



*The men of three hostile range outfits
blizzard-bound—and a murderer among
them.*

BLIZZARD CAMP

By ERNEST HAYCOX

Author of "Man Hunt," "In Answer to Summons," etc.

I

ON THE third day of his confinement in the old line-riders' hut, Tom Darrah looked at the sky and decided reluctantly to chance a run for Arrowhead. The driving Easter had stopped sometime during the night and the ensuing calm was profound and brittle—not the calm following a blown-out blizzard but rather that sort of a sullen recess auguring worse to come. There was no feel in the air of the bland chinook which erases and melts the effects of the harsher winds; there was, in fact, nothing to indicate change. Two feet of dry, packed snow lay along the ridge and trimmed the pine boughs. A slate-gray sky pressed its ceiling down within a hundred yards of the ground. The footing, he knew, would be bad and the travel slow. Nevertheless, Tom Darrah decided to make the try. So he saddled, tied his tarp roll to the cantle thongs

and started out. Crossing three lesser ridges, he fell into the flats of the Arrowhead and was around five miles from the cabin when the worst of his fears were realized. The snow began falling again, softly bellying down. A clap of wind rushed into the vacuum of stillness. Inside of half an hour the full tempest was upon him, howling like a thousand mongrel packs.

Arrowhead was east and out of that east rose a rushing, screaming element he could not fight. There came a time when his horse, stout and willing, was able only to march in its former tracks; as for Tom Darrah, he could not face the knives of that hurling blast. For man and beast Arrowhead became an impossibility. Turning to northward, Darrah tried a tangential advance. In that direction, about three miles, an abandoned mining camp, Sumpter Gulch, butted against the hills and furnished the shelter he had to have rather soon.

“An hour of this,” he said casually to himself, “is about the outside limit. Sumpter Gulch better be where I think it is.”

It was a canny remark, for he had fought blizzards long enough to realize how greatly they increased the probabilities of error. All the landmarks were gone. Sky and horizon ceased to be. It was a world suffocated and drowned out; and there actually seemed to be no free space. The snow didn't strike the earth but ran parallel to it in ever-thickening substance, and all this while the cataclysmic wind beat the pony on its flank and drove it off the true course. Great solid clouds were ripped up by that wind and rolled against Darrah, tipping him in the saddle, smothering him. The grayness of the morning deepened, the rumble and whine and clapped-out reports increased. Now and then Darrah essayed to correct his course—deliberately setting himself little sums in arithmetic to think out, asking himself simple questions. Storms like this one did things to a man, warped the mind and dulled it; in some respects it was like the heat craze. Meanwhile he felt the inward creep of the cold. Heavy as was his buffalo coat and his ear-lapped cap, a slow paralysis struck his extremities and worked back. The bandanna raised over his mouth was quite stiff. Fringes of ice drooped from his brows and lashes. Lids three quarters closed, he had only a narrow vision of a world revolving like a wheel.

“One—two—three—four—five,” he said to himself. “And five and five make ten. Pony, you dam' fool, quit drifting on me.”

SUDDENLY, like some island in an empty ocean, a scrub pine loomed dead the fore. Instinctively the pony aimed at this and got on its lee side and halted behind a shelter that was no shelter at all. Tom Darrah beat his arms across his chest, rapidly calculating. “I'm sliding over to the timber, or this is the lone tree outside, of Sumpter Gulch. Or it might not be either. Maybe I'm goin' backwards. No, that can't be right. The wind's dead in the east. Sumpter should be less than a mile forward. Go on, pony.”

The horse, decidedly reluctant, bucked the drifts, its hoofs rising like the pads of a dog. Bent over in the saddle, Darrah saw a small dark object being kicked up by one of those hoofs. It had been at the base of the tree, but the wind took it and threw it twenty feet before it lodged in the snow

again. Riding that way, Darrah bent over to the uplifted surface, got the object and held it unobserved a moment while he fought the pony into the slanting blast. When he looked down his distorted vision got only a blur and it was some moments before he could focus his vision on what he held, a woman's fur-lined gauntlet stiffly frozen.

In weather such as this was there could be only one thing to surmise and only one reaction. Darrah turned the pony toward the tree, literally pushing the beast a hundred yards into the teeth of the incredibly bitter blizzard. Afterwards he wheeled and drifted on an exploring circle, finding nothing. The second time he made his circle the tree stood very dim on his right hand and presently he lost it. By now he was considerably downwind, bowled along like a piece of debris. Struggling back, he could not lift that tree again. Once more dragging the area—without luck—he discovered he could never repeat the maneuver a fourth time. The pony refused to face the wind. It stood still, stubborn and exhausted.

“If she's out here,” Darrah said to himself, “she's dead and buried. May have floated miles from the tree.” Hard as the thought was, he could do nothing more about it; and squaring himself at the uncertain north, he pressed on.

It was the horse that discovered the abandoned camp first. Knocking along the drift with a stumbling discouragement, the beast flung up its head and whinnied and thereafter showed a surprising remnant of strength. Darrah let the reins go slack. Ten minutes later the huddled line of Sumpter's old buildings made a phantom appearance through the storm mists and he was in that camp's single street before he quite had oriented himself. The pony, surer of judgment, struggled against a head-high bank of snow and bucked a trail through it, to stop against the closed doors of a deserted stable. Darrah got immediately down, kicked open a smaller doorway beside the large ones and went in. The pony followed close at his heels, eager as a human to be out of the torture. Along the clammy darkness of the stable rose the sound of other horses stamping and shifting.

“So,” grunted Darrah, mildly surprised. “I'm not the only one caught in this blow.”

HIS eyes burned, his cheeks began to ache. But presently the blankness before him coagulated to shapes and silhouettes. Going along the line of

stalls he found an empty space near the end. He put his pony there, unsaddled, threw the saddle blanket over the beast for whatever warmth it would afford; and then, curious about his neighbors, he casually cruised the stalls. He counted twenty-four horses, all dry enough to have been stabled a considerable time. More closely investigating, he found some of them branded Lazy JT—which caused him to wonder what Lewes DeSpain's outfit was doing so far from home. Nearby, he ran into the Circle Arrow iron and he guessed that this bunch had been out on a winter inspection. Then he brought up in front of a horse with narrowing, quickened attention. The Slash N on that rump made him whistle softly.

