with a roar. Yet Joe, measuring the warmth of that sentiment's approval marked it down that it lasted only a moment and was followed by an immediate shifting and gathering of groups. The old-timers were with Rube, heart and

soul. But Joe plainly saw they feared Praygood Nuggins. The latter gave no notice to the toast, a thing ominous and unsettling to the onlookers. Individuals began idling toward the gun guardian. Al was at the front entrance, trying to catch Nuggins's attention. He caught it finally and raised himself to his toes as if to gain some certain consent. Joe saw Nuggins's head flick to one side in a quick negation. The silver-haired partner dwelt thoughtfully upon this for a bare instant and spoke into Indigo's ear. "Inch toward the way out. Easy."

Unexpectedly, Crowheart Ames barred their path. His great chest expanded and he shoved his bulldog chin into Joe's face, speaking with a subdued belligerence.

"Where yuh goin'?"

Joe was suddenly cold and unfriendly. "It won't pay you to stand there long, Mister Ames."

"Keep yore fingers out of this pie," warned the sheriff. Joe saw the man's pupils dilate.

"Get out of my way," drawled Joe. "I'm playin' a waitin' game—like you. Only I don't bluff. Step aside."

Ames moved back a pace and turned his shoulders. The partners cruised the width of the room, skirted the guns and stopped abreast Al. The Nuggins's henchman flashed a suspicious glance from one to the other and put his back to the wall like a balky horse. Indigo's pale orbs slowly turned to green and he looked at Al with a thoughtful mayhem printed upon his furrowed, waspish cheeks. Al started to say something and stopped, attention snapping into the room. Talk ceased, as if the bottom had dropped from the ranch-house and carried the crowd with it. Indigo muttered, "Look there," and Joe turned upon his heels.

Rube Mamerock had returned to the fireplace. Dead Card John stood to one side of him and the girl, hidden all the evening, rested on the other. Something had happened to Rube in the brief intermission, something had taken twenty years from his face. He confronted the crowd, shoulders squared, the haunted, discouraged look gone from his eyes. He wasn't smiling, but there was a confidence or relief present that had not been there before. He swept the gathering, man and man, lingering a little on the soldierly figure of Praygood Nuggins. His head ducked, as if he had confirmed a belief. He raised his hand.

"Friends," said he, voice filling the room, "I have got an important message for you. I am going

to make an oral will. I want every man here to testify to my words. I am about to do a duty that has troubled me, sleepin' and wakin' more than twenty years. I had it settled once. Then my plans was knocked aside. Mebbe God knows best. Listen very carefully. I am passin' on Ox Bow to other hands."

THE heavy and oppressive hand of silence squeezed the crowd like the jaws of a vise. Joe heard Al breathing asthmatically. As for himself, he rubbed his hands together and found the palms damp with sweat. Mamerock laid a hand on the girl's shoulder and continued.

"When I left Texas better than fifty seasons back, I cut all traces from my family. They're all dead and gone these many years. I know of ary kin. But there was two people in Terese I loved like son an' daughter. I waited some years for Sam Trago to grow up. Sam was broad-shouldered, he had a level head, and I knew blamed well Ox Bow would never suffer under his hands. I meant to will the ranch to Sam. I—"

He halted, and the crowd saw a sight they had never seen before. Rube Mamerock's cheeks were wet. Ray Chasteen held to him, her head high and proud, eyes burning like dark jewels against her white skin. Joe muttered a savage phrase to Indigo, "She can't cry no more, the poor girl."

"I figgered I'd kept my intentions a secret," proceeded Rube Mamerock, catching hold of himself. "But the wolves found it out, or guessed it. So Sam died. An' when he died my hopes died, too. It was to be Sam's ranch—an' Ray Chasteen's. I wish I had a son like Sam an' a daughter like Ray. The wolves figgered they had me hamstrung. Up till ten minutes ago I guessed I was. But I have just been made aware o' a fact which changes my ideas." He turned to the girl. "Daughter, I ain't at liberty to tell you anything. But what I say now I want you to follow and believe, trustin' in old Rube Mamerock's judgment. Also trustin' in what he tells you to do." With that he faced the crowd once more, chest spreading out with an immense intake of air. And his words rolled along the dead silent room with a booming, resonant solemnity.

"I, Rube Mamerock, bein' more or less sound of body and entirely clear and sane of mind, do hereby will, bequeath and freely give to Ray Chasteen the Ox Bow ranch, with all its acres, buildings of whatever kind or nature, and all stock ranging upon

it, and all vehicles and tools and furniture and gear, and all rights that go with the ranch, as well as every dollar I have in the various banks of this county and state, together with every interest I possess in other institutions and every share of stock to be found in my strongbox in the office. It is my plain will and intent to give everything I own to Ray Chasteen from the date of my death, regardless of whatever lack of legal language in this oral will. I want no such omission of lawyer phrases to defeat this disposition and I call upon every witness here tonight to make a good note of what I have said."

ATREMENDOUS escape of breath passed from the crowd, as if each man had himself delivered the speech and now wanted air. Boots shuffled, a murmuring rose. But Rube was not yet through and he waved his hand to still them.

"The wolves won't be satisfied. They'll figger to wrestle the Ox Bow away from a woman's hands. I have got a loyal outfit, but since old Rube's about done, I'll say that there's some of my men not to be trusted. In this room tonight are folks waitin'—just waitin'. I've fought those gents to a standstill while I lived. I am leavin' a good fighter to take care of 'em now. The man I mention is one I always distrusted. Here and now I offer him an apology and I wish you all to testify I freely give him my confidence and trust. In order that Ray Chasteen's right to Ox Bow may be protected and defended, I hereby appoint as sole executor and administrator—"



He paused, shrewdly creating a suspense that none of them would forget. It was Rube Mamerock's last scene, his last fight, and he built up at this moment a climax that was to be a memorable chapter in Terese. Even the girl

looked at him in wonder. Praygood Nuggins seemed to be a statue chiseled against the wall.

"—I appoint Dead Card John. And now I can die with some amount o' security. Daughter, I will take you back—"

Not a sound escaped the crowd until Mamerock and the girl had disappeared in another room and the door was closed behind them. Dead Card John,

at once the target of every eye, moved to the fireplace and stood with his back to it. Joe marveled at the man's cold, cast-iron courage. For Dead Card John surveyed a hostile assemblage with the same inscrutable, unrevealing glance he would have given to a hand of cards at a poker table. If the man had any outright supporters present Joe was not aware of them. On the contrary, he confronted an implacable enemy in Praygood Nuggins, with all the apparent aid Nuggins could muster within the space of a short word. He also had little to hope from the loyal Ox Bow hands or the old-timers. His reputation was behind him, his coldness repelled, and it was quite obvious to Joe that the crowd suspected he had somehow brought pressure upon Rube Mamerock, or had tricked the veteran.