"Nig Sommers. What kind of company have we got collected out of this blizzard?"

The question was worth an answer—for Sommers and Sommers' men were notorious. Going to the door, Tom Darrah pushed his way into the stinging slash of the storm and stood three quarters buried in the drift a moment, surveying the buildings across the street. Necessity, he reflected, made strange bedfellows. Under ordinary conditions these three outfits could not be got together in the same town and it took a powerful motive to put Sommers within gun distance of any ranch crew. Directly opposite he saw light leaping through the windows of what used to be Sumpter's hotel, and without further reflection he ploughed a trail to it and went in.

Sudden heat struck him; this and the smell of drying clothes. On the far side of the lobby a great fireplace was banked high with blazing wood. In front of it stood eight men, all facing him with a show of deep interest. He recognized the Circle Arrow crew and more particularly the slim and yellow-headed young foreman, Lonzo Hardesty, who confronted him with a kind of indifferent alertness. At the moment he failed to remark the oddity of this attitude.

"Move over, Lonzo," said Darrah. "I damned near didn't make this camp."

LONZO HARDESTY'S answer was somewhat noncommittal. "Glad to see you, Tom. Don't come near this heat till you thaw out. You look nipped."

Darrah stripped off his outer clothes and stepped away from the puddling water around his feet. He chafed his ears vigorously. "How long you been

here, boys?"

"This is our third day," grunted Lonzo Hardesty. "We were up in the hills lookin' after beaver tails when the Easter come. Don't look now like we'll ever get clear of this dam' place. Hate to think of the amount of frozen beef lyin' around this country."

Darrah chuckled. "I observe you got company."

"What?" said Hardesty, a little sharp with the question. Then he said, "Oh, sure. You mean Lazy JT and Nig Sommers. Ahuh. JT boys are campin' in the old jail office. Sommers—him and six other of his mugs—took to the saloon."

"A friendly gatherin'," drawled Darrah.

"We'll get along—apart," muttered Hardesty.

"Who's in charge of the Lazy JT lads?"

"Eric Bull."

Darrah showed a little surprise. "Lewes DeSpain always used to ride these winter tours with his men. He ain't along this time?"

"No," said Hardesty.

Something about that answer brought Darrah's attention strictly back to Hardesty. It had been a barren, laconic answer and it hit the silence of the room flatly. It occurred to him now something was wrong. These men were not at ease. Distinctly they had an edge to their tempers. They were taut as fiddle strings. Hardesty remained still in his tracks, the lines of his cheeks drawn tight and his mouth dipped at the corners. He said "No" again with a more metallic inflection and kept his sober eyes on Darrah. It came to Darrah that the group was touched by the weather, turned cranky by close confinement. Yet that hardly explained the touch of actual unfriendliness demonstrated toward him. He had it on his mind to ask another question and then decided against it. Curiosity had a place and a time, neither of which items seemed now favoring. So he moved nearer the fire and kept his mouth closed. Hardesty wheeled, speaking.

"Where've you been, Tom?"

"Was over at The Pass for a month. Started for Arrowhead five days back and got caught in one of your old line cabins when the blow came on first time. This morning I figured I'd try again. I was lucky gettin' here. No doubt of that."

"When was you at that line cabin?" rapped out Hardesty.

"All of the last three days," answered Darrah, surprised at Hardesty's tone.

"Then you came straight here? Which way did

you come here?"

"Out into the flats," said Darrah. "What's the palaver about?"

"Nothing," grunted Hardesty and fell silent.

"So you're just talkin' to make sound?" said Darrah skeptically.

"This ain't no time for humor," muttered Hardesty, rough and curt.

"If there's any humor around here," pointed out Darrah, now irritated, "you're furnishing same. What's biting you?"

THE front door came open and slammed violently against the inner wall. Eric Bull, the Lazy JT foreman, stamped in with nine or ten of his outfit filing behind him. Looking sidewise for a reaction, Darrah saw the Circle Arrow crew stiffen and turn more taciturn. Hardesty was rolling a cigarette at that moment, but his fingers stopped moving,

"Hello, Eric," drawled Darrah.

"Thought it was you that came in," said Eric Bull truculently.

"So you came to see."

"So I came to see," repeated the JT man and squared himself toward the fire. It was a characteristic gesture on his part; he always put his blocky body definitely against those with whom he talked. No taller than the slim Lonzo Hardesty, he was probably twice as broad and twice as heavy. He had a short bull neck supporting a heavy head and uncompromising features as ruddy as wine. A high-arched nose swooped down toward a stubborn chin that came out to meet it and this conformation of bone and muscle always made him appear on the verge of biting something. He said gruffly, "Where'd you come from?"

"From a line cabin about eight miles back in the hills."

"That so? How long was you there?"

The questions, mimicking those earlier asked by Hardesty, stirred a sudden suspicion in Darrah's mind. But he answered readily, "About three days."

"Anybody with you?"

"Nope. Alone."

"Been ramming the country before that?"

"Nope. Came from The Pass."

Eric Bull put his head forward, seeming more and more truculent. "See anybody on your way here? Anybody or anything?"

"Nope," said Darrah. "And that's the third

strike. You're out."

"Maybe I am and maybe I ain't," growled Eric Bull. He swung toward Hardesty. "You've said anything to him?"

"No," said Hardesty, plainly angered. "Go on back to your own joint and take your crew also."

"When I get damned good and ready," stated Bull, shaking his shoulders. "I'm holding a hand in this game."

"Nobody's dealt me anything yet," put in Darrah. "When you fellows get finished with the dog fight let me know. Anything to eat around here?"

Hardesty nodded toward the rear. "We dragged in a steer. Help yourself."

Darrah tramped the width of the room, pushed a swinging door ahead of him and entered a kitchen. Circle Arrow had dumped its chuck wagon outfit here, fired up the ancient range, and made some shift at cooking. A camp coffee pot gurgled on the stove and there was a cold side of beef sitting on a nearby table. Darrah got a cup and poured himself a drink. He carved off a piece of the beef. Leaning against the table he ate this sketchy snack with a show of abstraction. Men were talking in the lobby, talking straight from the shoulder; but he heard none of it plain enough. Words rose and fell in a bickering, argumentative disharmony. The front door rattled and cold streamers of air slid into the kitchen. Somebody else tramped noisily over the lobby floor. The talk stopped for a little while, then went on again, more surly and acrid than before. Darrah poured himself another tin of coffee and felt grateful for its scalding strength.

"These outfits," he thought, "never did get along and never will. Right now they got to be neighbors and they don't like it. But what was that hint Bull dropped about Hardesty tellin' me something?"

Water dripped along his leg. Looking down he saw that his coat pocket was half filled with slush and he reached in to draw out the woman's gauntlet. Unthinkingly, he had stuffed it there.

"Good Lord," he muttered, "here's something else to think about." And putting aside the tin cup he wrung the glove free of the melting snow. Going over to the stove, he lifted a lid so that the firelight would shine up; and he slowly turned back the rim of the glove. But there was no name on it—and no such initialing as a man might make to identify his property. Darrah's scowl of interest deepened.

"Nothing to be done about it," he said very

quietly. "If she's out there she's dead. But supposin' she ain't out there. Where else would she be?"

HE FOLDED the glove, put it back in his pocket. The attentive speculation of his eyes brightened. And he repeated to himself, "Where would she be?" It was a worrying weight that deadlocked his mind. He held the puzzle; one or more of these twenty-odd men in Sumpter Gulch ought to know the answer to that puzzle. All of them had been out along the ridges and in the flats during the preceding three days. That woman would have been sighted—it was only logical that she had been seen somewhere by the roving outfits. This being the case it was up to him to reveal the story of the glove.

Yet a growing caution stayed the half-formed decision. Thinking over the situation with a deeper, harder concentration, he began to perceive that something more than average antagonism rode the parties now caught in Sumpter. The affair had odd angles; such small bits of information and evidence as he had gathered made a disjointed pattern. "Something bothers 'em," he muttered, more and more convinced. His auspicious thoughts kept returning to the queries Hardesty and Bull had thrown at him. Both men had wanted the same information; both of them, brushing aside lesser talk, had tried to dig specific facts out of him. What was it they were so anxious to discover?

He replaced the stove lid, stood idle a moment; trying to form the shapeless warning all this while moving through his head. Hardesty's voice struck above the pounding and slatting of the storm. "Darrah—come in here!"

Tom Darrah suddenly shook his head. "The less said the better, for a little while longer," he decided silently. Then he went back to the lobby.

He saw immediately that the crowd had grown. Hardesty's Circle Arrow people maintained their positions nearest the fire. Along a side wall the Lazy JT hands had consciously grouped themselves behind the blocky figure of Eric Bull. But Darrah gave these two parties only a half glance. For Nig Sommers had arrived with his men and it was toward these seven unsavory characters Darrah bent his freshened interest. They were in a farther corner of the room, thus completing the watchful, trustless triangular grouping of outfits. Born in this country, Darrah knew all about those seven

renegades and his own reaction was a slow constriction of nerve and muscle; the record of Sommers and his riders was unpleasant.

"Where you been?" challenged Sommers in a queer, chest-less voice. The man stood on the balls of his feet, swayed a little forward as if ready for the unexpected. He was tall, taller than any other in the room. But the rest of his body didn't match its height; awkward arms hung abnormally long beside the gaunt and shackling frame, and his head, atop a lank neck, was small and forward sloping. Sun and wind had darkened him, yet beneath the surface coloring was the added suggestion of a racial swarthinness. Two small eyes lay in recessed sockets; an insufficient chin retreated below a slack mouth which in turn seemed inadequate for the long and flattened nose that pointed and dominated the whole evil-arranged face. The eyes, of a muddy coloring, had the intent fixity common to a predatory animal startled by some odd sound.

"I've spread my yarn twice," said Darrah calmly. "And I don't think it's necessary to do so again. Leastwise not to a brush jumper such as you, Nig."

Nig Sommers' mouth went ugly. "Sing low, Darrah. You'll say and you'll do just what this crowd decides is best."

"For a man of no known reputation whatsoever," said Darrah, "you're throwin' a lot of weight. Go to hell."

Lonzo Hardesty turned on Nig Sommers, explaining with a quick patience. "He came from The Pass five days ago, got hung up in one of the Circle Arrow cabins and left it this morning, meaning to run for Arrowhead. Storm caught him on the flats. That's all, Nig."

Tom Darrah's mind closed down on this little scene with a cold, hard interest. Here was Lonzo Hardesty, an honest man working for an honest outfit—obviously trying to keep Nig Sommers in good humor. It wasn't like Hardesty. And Hardesty himself must have realized the strangeness of his explanation for he fell silent and stared from Eric Bull to Tom Darrah morosely, defiantly.

"So that's that," grunted Bull, laconic and a little skeptical.

"Darrah," said Nig Somers, "what do you know?"

"I know something's rotten around here and I'm gettin' tired of all this palaver."

Eric Bull addressed the room in general. "He

might've been in it."

Heavy silence covered the crowd and Darrah felt the whole weight of those absorbed, calculating glances. Anger began to trickle through him and he framed a reply in his head. The glove, he felt, had a share of this mystery. He was glad he had said nothing about it; and he had no intention now of telling, not until he knew more. "You can all—"

"Tell him Eric," said Lonzo Hardesty.

"Darrah," said Eric Bull, pushing his chin forward, "Lazy JT lost a boss out there in the snow. Somebody shot him a few hours after the blizzard first started—three days back. Somebody killed old Lewes DeSpain—see? That fellow is right here in this room. Couldn't have been nobody else. We're the only ones that rode the country. And, by God, we don't leave Sumpter Gulch till we find out who it was!"

II

THE silence returned, more oppressive than before. The other men made a ring around him, watching him as if they sought to pry out the thoughts running through his head. Utterly impassive, he stared back, giving them no satisfaction. And he spoke dryly to Eric Bull. "I can't cry. Lewes DeSpain deserved shootin' twenty years ago."

"Yeah?" grunted Eric Bull. "Well, that ain't the point."

"What is the point, Eric?"

"JT," said Bull, "is going to find out who killed its boss. Make no mistake on that point."