HE SQUARED his thin shoulders and broke the long silence, speaking in a droning, emotionless manner sounding for all the world like an announcer at a gambling table. "You may believe it or not, gentlemen, but I wish to say that when the time comes for me to act in accordance with Rube's wishes I shall do so to the very letter. You gentlemen know my reputation. It will not agree with most of you. But you also know I have made it a policy to keep my word in Terese, good or bad. I give it now that Ray Chasteen shall receive every inch and penny of her estate."

Gradually, the crowd broke ranks and began a slow shifting, the talk rising from a subdued humming to an excited clatter. Crowheart Ames had one elbow on the whisky barrel, plunged in a study. Once he looked to Dead Card John and shifted the gaze to Praygood Nuggins. And it appeared to Joe that the sheriff was weighing his own chances of profit between those two antagonists. But Joe kept his attention riveted to Praygood Nuggins. And by-and-by he saw the man's chin drop toward Al. Al wheeled instantly and ducked into the storm. Joe prodded Indigo with a sharp elbow and ran down the steps, circling the corner of the house. Indigo stumbled in pursuit.

"Now what? Sa-ay, Joe, I ain't goin' to get any more goose pimples for anybody. What's up?"

"Horses, ropes. We're goin' to pull that bridge off its pins before the rest of Nuggins's sagebrush pirates cross. If these stable dudes make any shout, belt 'em in the stummick—"

The partners ducked under the shed and into the

lantern light, arousing a quartet of Ox Bow men from a friendly game of pitch. The sight of them, plunging in from the storm, roused a quick alarm; nor did Indigo's thin embattled face tend to soothe them. Joe swept the lantern up from the ground with a gruff explanation. "We're after our brutes. Come along, Indigo." And the partners raced down the shed. An angry protest followed them. "Wait a minute—cut that out. I'll boost out all ponies here. Hey, hold on!"

BUT the partners were already in the saddle, swinging away. Joe dropped the lantern, the light guttered and died, a stream of profanity followed them. They rode side by side, untying their ropes; they reined in at the bridge end and dropped to the sodden earth. Joe took both ropes and walked out on the bridge until his exploring arm touched an upright post supporting the handrail. He dropped to his stomach, leaning far down toward the boiling current, made a quick tie with one rope and repeated the operation a few yards farther along with the remaining rope. Indigo, waiting in the saddle, took up the slack. Joe ran to his horse, mounted and gave the signal. "They're comin' into it. Hear? All right, out she goes."

The planking threw out the sound of the advancing Nuggins's crowd. The partners put a cautious strain on the ropes. "Out she goes," repeated Joe. Nails screamed, Joe's horse crouched for a harder pull. The bridge, warped and weakened by long years of traffic, held for a stubborn moment and then gave. The near end collapsed, planks snapped and dropped into the rushing stream. Over the drumming beat of the rain sailed a warning cry. A gun flashed in the utter blackness. Joe's rope went slack. Indigo howled defiantly across the river and began to curse out of pure pleasure. The bridge, bereft of its underpinning at the near shore, collapsed section by section and they heard the tempestuous waters carrying it away. Both ropes were taut again, fouled in the driftwood downstream.

"She's out," said Joe. "Let the ropes go. We got business someplace else."

"Say, I put in a lot o' labor on my string," grumbled Indigo. "I want it—"

Another gunshot broke the galloping tempo of the storm, coming from the house. "Let it go!" shouted Joe. "Trouble back there."

The partners rode to the ranch door, dropped to

the steps and ran inside. The crowd was bunched at the far end of the room. The door through which Mamerock last had passed swung wide. Somebody shouted, "He ain't in here. Look at the office." Ox Bow hands turned from the fringe of the crowd and slid into the dining-room, Joe and Indigo close on their heels. Another door gave way. Cold air struck them in the face as they followed Ox Bow men into Rube Mamerock's office. More men spilled through from an opposite entrance, Dead Card John foremost. And the excited, threatening talk was damped at the raise of his arm. Rube Mamerock was on his knees, between desk and chair, head lying on the desk's top. He had his back to the window and it seemed he was praying; but Dead Card John stepped up and ran one hand down the old man's coat to indicate a bullet hole. Then his long, tapering fingers slid inside the coat and touched the old man's chest. He stepped back, nodding. Mamerock was dead.

CROWHEART AMES pointed accusingly at the window. "Glass splintered. Somebody shot him from outside." His fist doubled and his bulldog face shot out in the direction of the partners. "Where was you then? I saw yuh moochin' out o' the door!"

"You'll find our guns checked with the others," drawled Joe. "And I reckon we can account for our acts the last few minutes. Instead o' standin' here why don't you take a look outside by the window?"

Ray Chasteen fought through the ranks crying, "Let me get in—let me get in!" Dead Card John turned and threw out both arms to stop her, but she knocked them aside and dropped in a heap by the dead Mamerock. Joe averted his face and his eyes, passing across Dead Card John's marble countenance, saw terrific pain struggling to come through the ivory mask. "Let's get out of here," he suggested and led the way back to the main room.

One man had never left this room. Through all the excitement and the shifting of the crowd, Praygood Nuggins remained in the same spot near the wall. Still, he had improved the interval, for he wore his gun. The partners struck directly for the hall and the custodian of the artillery. The man was gone; Joe took his weapon from the wall and buckled it to him, blue eyes narrowing at the sight of Crowheart Ames's steady inspection. Indigo claimed his piece with a snort of satisfaction. "It was against my principles to undress in the first

place. Jus' ketch me doin' it again."

The two of them stepped aside. They had started a rush. Every man in the place felt the spur of fear, and although Crowheart Ames yelled a command to stay away from the hardware none paid him attention. For a moment it seemed to Joe the long anticipated fight would burst forth in that sullen jam of men struggling for their weapons. Nuggins and the sheriff were swapping some kind of a signal across the room; Ox Bow punchers were collecting in a corner by themselves for a bitter and subdued family discussion. But the old-timers, the backbone and the bulk of the crowd seemed to drift and gather around Crowheart Ames. The sheriff's red face grew wrinkled; he scooped a dipper of whisky from the keg and downed it recklessly. One rash, headlong challenge emerged from the Ox Bow bunch. "Well, here he is. Le's settle this thing for good!"

"Now," whispered Indigo, "this is where we ought to be someplace else. What diff'runce does it make who steals the ranch. Ain't it plain both sides is robbers? Don't yuh believe nothin' what this Dead Johnny gent says. An' when yuh takes his part o' the quarrel yo're shore on the losin' side. Look at 'em siftin' toward this Nuggins buzzard."

DEAD CARD JOHN came in, looked about him; and he saw that the crisis, long threatening, had come. He squared his thin shoulders.

"Gentlemen, I am the administrator of this estate. Ray Chasteen owns it. I ask every man who believes her entitled to it to stand beside me." So far the words were lifeless; and perhaps the man understood he made no friends, for he turned until he confronted Praygood Nuggins and a controlled and bitter fury erupted. "Now, you damned dog, I'll call your bet! What are you going to do about it?"



"Yuh worked it very well, John," said Nuggins. "But it won't last a minute. Yuh can't hide behind a woman's petticoat."

"What do you propose to do?" snapped Dead Card John.

Nuggins ducked his Stetson toward the old-timers ranged around the sheriff. "You boys are of

a mind to see the girl gets her just dues, I reckon. I ain't buckin' yuh none. But I don't propose to be put offen the track either. What's Ray Chasteen to Mamerock? How does it happen our friend John and the lady is hooked together on the deal? You all know Rube Mamerock never had no truck with John. It ain't human nature to change so sudden without some sorter nigger in the woodpile. How long do any of yuh suppose the girl would hold Ox Bow with him in possession? How long do any of yuh figger she could run it, even if she got it away from him? Ox Bow's a man's ranch. I don't aim to fight a woman. Don't aim to get the county set against me. Ox Bow is worth somethin'. I'll pay the girl a fair sum. More than it'd be worth ten months after she tried to run it." He met Dead Card John's challenge, his slanting eyes lifted against the light. "I'll tell you what I'm goin' to do, John. I'm havin' forty riders acrost the bridge in three minutes. And they'll rake hell outen yuh if it's yore mind to put up a fight! I'm buyin' Ox Bow!"

"Excuse a stranger for buttin' in," drawled Joe Breedlove, "but I misdoubt you'll have any forty helpers across the river short of two days. The bridge is out. Me and my friend pulled it out. Old trooper, yuh'll have to do yore scrappin' with what men yuh got here and now."

"Who are you?" challenged Nuggins.

"The name is Breedlove. This bantam rooster by my side is known as Bowers. Don't be deceived by a stunted stature. We're friends o' peace. Tonight we're upholdin' the legal duties of an administrator. Any objections?"

"Yo're playin' a weak hand too strong," warned Nuggins. "We ain't askin' the help o' strangers. Yuh'll get yore whiskers singed."

AT THIS particular point Indigo obeyed his instincts and changed front. Ever since he and Joe had ridden into the country he had been protesting that he wanted to be out of it. He disliked Dead Card John from the moment he first laid eyes on the man. And with every step along the pathway of trouble he had angrily warned Joe he would bear no part in it; he didn't propose to help any renegade steal a ranch. Yet when Praygood Nuggins challenged Joe, Indigo Bowers's scruples ceased to matter. Instantly he was aflame with hostility, instantly the washed-out eyes took on that greenish hue which was for this little man a sure and inevitable sign of fighting wrath. Indigo was

not a character to reflect or follow his reason. He was a bundle of nerves, a harbinger of grief and gloom, he was a repository of dynamite. Once feeling that his dignity had been infringed upon or his wisdom and courage questioned Indigo was full ready to fight the angel Gabriel's heavenly warriors, nine wildcats and an entire room full of assorted badmen. And when he reached that pitch of temper he was fully capable of tearing down the premises, board by board; caution was not in him then and his hundred-odd pounds left a cyclonic trail of wreckage behind.

So he twisted his nose and tilted his small chin and stabbed Nuggins with a glittering glance. "Poor hands is our favored way o' playin' cards. Listen, yuh yaller whiskered, frost-faced son uh original sin, yo're so crooked the sun can't cast a shadder behind yuh. A snake in the grass is a messenger o' charity compared to a man what would steal a gal's ranch. Buy it, yuh said. Who in hell believes yuh'd ever pay a nickel? Yore friend Al, which does all the dirty washin', tinkered with Mamerock's messenger to get invites. We saw that play in town. Yore friend Al tinkered with this fella Dead Card John's men. We saw that out by the road saloon. Yore friend Al's been tinkerin' with Ox Bow men tonight at the bridge. And we saw that. Why, man, yuh ought to be a foreign diplomat yo're so smooth. Don't tell us where to head in. Joe and me has cut our gums on jaspers like you."

ALL the while he had his thumbs hooked in his belt. And all the while Joe Breedlove was smiling in a tight, suppressed manner. The sheriff, Crowheart Ames, stepped away from the whisky barrels, roughly challenging Indigo. "Hey there! Pull in that crooked nose o' yores. We'll do our own family fightin' without help. You and yore friend hit the Terese jail tomorrow. Chew on that. Now stand back and let white folks talk."

Indigo faced the sheriff, polite to the point of deadliness. "Yeah? My nose may be crooked, Mister Ames, but I ain't got a face that looks like a mush bowl turned wrong side out. What are you so proud of? I guess we could tell a few things about yore recent history likewise. Yuh been tradin' hosses in the middle of the stream lately and right now yuh don't know which side of this argument's goin' to come out clear and bring yuh yore profit."

"Gospel," drawled Joe. "Indigo, you sure are wound up." He watched Praygood Nuggins,

waiting for open aggressiveness; the latter seemed to be testing the tide. But Crowheart Ames was thoroughly enraged. "By God, I'm tossin' you two troublemakers in the root cellar now! Put up yore hands!"

"Not for a while," interposed Joe softly. "I guess it's about time to set the ball rollin'. Me and my partner are declarin' ourselves. Come on, Indigo."

They circled the sheriff, never letting him out of sight, and dropped beside Dead Card John. "How's politics in this room?" Joe asked. "It don't make no difference to me what this gent's past history is. He's on the right side of the fence now. Who's declarin' for him? He's upholdin' the girl, ain't he? Why not give him a ride, then? If he starts puttin' anything in his own pockets the county ought to be strong enough to haze him down when said time comes. As between the devil and the deep blue sea, I'll take to water myself. Nuggins, yore hat hides yore horns!"

Thunder rode Nuggins. "Yuh've wrote yore own ticket, friend! I never let a man interfere with my ideas!" He ducked his head around the room. "All right, boys. Come over here and line up."

THE sheriff started to speak, but crowded the words back down his throat. For the tide drifted both ways. Nuggins collected some of the Ox Bow men to him, some of the visiting punchers, and a few of his own men who had managed to cross the bridge. The old-timers to a man stuck to their own group, beside the sheriff. What astonished Joe, and therefore possibly silenced Crowheart Ames, was the support Dead Card John pulled from the assemblage. Six Ox Bow men, the partners, the saloon proprietor from Terese, and a scattering of young bloods, these were with him. And after another moment, three of the old-timers left the neutral bunch with some show of reluctance and added to Dead Card John's strength. It did not match the strength of Nuggins by half, but it was sufficient to check any immediate rush.

"Every penny of this ranch and every inch of it goes to the girl," droned Dead Card John. "There's my word. You know I never go back on that, Nuggins."

"It may go to the girl," snapped Nuggins, "but it may come back to you again, John. You're both the same kind. The two of yuh ribbed old Rube!"