"Let the sheriff do that, if he thinks it necessary," advised Darrah, candidly. "The man's well dead. Nobody grieves. You ain't grievin' are you?"

Eric Bull's chin and nose came nearer together. "That's the trouble. If we don't find out who got him the blame will be put on the JT outfit. I don't propose to ride this country with that suspicion hangin' to me."

"Where'd you put his body?"

"Left it. Goin' to be left as is, till the sheriff can be got. Nobody is goin' to touch him. And nobody is goin' to leave Sumpter till we get the true dope."

"Suits me," said Darrah. "But you're wastin' your time nevertheless. DeSpain was a born crook. He had notches on his own gun and he never said a fair word for a livin' soul. You worked for a man,

Eric, that didn't own a friend in three hundred square miles. Why, anybody in this room had reason enough to shoot him."

"One man in this room did," interrupted Bull, doggedly. "I propose to find out who."

"Might've did it yourself," said Darrah. "He laid his tongue on you plenty." Then his attention centered on Eric Bull's increasingly flushed face. "And, by the way, who would get the ranch if DeSpain shuffled off? He had no relatives. Be the man who could handle it, who knew it. Might be you, Eric."

"Darrah," rasped the JT foreman, "that's enough outta you!"

"Or it might be Lonzo," went on Darrah evenly. "Circle Arrow always did fight DeSpain."

HARDESTY never said a word, only showed an increase of suppressed anger. Nig Sommers laughed ironically. "That ain't so far from the truth either."

"Yes?" put in Darrah, swinging toward the outlaw. "Well, what prevents you from bein' the killer? It's right down your alley."

"By God," yelled Sommers, of a sudden black, "I won't take that from you!"

"Wait a minute—wait a minute," pleaded Lonzo Hardesty. "We've threshed this out before. Might as well do it again, seeing Darrah's come into the business. All right. Tonight after supper. It's damned near noon now."

Said Bull suspiciously, "You act funny to me, Lonzo. You keep wantin' to stall along."

"Tonight," repeated Hardesty.

"Nobody is goin' to pin this scrape on me," threatened Nig Sommers. "I'll be around on the dot." Motioning his men to follow, he tramped out of the lobby. Eric Bull teetered on his heels, glumly thoughtful. Then he said, "All right," and followed the retreating Sommers. The JT crew milled into the storm. Somebody slammed the door, leaving Darrah alone with the Circle Arrow bunch.

"Before this is over with," he drawled, "you'll all wish you'd taken my advice."

"I'd take it now," muttered Hardesty, "if it was my say-so. Pete, get some grub fixed up."

Darrah shot a sharp question at Hardesty. "What are you afraid of, man?"

Hardesty actually flinched. He opened his mouth to answer, then closed it with a quick pressure of his lips—sulky stubbornness showing

on the strained face. One of the other Circle Arrow hands said to Darrah, "What makes you—?"

"Shut up, Tansy," ordered Hardesty.

Darrah shrugged his shoulders. "You boys have got a bad case of the jumps," he observed and went into the kitchen. Rummaging around, he found a five-gallon oil can and filled it with snow beyond the back door. Melting it on the stove, he trudged through the lobby and out to the street. Even in that short crossing the curdling blast of the storm left him shaken and miserable; it went through clothing and flesh and left an ache all along his bones, and when he got inside the stable he was shivering as from the ague. Pausing to adjust his vision for the semi-darkness, he heard a low and hurried voice stop in the middle of a word. Feet shifted. Two blurred figures moved apart and Eric Bull's blunt, challenging words struck at him.

"What the hell you doin' here?"

"You've got eyes," said Darrah dryly. The other man never spoke—seemed, in fact, to want anonymity for himself. But Darrah recognized the long, ungainly frame of Nig Sommers even in the obscure shadows. Going on, he let his pony drink the can dry. Eric Bull spoke to Sommers with an exaggerated force, "There ain't but a little straw and it's moldy. We'll split it among the brutes, even." Darrah took his tarp roll over his shoulder and walked into the hurling tempest again.

"Cookin' up somethin'," he said to himself, fighting through the drifts. "Maybe Lonzo Hardesty's got a reason to be afraid. I wish I knew what it was." Half running down the hotel porch, he wrenched the door open and stumbled through. The room was empty—all the hands moving around the kitchen and talking casually; but Darrah's eyes rose and caught one man turning out of sight on the second-story landing of the stairs. The fellow stared down and deliberately backed beyond view, though not quite quick enough to hide the plate of food he held in his hands. Lonzo Hardesty put his head through the kitchen doorway. "Come and get your chuck."

"Already had my snack," said Darrah. Riveted to the middle of the room, he listened to the footsteps of the Circle Arrow puncher above. The man obviously was trying to walk softly, but each loose board of the warped hall betrayed him as he moved on to the left end of the building and halted. A door's rusty hinges shrieked; silence held the upper quarters for a moment. Then the puncher

started back. Darrah deliberately drew the interest out of his face and strode to a chair by the fireplace. When the Circle Arrow hand came down the stairs Darrah was sitting on the small of his back, feet cocked against another chair, eyes shut. The hand dallied a moment in the room, then went to the kitchen.

Darrah remained motionless for perhaps a minute, thinking, "More mystery—who's the invalid that needs grub brought to him?" Opening his eyes, he found the kitchen door closed and thereafter he rose abruptly, crossed the room and took the stairs two steps at a time. Rounding into the upper hall, he halted briefly to orient himself and to recollect which way the Circle Arrow hand had gone. There were, he saw, four doors on either side of the hall's left wing. All of them closed. Yet, irresolutely considering this, he picked up the tapping sound of a shoe—a sort of restless rhythm made by somebody beyond the third door on the right hand series of rooms. Gently advancing to that door, he placed his ear against it and got the sound more distinctly. There was no longer any doubt. He thought slowly, "May be lettin' myself in for something, but it will be an answer to one question anyhow." Then he turned the knob and pushed himself into the bedroom.

A woman—a girl, rather—sat up to a small table in the center of the room eating the meal brought her by the Circle Arrow puncher. She was swathed in blankets from waist to foot and a man's leather jacket cloaked her small, square shoulders. For the briefest of moments she smiled at Darrah and her head, massed with glowing copper hair, nodded slightly. But that smile fled when second sight found a man she had never before seen. Her chin lifted sharply and a quick breath fell out of her. "Who are you?" she said peremptorily.