"Be careful, Nuggins!"

"I got yuh over a barrel, Johnny," cried Nuggins, using the words as he would have used a knife. They slashed through the smoke laden air. "It took me five years to sap yuh. I got yuh licked. This ranch is mine. I said so! I'll pay a figure out o' the earnin's and no man in Terese can say it ain't legal. Yuh ain't big enough any more to stand in my way, Johnny!"

"Be careful, Nuggins!"

Crowheart Ames's little eyes jumped from side to side. He took off his hat and pushed his fingers nervously across his hair, a plain picture of a thoroughly bedeviled man. The scene and the situation ran rapidly beyond control. Turning to the kegs he scooped another dipper of whisky into his bulldog jaws. Those old-timers in the neutral ranks were studying him with an uncomfortable closeness. One of them leaned and whispered in his ear. Crowheart's whole face lightened. "Yeah," he muttered. "Why didn't I think of it before?"

Nuggins launched his challenge to Dead Card John. "Take yore men and get out! I give yuh two minutes to pass the doors. Yo're trespassin' on my property."

"In two minutes," was Dead Card John's brief, chill answer, "we will draw guns."

THE sheriff stepped between the parties. "No fight," he announced. "We've got to cool off and do some figurin'. Nuggins, take yore men out to the bunkhouses and wait. Me and these gentlemen"—pointing to the neutral bunch—"will collect at the barn and do some arguin'."

"I'm not movin' an inch," snapped Nuggins.

One of the neutral men challenged this. "No? How far do yuh think that's goin' to ride? You be reasonable. We want some time to compare notes. We ain't against yuh, Nuggins. But we'll just take control till we decide who's right."

Nuggins shook his head. "I'll share this house with Johnny."



"Johnny stays," replied the spokesman of the neutrals. "You go, plenty prompt. Don't get us sore. We got you outnumbered and if yo're goin' to get pig-headed we're apt to throw in with the other side. Bustle."

The sheriff was watching Nuggins and his head dropped a faint distance in signal. Nuggins gave in.

“All right. At the bunkhouses.” Dead Card John and his followers held steady as Nuggins led his crowd into the rain-swept night. Crowheart Ames and the neutral ranchers followed.

“Close the door—lock it,” said Dead Card John. Joe stepped over and did it.

“Smells like more spoiled beef to me,” grumbled Indigo. Joe raced across the room in great strides, shattering the globes of the reflecting lamps. A burst of shots smashed the front window panes. “Drop!” shouted Joe, and made a leap for the remaining lamp. They went down to the floor, the room in semi-darkness. The saloon proprietor from Terese groaned. “They took a tuck in my ribs, boys.”

CHAPTER V TRUMP CARD

“**R**OLL away from the front of the fire,” ordered Dead Card John.

Window glass elsewhere in the house splintered and jangled on the floor. “How many doors to this shebang?” demanded Joe, plastered in a corner.

“They’re all locked,” answered an Ox Bow man. “I seen to that a long time back. Hell, I thought them old dudes was Rube’s friends. They’s a pack uh flea-bitten dawgs an’ they only got outen the house to save their rotten hides from bein’ perforated.”

One of the three ranch owners who had deserted from the neutral group challenged this with mild anger: “I don’t take that kindly. Those gentlemen are friends o’mine. Keep yore heavy tongue off ‘em. Ames is only waitin’ to see which side wins before declarin’ himself. They know it and they ain’t bein’ fooled none. But mebbe you think it’s an easy job to figger this scramble?”

“It looks plain enough to me,” said the Ox Bow man.

“Well, it don’t to them. Don’t you mistake it none, they’ll fight. But they ain’t helpin’ nobody till they’re plumb shore a ketch ain’t involved.”

Joe raised his gun and took aim into the night. A roar and a spattering of lead slugs filled the room. The driving wind found the apertures in the shattered glass and raced against the fireplace, fanning it to a white, tall blaze. A back door splintered and the partners, galloping toward that quarter at the head of six or so others, met Nuggins’s men head-on. The door was off its

hinges and the opening filled and spilling over. Some thoughtful defender shot out a light, leaving nothing to the sight save a square rectangle of uneasy blackness where the door had been. Gun flashes made purple-orange dusters there; a long, wild cry beat inward, flesh struck flesh. Impact and recoil. Powder smoke belched back, whipped by the wind. And the gun flashes faded and the sortie was ended, one man’s groan of ebbing mortality marking the effort that had been made.

Dead Card John rallied them back to the main room. “One fellow watch this opening. Rest at the other side o’ the house. I think they’re tryin’ to draw us off guard.”

They assembled in the shadowed corners, waiting. One lone shot drummed along the rain. Boots shuffled across the floor. “Lights comin’ on in the bunkhouses. Guess they got a bellyful. Lights in the barn, too.”

“Waitin’ for daylight,” observed Indigo. “Which is help to them and no good use to us.”

“Why not?” asked Dead Card John, somewhere in the remote shadows.

“A river which goes up can likewise come down,” opined Indigo. “If ever they get the rest of their outfit across the water we’re in a bad shape. Not mentionin’ the fact an’ possibility o’ this Ames jasper swingin’ the old ducks his way. Proceedin’ with the inquest I will state we ain’t got enough men to scatter ‘round this castle and head off a daylight attack.”

Somebody away back in the room vented his disgust. “You sound like an undertaker. If yuh got chilblains, clear out.”

Joe interceded. He had a great respect for his partner’s sense of strategy. Indigo could not plan ahead, neither was he a very good judge or leader of men. But once a situation hung in front of his nose he had no superior picking the weak and the strong angles. This was born hot of imagination but of long experience. Therefore, Joe came to Indigo’s assistance. “You boys take note. Indigo’s no specimen of beauty, but he’s been in more arguments than the pack of you fellows put together. Right now he’s talkin’ sound.”

“Yeah? Well, what about it?”

“Why wait for ‘em to visit us?” proceeded Indigo. “Le’s get four-five boys together and shoot a few holes in their dawg house. When yuh keep a man busy brushin’ lead offen his shoulders he’s plumb apt to get discouraged.”

SILENCE met his proposal. Some rash individual crouched in front of the fire and proceeded to light a cigarette. “Don’t do that!” snapped Dead Card John.

“What time is it?”

“Goin’ on three in the mornin’. Couple hours till we can see somethin’.”

Indigo emitted a sound half between pain and anger. “Sa-ay, what am I smellin’?”

“Grub, mister. They’s a whole table full of beans yonder.”

Indigo’s boots echoed across the room and into the adjoining one like the clatter of a cavalry troop. And they heard him murmuring, “Sometimes I shore do pass up a bet.”

Dead Card John took command of the conversation. “About that idea of goin’ out after them. It’s a good one. Any volunteers?”

“How about yoreself?” queried some slightly suspicious individual.

“Never ask a man to do anything I wouldn’t try first,” was Dead Card John’s ice-cold reply. “And I will kindly beg you to remember you are not fighting for me but for the girl.” His voice rose to a higher, incredibly bitter note. “I would see you all in hell before I’d ask a favor on my own account! Who’s got nerve enough to tackle the bunkhouse?”

That touched them. Out of the screening darkness they cursed him; they were rising up to the challenge. But Joe Breedlove had another idea and another purpose. “Wait a second. Before you get started on this bust, I want to crawl over to the barn and see what that collection of whiskers has got figured out.”

“Another good idea.”

Joe aimed for the door Nuggins’s outfit had battered down. “Back in a little while. If I ain’t, draw yore own conclusions.”

“Hey,” shouted Indigo, sounding strangled. “Wait till I find the bottom o’ this bean crock.”

“No, you stay put,” decided Joe, and bent his head through the whirling gusts of rain.

He cleared the door at one long jump, landed on his haunches and crouched there, waiting. Nothing happened. Rising, he turned directly toward the lights glimmering out of the barn apertures. Against the lee shelter of its walls, he waited again, one ear tight against the boards. But the wind and the rain, still slanting furiously from the sky drowned all other sound and he turned a corner and bore down upon the front entrance. The great sliding door was

closed, the lesser door cut within it rattled to the pressure of his shoulder. He lifted the latch and crowded through, lantern light springing upon him. The neutrals were slouched in the straw; Crowheart Ames sat cross-legged behind the lantern’s golden glow, heavy lids squinting up and across the bowl of radiance. “Who’s that?”

“One o’ the strangers.”

The sheriff sprang to his feet. “I’ll take care of him right now!”

Joe came forward and squatted within the circle, conscious that this group watched him with the same curious closeness that a hunting pack would bestow upon a treed coon. The sheriff started to cross the center of the group and was stopped by an admonitory hand. “Sit down, Crowheart. It ain’t yore party, is it?”

JOE made note of the speaker. He had seen the man talking confidentially to Mamerock earlier in the evening. He had heard a name—something like Bristow—attached to him by Mamerock. And this Bristow at present seemed a leader of the gathering; a chap with coal black whiskers and coal black eyes. He flashed them on Joe Breedlove. “What’s on yore mind, brother?”

Breedlove eased himself nearer the light, relaxing; and he smiled that frank, disarming smile that never yet had failed to win him friends and followers. His palms turned up, Indian fashion; he looked around the circle and back into the tiers of men half hidden outside the ring of light, glance returning to meet Bristow’s straight, blunt regard.

“Wondered if you fellows had reached a decision yet?”

“Dead Card John send you?”

“It’s my own curiosity,” replied Joe. “But I’d say the other boys are some interested.”

Bristow shot a quick question at him, reminding Joe of a prosecuting attorney he once had faced long ago. “What profit do you get haulin’ Dead Card John’s chestnuts out of the fire, stranger?”

Joe smiled once more. “I’m a hell of a fellow to mind my own business, till somethin’ stings me.” The smile vanished. “My partner and I saw Sam Trago dead up in his folks’ house. We overheard a lot of things since. We got a ticket to Rube Mamerock’s fandango. I might ask you the same question, friend. Why should you pull Nuggins’s chestnuts out o’ the fire?”

“Who says we are?”

“Write yore own ticket. Here you boys augur, while said gent plants a bunch of lead into the house. Looks to me as if you wanted Nuggins to steal the girl’s right.”

“Don’t get so precious about it,” grunted Bristow. He leaned back, frowning into the straw. “Maybe you think we ain’t been debatin’ it a little. Seems to me that for a mature, shrewd-lookin’ man you take a lot o’ stock in Dead Card John. Don’t you know a crook when you see one?”

“Which likewise applies to Nuggins,” countered Joe mildly.

“Yeah, we know that better’n you do,” muttered Bristow.

CROWHEART AMES leaned into the light, florid and threatening. “Yuh talk too damn’ much for a stranger! Dead Card John ribbed old Mamerock some way. It’s as plain as the nose on yore face. Mamerock spent most of his life cussin’ folks like Johnny. It don’t stand to reason he’d change in a minute.”

Joe looked at Bristow. The latter nodded, confirming that idea. “It’s the way we look at it, stranger.”

Joe got out his cigarette papers, and talked casually, half to himself. “So Terese lets the girl fight her own battles. Well, I’ve heard o’ people like that—”

“Hell’s pit!” exploded Bristow. “Who said we aimed to let her lose her right? But we ain’t playin’ Dead Card John’s cards for him, either.”

“Then you play Nuggins’s,” said Joe with unmistakable definiteness.

“Nuggins can be hazed into line,” argued Bristow, “if he tries anything funny.”

“Why argue with this jasper?” stormed the sheriff. “We don’t owe him no apologies. Great Moses, yuh gents aggravate me! He’d ought to be in jail or rid out on a rail. I’m goin’ to see it done before this is through.”

Joe went serenely on with the business of manufacturing his cigarette. Nothing disturbed the even set of his face, yet his mind raced down long alleys of thought. He felt the uncertainty of these neutrals. They were between two fires, reluctant to throw in with a notorious character, yet desiring to see the will of an ancient friend carried out. Another thing he knew; these men had a trace of fear when it came to Nuggins. The latter was a power, a sinister influence, while Dead Card John’s

star was setting. And it was because of all this that Bristow, mirroring the thought of the crowd, unconsciously put himself on the defensive to a complete stranger. Joe crimped his cigarette and lit it. “I’ve always found it never pays to be scared of any man. Always found said man could be knocked over somehow. It only takes one bullet to kill Nuggins’s kind.”

The shot was shrewdly aimed. He heard the rumbling rise of protest all around him. It had touched them on a sore spot. Bristow’s intensely black eyes filled with a hot, personal anger. “I don’t take that kindly, stranger. Who are you to tell folks they’re yellow?”

“Ain’t I told yuh it’s time to knock him over?” cried Crowheart Ames, weaving forward.

But this crowd was not to be swayed by the sheriff. Somebody to the rear of Joe cursed Ames and told him to hold his peace, Crowheart’s unlovely face dropped; he sat on his haunches, perplexed and uneasy.

“If,” drawled Joe, never raising his voice, “you boys knew this Dead Card John meant what he said about protectin’ the girl’s rights would it help any?”

He heard a note of encouragement in the rumbling comment. Bristow’s black beard bobbed in acknowledgment. “That’d be the end of talk, then and there,” said he. “But nobody believes what he says. It ain’t in the cards. The man’s played Terese for his own gains a long time, stranger. And I told you once we ain’t helpin’ his hand none.”

“What was the girl’s name?” asked Joe, seeming to wander off in his mind.

“Chasteen.”