IT TOOK Darrah completely aback. Even though some faint hint of such a situation as this had been in one small corner of his head it took him momentarily off his guard and he only stood and stared, oddly thinking that he had never met her before and that she made a striking, satisfying picture.

"You're not one of Lonzo Hardesty's men?" she said, alert and more poised now.

"No. My name's Darrah."

"Tom Darrah?"

"How would you know about that?" asked

Darrah, curious.

"I have heard of you," said the girl. It seemed to him she sat more relaxed and relieved. In any event the quite dark eyes lost part of their alertness and the angles at each lip corner dissolved. Her face was symmetrical, finely modeled; a cool reliance lay on it and a sort of thoughtful sobriety.

"I thought," pondered Darrah, "I knew everybody in this country."

"I'm new. I came out here four months ago to prove up a homestead at the foot of the ridge—where Hondo creek comes into the flats."

"Alone?"

"Yes," said the girl, and added, "My name is Anita Goodridge."

"What could you do, alone?" asked Darrah, in a manner that more or less answered the question.

"Does it matter?" parried the girl. "I have been happy, which is more than I could say four months ago."

Below, in the lobby Lonzo Hardesty's voice rapped out an impatient, "Darrah—where are you?" Darrah shifted, knowing the showdown wasn't far off. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the gauntlet, holding it toward her.

"Is this yours?"

Her face changed again. Fear came distinctly into it, the rose-colored cheeks whitened. She made a gesture toward the gauntlet and then laced both hands together until the knuckles turned pale. "Yes," she whispered. "Where—where did you find it?"

Hardesty shouted, "Darrah!" And then he started up the stairs riotously. Darrah laid the gauntlet in the girl's lap, saying quickly, "Never mind. Get it out of sight."

She whipped the gauntlet under the fold of blankets and somehow her eyes began to show warmth. "That's the kind of a man," she said swiftly, "I heard you were! Darrah—please—stay around here if you can! I'm not sure—not sure of anybody!"

DARRAH felt that she had something more on her mind. But there was no time for it. Lonzo Hardesty flung himself along the hall, cursing; and he lunged through the bedroom doorway and spat out a brittle order. "Stand fast! Damn you—you're a born meddler, Darrah! Who told you to come up here?"

"Easy, easy," warned Darrah, slowly pivoting to

face Hardesty. He found himself covered and, coolly silent, he wondered what profound disturbance could so put this Circle Arrow riding-boss completely out of character. Hardesty had always been an even-styled man, a friend of a rather close sort. But the gun was risen and aimed and Hardesty's slim cheeks were haggard with the combination of rage and worry.

"So this is what troubled you?" asked Darrah.

"I wish you'd lost your way out in the Easter!" cried Hardesty. Other men were climbing the stairs and coming down the hall. The bedroom doorway was presently blocked. Circle Arrow looked forebodingly in and one man said, "You want help on this, Lonzo?"

"I'll handle it all right," grated Hardesty. "I ought to've known better. You never let well enough alone, Tom. Always pryin' around and askin' fool questions. Well, this time is just where you forget what you discovered and keep your damned mouth shut!"

Darrah grinned a little, which didn't help Hardesty's temper. "This is a mighty cold place," Darrah observed, "to put a lady. Ain't there any stoves up here?"

"No," grunted Hardesty. "And never mind. Come back out of here."

"Wait a second," argued Darrah. He turned to the girl. "How long have you been in Sumpter?"

"Since the beginning of the storm. Three days."

"You came with these men?"

"They—"

"Be still," snapped Hardesty. "Look here, Anita, you got no license to put any trust in him. If there's talkin' to be done, I'll do it. Come on, Darrah."

Darrah shrugged his shoulders and went out of the room. The other Circle Arrow hands followed him down to the lobby, but Hardesty stayed behind for quite a while. Darrah took a seat by the fire, closing his eyes and listening to the beating fury of the wind outside. Only a little past noon, the light of the day was almost gone. The windows were gray rectangles and the fire on the hearth made it seem like actual night. Hardesty's words arrived from the upper hall rather clearly, followed by a quick, emphatic exclamation on the part of the girl. A door slammed. The foreman descended and walked to the fireplace. When Darrah opened his eyes he found Hardesty watching him with scowling intensity.

"I suppose we better iron this out," grunted

Hardesty. "But I don't like it. Not even if it's you. Why didn't you keep your confounded nose clear of this?"

"Usually," drawled Darrah, "you're a pretty even and substantial citizen, Lonzo. Right now you don't show a lick of sense. Why be afraid of me?"

"I've handled this mess so far," said Hardesty, "and I'll continue to handle it. I don't trust anybody. If you want to know what I'm afraid of, I'll tell you. It's you. You're always willing to gamble. You take too many risks. I don't play cards that way. So I'm telling you plain. I'll run this show."

"Now that that's settled," said Darrah, "go ahead."

Hardesty stared at the fire grimly, collecting his thoughts. "As a matter of fact, Tom, the girl came here with us. We were coming off the ridge just as the Easter began to rip. We passed her shanty. She was pretty near out of grub and I told her she better come along to Arrowhead and stay till the worst of it was over. So she did. We got this far."

"You lie, Lonzo," was Darrah's cool retort. "I don't know whether Circle Arrow or the girl got to Sumpter first—but you didn't come together."

Hardesty didn't answer, but Darrah saw something in the man's eyes he never had seen before. It was an emotion pretty close to the edge of homicidal violence. Even the rest of the Circle Arrow crew caught that. And one of them said, "Easy, Lonzo. Tom Darrah's straight. Don't be a dummy."

"All right," growled Hardesty. "The girl was here first. We came along about a half hour after that. DeSpain's men racked up just a little later—telling us DeSpain was dead. Nig Sommers didn't show till that night."

"You're thinking to protect the girl," mused Darrah. "What makes you think she did it?"

"I don't know who did it," Hardesty rapped out. "And I don't care. But I had her hide when Eric Bull and his bunch hove in. That DeSpain outfit is made up of tough nuts. It's the only kind DeSpain hired—the only kind that'd work for him. Well, I don't propose to let them bear down on the girl. Figure it out for yourself. What would they think if they saw her here? Why—that something damned funny caused it."

"Anything else?" suggested Darrah quietly.

Hardesty's glance narrowed on Darrah. Points of odd and glinting light showed in his eyes.

"Yeah," he muttered. "She ain't safe. Never mind the murder for a minute. Disregardin' that, she ain't safe. I said DeSpain's outfit was tough. Nig Sommers is a wolf and so are his men. Well?"

"I never knew a decent woman in this country who was ever insulted."

"How would they know she was decent?" muttered Hardesty. "There's been talk about her livin' up on the ridge alone. Also, she's with us. If they find that out they'll draw some wrong conclusions. I tell you straight, Tom, I ain't so much afraid of their pinnin' the killin' on her as I am of the other thing."

"When you found her here," questioned Darrah, "did she tell you what she'd been doing out in the blizzard?"

"I didn't ask," was Hardesty's instant response. "And I don't want to know."

"Good boy," mused Darrah. He got out his tobacco and rolled a smoke, face scowling over the job. He struck a match, eyes hard and bright. "I can see something else here pretty plain."

"What's that?" demanded Hardesty, displaying a trace of belligerence. Noting the manner, Darrah reflected that this Circle Arrow foreman seemed afraid of some fact so far hidden; that the man was braced for a further revelation. He put the thought in the back of his head, meanwhile drawling on.

"If Bull and Sommers decide to play against you, they've got you hipped. Here's nine men. Ten, includin' me. But Lazy JT and the Sommers' riders count up about sixteen guns."

"Don't you suppose I've thought of that?" said Hardesty, morose at once.

"Yeah? Why did you think of it? What have they got in common against you?"

BUT Hardesty didn't answer. He swung away, restless and troubled. One of the hands dragged another log from the kitchen and pitched it on the fire. The foreman's restlessness seemed to communicate itself to the others, for a small argument arose concerning the horses and presently five of the hands left the lobby, bound for the stable. Darrah's mind worked on, endlessly involved with this tangle of fact and guess and suspicion. Sprawled comfortably in his chair, the heat relaxed him and thinking turned harder; and presently he lifted himself abruptly and found he had been sleeping. When he looked at his watch he found it was beyond four. The windows were black

and the wind was cutting the eaves of the house with an increased roar and report. Somewhat ashamed of himself he went to the kitchen, located the bucket and brought it back to the lobby where he scraped half a dozen loose stones out of the fire's bed. In the bucket they made a decent heat; and with his improvised stove he started up the stairs. Hardesty's challenge immediately caught him.

"Here—where you going?"

"If you're afraid I'll hear something I shouldn't, come along," grunted Darrah.

Hardesty started for the stairs, but a change of mind turned him back a moment later. He said roughly, "Oh, all right." Darrah went on, cruised the hall and tapped lightly on the door. He heard the girl's voice, very small and shaky, call him in.

When he entered, he had some difficulty in seeing her—the place was that dark. And it was bitterly cold, draughts of wind knifing through the warped boards. She moved toward him, blankets about her shoulders. "Who is it?"

"Me," said Darrah. "Sit in the chair."

"I don't think I can stand this much longer," said the girl.

"You won't have to," promised Darrah. "Sit down. Now put your feet beside this bucket. Blanket around it. That'll keep the heat in."

He stood back while she arranged herself; and he heard her sigh of relief—which further shamed him. "I had forgotten," she whispered, "that men were thoughtful. Thank you, Darrah."

"Men are no better than they ought to be," said Darrah. "That's why you're here."

"How do you know?"

Darrah said gently, "I know nothing. But I can guess."

"Do you want to know about that glove?"

"No."

"You're the first man," she said rather bitterly, "who hasn't wanted to take advantage of me. Anybody else would be holding that glove over me like a club."

"Don't answer this if you'd rather not. You left your cabin alone and in a hurry—because you were scared out of it?"

"Yes."

"A man rode along—and you had to run from him?"

"Yes," repeated the girl, scarcely audible.

"It was Lewes DeSpain?"

HE didn't answer directly but he saw her head slowly incline. Darrah said irritably, "Lewes DeSpain was noted for that. Had he ever bothered you before?"

"Once. I drove him away with a gun. This time the gun wasn't handy. But my horse was saddled in the shed—so I got free and rode off. He—he followed me part of the way but by then the storm was so bad he lost sight of me within a hundred yards. There we were, wandering around in it. Then—"

"No—never mind," interrupted Darrah. "You didn't kill him."

He was then to see a different side of the girl. She straightened in the chair, saying swiftly, energetically. "I might have, Darrah! I am capable of killing a man like that! I have known people of his sort before and I hate them!"

Darrah took another line of attack. "Anyhow, you got to Sumpter. You were here first. Then the Circle Arrow bunch drove in and Lonzo Hardesty found you. Did he know about it?"

"No. At least I told him nothing."

Darrah straightened. "Then how was it he hid you when JT came along?"

"He said he was afraid of my being seen by the JT crew. He said they were tough."

But Darrah, staring through the dark, shook his head as another thought occurred to him. It was odd that Hardesty should hide the girl on that excuse alone. It seemed insufficient; it seemed only a surface excuse to cover a deeper fear. "He knows you pretty well—he's seen you quite a lot?"

"Yes."

"Fact is, the man is in love with you."

"Yes."

Darrah paused, then went on slowly, quietly. "Don't answer this if it sounds inquisitive to you. Do you—?"

"No!" said the girl emphatically. "I don't feel that way toward him at all! I know he is your friend—he has told me so. But—when you go downstairs—look more carefully at him. Look at his eyes."

"I'll run along," said Darrah.

"Come here," said the girl. And when Darrah moved nearer she took his hand and held it tightly a moment. "I have heard so much about you from different people that I got to dislike you. You seemed too sure of yourself—you got into fights and out of them as if you never doubted your

strength. I guess I have been a man-hater, Darrah—with some reason. But—but I don't feel that way about you now. Other people have leaned on you for help. I'm doing it now. Someday, when this is over, I'll try to pay you back."