Joe drew a deep breath of smoke. He knew well that if what he was about to say was to carry conviction he must first convince them of his own honesty. And he could only do that by keeping his mouth shut and letting them look at him. All his credentials were on his face; no word would help. So he straightened, a tall, soldierly and sinewy outline with the yellow light stamping the fine, rugged features. He was in the full vigor of his maturity, he had seen the West inside and out down along the far trail of his roaming. And because Joe had been hurt badly, because he had fought bravely, he could stand before this crowd now and impress them with the gentle, honest tolerance that was so great a part of his character. He had swayed men before, he did it now. And the very lifting of

his cigarette brought a deeper silence to the barn.

"I guess I've been a driftin' fool all my life," he drawled. "When a man sleeps under the stars enough times a house won't do. And when he follows the trail so many miles, a steady job can't hold him. I'm the sort of a man you gents hire for a season and never see again. West is full of 'em. I never knew my folks. Started on the spur when I was fourteen. A long time ago. Once in Abilene—"

THE great barn door surged to the wind, the lantern guttered. Bristow put a vast hand around the globe top. Crowheart Ames watched Joe out of the shadows. Somebody smothered a cough.

"—Once in Abilene, fifteen years ago, I blew in with money burnin' holes in my jeans. And I sat up to a poker game and lost it. I remember it mos' clearly because a woman sang through that crowd like I never heard anybody sing since. And she was totin' a little girl in her arms while she sang. Through that rough crowd—singin' the kid to sleep while she sang for the house. And I remember her lookin' at the professional which was relievin' me and four others of our spare cash. A woman only looks at one man like that. Then she passes on, singin' down the lanes. I'm readin' my cards close and I makes a bet, but the professional don't seem to hear me. He's pretty young, too, and as handsome as a marble statue. You know. But he's lookin' after the woman. Some kind of a word passes 'round that saloon. I turns and sees her close to some other gent. She'd stopped singing and was talkin' to him. Next I knew the hair was singed on the top of my head, I hears the woman screamin', and since then I never have been able to stand the sound. But the fellow near her is on the floor and the gambler at my table is goin' hell-bent for the door. Never saw him in Abilene again."

He lifted the cigarette, turning it in his fingers so that small spirals of smoke jettied upward. He inclined forward just a little and each following word dropped rhythmically into the silence. "I want to tell you boys, Dead Card John will see that girl gets every penny of her will. How long's he been in the country—five-ten years? Yeah. And he ain't ever told a soul his name, and he ain't ever made friends with man, woman or child. He's a crook, always was a crook. But I'm tellin' you he'll keep his word tonight and tomorrow and the next day to that girl. For his real name is Chasteen, and he was the gambler I sat with a long time back in Abilene.

And this Ray Chasteen, though she don't know it, is his own daughter."

"Get out! Wait—here, figger this. Ray's mama, Jenny Chasteen, died here six years back. No, five. Dead Card John drifted in right after. Ray was took care of by folks in Terese. She's been singin' goin' on four years, like her mama. I've seen Dead Card John stand by the bar and listen—" Bristow stopped and reared, black eyes snapping. "But I don't believe it none!"

"Who picked the girl out of the sheriff's arms last night when she fainted in the saloon?" was Joe's gentle interrogation.

"Hell's pit! But, man, why wouldn't he say he was her dad—if he was?"

Joe shook his head, wistfully sad. "The man's been a crook all his life. He shot a gent in Abilene out o' plain jealousy. And then he run, desertin' a wife and little girl. Do you figger he'd tell her now? She's straight, she was to be married to a straight gent. No, it was Dead Card John's play to keep his mouth shut and feed on his heart because o' what he couldn't do. I'm tellin' a man's secret, which I'd ought to be shot for. But that's why I'm on his side o' the fence."

Bristow got up and looked around at his friends. "Well, boys?"

THEY were all on their feet, crowding down into the light. Crowheart Ames spread his elbows to keep his place, protesting. "Say, don't swallow that guff. What're you goin' to do?"

"Shut up, Ames!"



Somebody spoke quietly and swiftly to Bristow. "Get that bunch out of the ranch-house. We'll set a ring around Nuggins's party and take him to camp."

"Done."

"I'll bring the boys this far," said Joe, turning to the door. "Turn out the lantern. If I was you, I'd hold Mister Ames close by. When Nuggins loses, Mister Ames also loses a cut in the profits." He bent into the sweeping rain with the sound of the sheriff's struggle behind; he crossed to the main house, challenged the open door softly and passed the guard. Somebody collided with him; Indigo cursed the blackness. "Get off my bunions, yuh

clodhopper.”

“All right, let’s travel.”

“Oh—Joe?”

Dead Card John answered from near the fireplace. “What are they doing?”

Joe smiled. And being a wise man, he was glad he could say this in the darkness. “I just got ‘em in good humor by recitin’ a few stories about when I was a kid in Abilene. Upon mature judgment the old-timers figgered they’d play our cards. They’ll be waitin’ by the barn. Let’s go.”

Above the scraping of feet and the clash of voice he heard Dead Card John’s reply, even and threatening. “I want to see you at daylight, Breedlove.”

“Daylight’s an hour off,” murmured Joe, “and lots of water will run under the bridge meanwhile.” Indigo was beside him, identified by a honeyed, sing-song profanity. Shoulder to shoulder they left the ranch-house and slid across the muddy yard. They were challenged at the barn, the groups merged. Bristow assumed command with a crisp order. “You fellows spread around the bunkhouses to the right. We’ll take the left and do the same. I’ll give Nuggins a chance to come out with a whole skin and no trouble. If they figger to argue the matter, let ‘em have it in the guts.”

The partners turned and started circling the lights of the bunkhouse. Bristow’s cautious summons came faintly through the sheeting rain. “Where’s that tall stranger? I want him with me.”

Joe swung back, pulling Indigo with him. “A grandstand seat for us.”

“It don’t feel right to me,” grumbled Indigo. “This Nuggins is a man who wouldn’t expose himself in a place like that, with lights burnin’. They’s a dead skunk in the barnyard.”

They found Bristow by his repeated summons. Indigo, as wary as a wolverine, wanted to know where the sheriff was.

“One of my men was watchin’ him last I knew,” said Bristow.

“I’ll bet he’s shed his skin and departed elsewhere,” Indigo prophesied. “That bunkhouse light burns plumb too steady.”

“Come on. We’ll find out in a minute.”

THE crowd had melted away. Bristow and the partners, accompanied by a fourth man unknown to Joe, walked directly toward the light, side by side. Figures cut across the beacon’s

outflung beams—Bristow’s party running around the place. Twenty yards from it, the four stopped.

“I’ll go and kick open the door,” said Joe. “And step aside. You fellows do the necessary talkin’.”

He left them, touched the bunkhouse wall and crawled along it until his exploring fingers reached the latch. He wasted no time; up came the latch. His boot struck the door and threw it open. Recoiling in the shadows he heard Bristow, somewhere to one side of the wide and yellow beam, shout a harsh command. “Yo’re surrounded. We got yuh two to one, Nuggins! Come out and give up— By God, they’ve flew the coop!”

“Hah!” yelled Indigo. “I thought so! That sheriff jasper—lookit the barn!”

A gun exploded twice over by the ranch-house. Joe knew then Nuggins had swapped shelter and now held the fort. Turning at Indigo’s command, he saw the barn emitting a blood-red glow. It grew with incredible swiftness; a tongue of flame lashed out of a loft opening, the windows were like ruby eyes. All that straw and loose hay seemed to catch at once and to set up a small explosion that tore the great door from its runway; the shadows of the yard were dissolved.

“Under the spot!” yelled Indigo. “Now ain’t that fine! Come on—we’re targets right now! Tear that damn’ house offen its foundations!”

Joe galloped over the slippery earth to come abreast his enraged, embattled partner. The rest of the besiegers closed upon the house in a long and irregular line. Indigo, whose every instinct was fashioned for a moment like this, launched a shrill yell at them. “Buck into it—tackle it all sides. Some o’ you buzzards flap yore wings up the porch posts. Keep ‘em busy—bust the windows—ram down the front door. Eeeyip! I never did like this mess, but I aim to get my money’s worth now.”

THE barn walls were shot with red streaks; the tinder-dry rafters inside began to snap and crash. There was a vast droning of air rushing through the open mouth of the place and a snoring of flames high against the roof. That sharp snapping sounded a great deal like gunshots to Joe; and when a jet of mud sprang out of the ground and plastered his cheeks he understood his ears hadn’t been playing him tricks. Nuggins had his men posted at every available aperture on this side of the house. One of the party beside him weaved like a drunk and pitched headlong in the muck, rolling

over and over. Joe and Indigo and Bristow arrived at the caved-in rear door of the house at the same moment and threw themselves out of range. Flat in the mud they felt the sudden explosion inside. The trap had sprung before the quarry entered its jaws.

“Now,” grunted Joe. All three of them hooked their guns around the side posts and raked the interior. Diversion. “Now,” repeated Joe. The three rose and plunged inside, broke apart and hurled themselves onward across the floor. From the corner of his eye, Joe saw Indigo bent far over, feet planted wide, throwing shot after shot into some black corner. The little man was at the peak of his fighting capacity. But Bristow had either fallen or gone on into the main room. As for himself, Joe rammed a table and felt his feet come from under him, locked around by a pair of arms. In falling, he turned and doubled. His gun laid along solid flesh, the grip on his legs relaxed; his third twist brought him across the man’s body and he smashed his gun barrel a second time upon the other. That fight was over. Joe ripped the assailant’s revolver free and crawled out to open space.

The blazing barn sent its light into the house through every opening. Light and shadow laid side by side. Men ran all over the place; they stamped across the floor above him, they fought solitary duels from room to room. Somebody rolled down the stairway, taking a part of the railing with him. Indigo’s shrill cry sounded out of a remote corner and Joe, wiping blood from his nose, knew that nothing but wreckage lay along his partner’s trail. As for himself, he got up and hurried into the main room. The house was crowded with attacker and attacked and the semi-darkness was all in favor of Nuggins’s smaller party. He ran to the fireplace, kicking the logs to fresh flame. He circled the walls, striking a match at each wick. A shot splintered the floor at his feet; whirling, he swept the corners, and saw nothing. Either the shot was a stray or else somebody hung around a corner, out of sight. Somehow, the fighters avoided this main room. They were advancing and retreating to distant crooks and crannies. Joe edged toward the front of the room, attention divided between two possible coverts. The door leading into the dining-room struck him as being open to inspection and he trained his gun upon it, walking in an arc that would give him a better view. Somebody shouted. Crowheart Ames plunged through that door, hatless, wild-eyed.

“Where they at? Where’s Dead Card Johnny—Nuggins?”

JOE studied the man narrowly. It seemed to him this precipitous entrance had been badly faked. “What side are you fightin’ on, Mister Ames?”

The sheriff dropped his gun, glowering at Joe. “It ain’t my place to do no fightin’. If I plug a few shots at Nuggins it’s all right, because he’s in wrong. But it don’t help a law officer none to get tangled in a private war. I’m out of it right now.”

“Still playin’ both ends against the middle, Mister Ames?”

“Yuh know too much!” cried the sheriff. “I’d advise yuh to keep yore mouth shut. It’ll pay yuh. This is a big county to get lost in.”

“Next time you want to take a pot shot at me,” said Joe, “get a little farther away or I’ll drop you.”

The echo of fighting grew smaller. Men were collecting in adjoining rooms, checking up. There was a scuffle upstairs and an exchange of shots out in the yard. Joe heard a faint sound come through the door beside the fireplace, in that room whence Rube Mamerock had taken the girl earlier in the evening. He stepped over and threw the door open. Crowheart Ames drew a great breath, as if to shout. Joe turned and checked it with a single glance. A lamp sat on a table of that room and two men stood face to face across the light—Dead Card John and Praygood Nuggins, each with his hands clamped against the table’s edge, each bending forward.



“Shut the door, please,” droned Dead Card John, never moving his eyes.

Joe quietly closed it. Crowheart Ames looked around him wildly and Joe saw the sudden sweat breaking through the sheriff’s fat jowls. Men came down the stairs and in from the night and out of the dining-room. Nuggins’s partisans had been corralled, beaten and bereft of their weapons. Bristow appeared from the outside, soaking wet. And he looked to Joe.

“Where’s Dead Card John?”

Joe inclined his head toward the back room. Bristow started toward it, but stopped at Joe’s warning shake of his head. “Nuggins is there also.”

The sheriff began to swear. “I ain’t goin’ to

stand here—” His whole body shook. Two shots exploded behind the door, a splinter rose from the paneling; and then the crowd, dead still, heard one more shot. But there was no other hole in the paneling. Boots struck the door, it opened; Dead Card John walked out, eyes brilliant against his white skin.

“The gentleman is dead.”

BRISTOW nodded as if it were a matter of course, and not particularly important. He began checking over the prisoners. “You boys have caused a hell of a mess. Maybe you had an honest doubt about Rube’s will. I’d be the last man to hold that against you. But when you knew we old-timers decided to throw in with Dead Card John, you ought to’ve had sense enough to figure the fight was over. You didn’t. You spilled blood. You played with Nuggins, knowin’ damn’ well what Nuggins aimed to do. All right. Now yo’re all goin’ to the jug and let Terese County think about it. Ames—rope these fellows up and watch ‘em!”

The sheriff rose. “Listen—”

Bristow exploded. “By Judas, don’t stand there and argue! Yo’re skatin’ on thin ice right now. We got a mind to bust you. Do as yo’re told and do it sudden.”