"I'll be riding your part of the ridge more frequent," drawled Darrah, and went out. When he descended to the lobby all the Circle Arrow crew stood by the fire, watching him with a studied attentiveness. Hardesty's cheeks were smoothed out, consciously wiped clear of emotion. But Darrah thought of the girl's warning and he looked at Hardesty's eyes; they held, he saw, a kind of expectancy. The man was bracing himself for trouble, for bad news, for something he thought was to break.

"She was blamed near froze," he said shortly. "Why in thunder didn't you think of that?"

Hardesty shrugged his shoulders, seeming relieved. Darrah walked toward the kitchen, calling over his shoulder. "Come here a second, Lonzo." And when Hardesty followed through the door and faced Darrah alone he was obviously on guard again, taut as a fiddle string.

"You're sold on her, ain't you?" inquired Darrah.

"That's none of your damned business!" snapped Hardesty, glowering. "I told you, Tom, to quit pryin'. If you don't—"

"Yeah?"

HARDESTY pointed a finger, jerking it downward with each slow word. "I'm playin' this game and will continue to do so. Don't butt in. You're in no shape to interfere. Get what I mean? Between Bull and Sommers and me, you're mighty small potatoes. If you get too curious we might get together and put the load on you. Now remember that."

"So?" said Darrah, tonelessly. "That's different some more."

"How different?" challenged Hardesty, alert and hard.

"Never mind."

Hardesty started to speak. But the lobby door opened, letting in the rush and riot of the storm. Then it slammed and men stamped across the floor toward the fire. Both Hardesty and Darrah left the kitchen—to find Nig Sommers and Eric Bull waiting for them. At that moment Darrah realized the situation had changed—for the worse. As

clearly as if they had announced it, Darrah saw they had made an agreement between themselves and were now about to put it into effect.

"Let's get down to cases," said Eric Bull, pushing his jaw forward.

III

IT WAS again Lonzo Hardesty who showed reluctance. He said irritably, "I thought we'd set the time for after eatin'."

"You're stallin'," accused Bull.

"We'll get no further than we were before," grunted Hardesty. "I'll tell you—we'd be blamed wise to agree to a closed-mouth policy on this and let it go as such. If we say nothing the sheriff won't find out anything."

Bull shook his head. "Won't do. I ain't going to be tarred with this murder. I want it pinned on the proper man."

Nig Sommers' black and lined cheeks showed a sullen amusement. "Supposin' we did agree to say nothin'. It wouldn't last. Somebody'd squall."

"If anybody did, it'd be you," rapped out Hardesty.

"Sure," agreed Sommers, cynical to the extreme.

"All right then," said Hardesty, "let 'er flicker."

Standing idle and watchful, Darrah saw that Bull and Sommers had made up a common attack. Bull slid a short glance at the outlaw and then braced himself in front of Hardesty. "Just where were you when the shootin' happened—that's what ain't quite clear to us."

Darrah fully expected Lonzo Hardesty to flare up and make a scene. Surprisingly, Hardesty did not. He returned Eric Bull's close glance and drew a long breath. "I've told you already. We were working up along the foot of the low ridge. I saw the Easter coming and decided to split the crew so that we could comb the timber and drive such scattered stock as we could find on over to Medill's Pocket where we'd put up a thirty-ton stack of meadow hay. I took the chuck wagon myself and drove across the flats, along the edge of the ridge. Was my intention to leave the wagon here in Sumpter and go back to the pocket. I did. But before I could reach Medill's pocket the blizzard busted down. I had a hell of a time gettin' the men together. We came here. That's all."

"All?" grunted Bull.

“No-o, not exactly,” amended Hardesty. “I was out there alone, downwind from the lone pine when I heard the shot. Thought it was one of the men signaling so I answered. Looked around and couldn’t see a damned thing more than fifty feet ahead of me. So I turned for the timber, got the men and paid no further heed to the shot. That’s all I know.”

“But you was alone when you heard the shot,” pointed out Eric Bull. “You admit that much. You was inside of a hundred yards of Lewes DeSpain when he was killed.”

“What of it?” said Hardesty. “I’ve laid my cards on the table. I’m clear.”

Darrah broke in, speaking to Bull. “Where were you, now that we’re on the subject?”

Eric Bull answered readily, as if his story were pat and perfect. “JT crew happened to be on top of the second ridge, travelin’ south. Lewes DeSpain pulled away from the outfit and said he’d meet us at Diamond Bar Gulley.”

“Where was he headed for?” questioned Darrah.

ERIC BULL hesitated a moment and stared at Darrah. “He went to that Goodridge girl’s cabin. Or he said he was goin’ there. When we got to the gulley he wasn’t in sight. By that time it was snowin’ to beat hell. So we come back along the flats and went up to the girl’s place. Nobody there. We came back. Stumbled mostly by accident onto DeSpain. He was layin’ on top of the snow and he hadn’t quit breathin’ more’n ten minutes.”

“You heard the shot?” asked Darrah.

“In all that wind? No.”

“But you were close enough to the spot to find him,” said Darrah.

“I said it was pure accident that we did,” grunted Bull.

“Kind of a well-timed accident, wasn’t it?” said Darrah evenly.

“Don’t mean a thing,” countered Bull. “Except for a quarter hour I was with my outfit every bit of the time.”

“Lot could happen in that many minutes,” Darrah reflected. “And it’s on record that DeSpain called you a gentleman without a legal father three weeks ago in Arrowhead.”

That went home. It hit this stocky, belligerent Eric Bull harder than Darrah imagined it would. Bull’s florid face congested with blood and the greenish blue eyes filled with fire. He lifted one

solid arm and shook it at Darrah, shouting, “I don’t want that repeated. I took it from him because he was drunk. He apologized later and I accepted it. By God, Darrah, don’t let me hear the remark from you again!”

“But it still hurts, doesn’t it?” said Darrah softly. “You didn’t forget that cussing.”

“If he’d been sober I’d killed him!” cried Bull.

“Yeah? Well, he was sober when he died, Eric. And it wasn’t very dangerous to end a grudge in weather so thick it could be cut with a knife.”