Ames said nothing more. His forefinger tolled off a few men to help him. A man, quicker minded than the others, appeared from the night with a bunch of ropes and tossed them to willing hands. Bristow looked thoughtfully at Joe, seeming to debate over a particularly hard question.

“Where’s the girl?”

“Upstairs,” said a puncher.

Bristow turned and went up.

Indigo limped in from outside, water pouring out of him at every step. The fighting fervor was gone and he looked like some bantam rooster that had been doused with the water bucket. Gloom wreathed itself on his thin cheeks. He was a figure of suspicion and despair. And without a word he passed into the dining-room and began occupying himself with a crock of beans. Joe started to follow, then swung back with narrowing eyes. Ames returned from his trip, holding a rifle in his hands.

“Where did you steal that, Mister Ames?”

The sheriff had been beaten badly and there was nothing but sullen resentment in him. “I’ll take no lip offen you, stranger. It’s my own rifle.”

“Yeah?” drawled Joe. “What kind of a rifle?

Looks like I saw somebody else usin’ that tonight.”

THE sheriff refused to answer. An adjoining puncher spoke for him. “It’s his gun, all right, stranger. Nobody but him has got a Krag.”

Joe squared his shoulders, the pleasantries fading from his blue eyes. The crowd, puzzled by the scene, gave Joe a curious attention. Indigo heard his partner talking and, from the tone Joe used, he knew trouble to be in the air. Spurning the bean crock he crossed to his partner’s side. Joe pointed at the sheriff’s gun. “He says it’s his gun, and that he’s always owned it. I been furnished with the further information that he’s about the only gent around Terese usin’ a Krag.”

“What about it?” growled Ames, frowning. He was angry and nervous and ill at ease.

Joe put thumb and forefinger in his vest pocket. “Maybe that explains a mystery I figgered wouldn’t ever come to light. Me and my partner was up at Sam Trago’s shanty yesterday and we ran across the spot where he’d been ambushed. And we found this shell.” He pulled it out and held it up for inspection. And he added, very quietly, “It’s a Krag shell.”

It was a tribute to Joe’s power that, as he threw the shell to the floor, no single man stooped to verify it. Dead Card John jumped away from the fireplace, reaching for his armpit. “Stop that!” warned Joe, and put himself between the man and Ames. Ames dropped the rifle; his arm fell to his gun and ripped upward. The crowd stood rooted, failing to catch the speed of the play. But Joe was smiling in the face of the sheriff’s revolver; smiling with his lips pressed together and his blue eyes flickering queerly. He had matched the sheriff’s draw. So they stood, deadlocked and a bare three yards apart. Ames had taken a step backward, putting himself clear of the crowd.

“Yuh been wantin’ action, stranger,” he shouted. “Now come and get it! Terese ain’t big enough for you and me. Yuh lie about that shell. I never was near Trago’s shanty that day.”

“Another lie!” broke in Dead Card John coldly.

“I been wantin’ to know what the state o’ yore nerve was,” mused Joe. “Ever since I saw you in the saloon, I been wantin’ to know it. Ames, yo’re yella. Go on and pull the trigger. Take a chance. Stand up there—don’t get a kink in yore back!”

“It’s yore last play,” muttered Ames. His grotesque face was warped, the chin so far forward

that the upper lip dropped down upon the nether teeth. Sweat trickled down the fat curve of his cheeks and made a glistening pool in the blue stubble on his chin.

“What’s the matter with yore back? Starch all gone out of it? I’m countin’ five, Ames. If yore gun don’t drop by then—one, and two, and three—”

AMES’S arm fell swiftly. A weird and strangled yell left his throat; turning, he clawed for the door. At that the crowd broke and in the ensuing jam Joe saw the sheriff go down. He holstered his weapon, sighing as if he were tired.

“I wasn’t so doggoned sure about him bein’ yellow,” he murmured. “But he’ll hang.”

Bristow came down the stairway with Ray Chasteen. And when Joe saw her looking toward Dead Card John, he retreated into the dining-room, pulling Indigo after him. “What’s matter now?” grumbled the small partner.

Joe shook his head, taking a final glance at the scene. The girl ran across the room and threw her arms around Dead Card John; and he heard her say, “Dad!” He shook his head, swearing softly at his weakness, and when he looked again he found Dead Card John nothing more than a man after all. Dead Card John was crying.

“Come away, Indigo. The party’s over. Rube put on a good fandango. He’d sure be pleased to know how much of a success it was. Come on, Indigo.”

“What the hell—out in the rain again?”

“He said he wanted to see me at daylight,” replied Joe, ducking through the rear door. “But I’m runnin’ away from him. Don’t want to see him. It’s daylight, ain’t it?”

The barn was a red skeleton that illumined all the island. Gray dawn broke along the sullen eastern rim. And the rain came down steadily. They got their horses out of the shed—whence the animals had drifted since last used—and turned past the barn and bunkhouse toward the east end of the island.

“Yuh can’t cross this water,” objected Indigo.

“Got to. Indigo, I’d rather drown than meet Dead Card John. Yeah, I would. It don’t look so

bad by light. Let’s try the old channel. I see a trail up the bluff, once we ford the water.”

“It don’t make no difference to me. I’m as wet as I ever could be. There’s a shaller spot.”

They stood a moment on the edge, watching the current curling over the gravel. At best, it was a difficult crossing even with the firelight of the barn to guide them. Joe urged his horse into it and kicked his feet out of the stirrups. Twenty minutes later the two of them poised on the bluff and looked back, downward upon the Ox Bow. They saw men moving restlessly around the yard; they heard a gun’s report.

“Lookin’ for us, I bet,” said Indigo. “What makes yuh so afraid of meetin’ that jasper?”

“Bristow told her what I told him. Dead Card John is her daddy. Met him in Abilene once. She’ll forgive him. No matter how bad he’s been she’ll forgive him. And don’t you think he won’t run that outfit smooth. The man’s had his punishment. It wouldn’t be in a woman’s heart to quit him now.”

“Well, what’re you afraid of then?”

JOE smiled. “He wanted to kill me once for tellin’. Right now I reckon he wants to thank me. He ain’t a man that’s had much practice in showin’ gratitude. He’d make a terrible botch of it, Indigo. So we’re relievin’ him of the trouble.”

Indigo swore a while. They turned east again and rode toward Terese. The gray morning dawned. Joe shook his head. “Indigo, it’s winter. We’ve got to figure about holin’ up.”

“Yeah,” said Indigo, not meeting his partner’s eyes. “Tell you what. We’ll eat and take a wink in Terese. Then we’ll ride south and think on it with some mature judgment. And we’ll finally decide what to do when we get to the next sizable town.”

“Agreed.”

Indigo muttered something to himself. He had seen a map of the country the previous night and he knew what Joe didn’t yet know. The next sizeable town south of Terese was a full hundred miles. That was staving off difficulty for quite a few days.

So, silently, they joggled toward Terese in the driving rain.