BULL suddenly realized he had said too much and he closed his mouth so rapidly that his teeth snapped, glowering at Darrah. An uneasy silence came to the room for a brief while, to be broken by Nig Sommers’ chest-less, dead-flat voice. “I’m the man that’s goin’ to be accused right off of doin’ it,” he said. “But they’ll never make it stick. I was two-three miles away, bringin’ my boys to Sumpter because I knew it was goin’ to be pretty tough weather. I’m plumb clear.”

“This isn’t your country,” Darrah suddenly remarked. “What were you doing over this side of the ridges anyhow?”

“That’s my business,” growled Sommers.

Darrah turned on Eric Bull. “For that matter this ain’t your end of the range, either. There’s no DeSpain beef anywhere’s near Circle Arrow country. What was you doing in these parts?”

Eric Bull started to speak, but bit off the phrase and pressed his lips together. It seemed to Darrah that this heavy-bodied man had thought of some unexpected turn in the talk and was now craftily puzzling his way around it. He shot a quick, surreptitious glance at Nig Sommers who instantly looked away. Definitely a message passed over the space—and found no willing receiver. Meanwhile, Hardesty’s cheeks turned more and more care-worn as he stood back and watched. Darrah’s mind closed avariciously around a new-framed thought. He had stumbled into something.

“We thought there was some DeSpain strays over here,” Bull at last explained.

Darrah threw a fast, metallic question at Nig Sommers. “Sommers, did you and the DeSpain outfit have a meeting up in the ridge some time before the storm broke?”

“No,” said the outlaw instantly.

But Eric Bull lifted a warning hand. “Now, Nig, we’ve got to play it right through. Somebody in my

outfit or somebody in your outfit will squall. Sure, we met. But what of that, Darrah?"

"Another curious accident," drawled Darrah. "Both of your outfits coming into the same country about the same time. There might be some unkind comment on that. It might even be guessed that DeSpain and Sommers made a gentlemen's agreement to join up and tour the Circle Arrow range for a little Circle Arrow beef."

Nig Sommers' beady eyes were charged with glittering light and he had unconsciously thrown his body forward till the weight of it rested on the balls of his feet. His long arms hung motionless, almost rigid; and not for an instant did he take his attention off Darrah. But Bull, oddly enough, accepted Darrah's suggestion indifferently. He shrugged his big shoulders. "What's that got to do with Lewes DeSpain bein' killed? If anything it leaves Nig out of the case. Don't it, Nig?"

Sommers scowled, relaxing a little. And he muttered, "Yeah," uncertainly. Nothing could have been clearer to Darrah than that Bull's statement had been meant to reassure Sommers, to keep him from going off half-cocked.

"In fact," said Bull, ironically, "it would leave the little chore right on Lonzo Hardesty's doorstep. It could be said he found DeSpain poachin' and promptly knocked him over."

"Justifiably so," said Darrah. "No jury in the West would hold him for it."

"I ain't interested in that at all," returned Bull. "All I want is to get the suspicion away from me."

"That helps me, don't it?" said Lonzo Hardesty to Darrah, sullenly tossing the words into the room.

"A justifiable killin'—that's the right answer," mused Bull. "You see it, Lonzo?"

"What are you tryin' to do?" snarled Hardesty. "Push the whole rotten mess on me? Not by a damned sight! That justifiable wrinkle don't fool me for a minute!"

DARRAH turned from them, walked past the knot of tense Circle Arrow hands, and faced the fire. He drew out his cigarette tobacco and rolled a smoke with an utter absorption of mind. This thing went deeper and deeper. In the beginning it had looked like the girl. Afterwards Hardesty's own attitude had indicated a participation in the shooting, for it was clear that he wanted the girl badly enough to kill any man who troubled her. But this scene had complicated that

logical explanation. Sommers and Bull each had a sufficiently valid reason for wanting Lewes DeSpain out of the way—yet these two men were now, without any doubt, working together for some common end. And Lewes DeSpain had had both of them in his confidence. Once more, the reasoning led him back to Hardesty—on the entirely different assumption that Hardesty had found DeSpain stealing Circle Arrow stock.

Bending to the fire, he got a lighted sliver of wood, thinking coolly, "That won't do. Hardesty wouldn't be afraid to face any jury on that score. And he is afraid of something. Also, Bull seems to have the bulge on him this minute. Why?"

He waved the burning sliver across the tip of his cigarette, hearing Bull say abruptly, "There's a better answer yet, boys." And turning around he found Bull pointing at him. Sommers grinned slyly, nodding.

"Me?" drawled Darrah.

"You," said Bull.

Hardesty looked all around the room, to Bull, to Sommers, to the Circle Arrow crew—and lastly to Darrah. He drew a breath, his whole face changed. "All right. That's the answer."

"So I killed DeSpain?" grunted Darrah.

"You crossed his trail at the right time," said Bull. "You've got no witnesses as to your whereabouts."

"It won't stick," Darrah answered calmly. "You know, of course, it's a plain cock-and-bull story."

"It'll stick if all of us make a case against you," Bull rapped out. "And we will!"

"Now wait a minute," put in one of the Circle Arrow hands. "I ain't so sure—"

"Shut up," snapped Bull. "You lads will do as you're told! Don't make any mistake about that. If you don't there's plenty of holes in the hills to bury you in."

Darrah looked to Hardesty. "You're willing to agree to this frame-up?"

"It ain't a frame-up," said Hardesty doggedly. Afterwards he avoided Darrah's glance and stared across the room. Darrah took a long drag of smoke into his lungs, at last decided on the final question in his mind. It was not only Bull and Sommers. It was Bull and Sommers and Hardesty. Somehow, DeSpain had not fitted into their scheme. He started to turn and speak. But before he did a voice came clearly down the stairway.

"You men lie. Darrah didn't shoot DeSpain. I

know who did it. I saw it done!"

Every man in the room started, whirled about. Looking up, Darrah saw the girl come slowly to the bottom of the stairs and face the crowd. Of a sudden the silence turned heavy and oppressive.

IV

IT WAS strange. Of all those men in the deceit-ridden room Nig Sommers spoke first. Darrah saw him straighten, saw actual relief cross the dark, trustless visage; saw even a shadow of a grin come along the thin lips.

"Who was it?" called Sommers.

But he no more had got it out of his mouth than Hardesty started toward the girl with a lifted arm; and at the same moment Eric Bull said sharply, "Wait a minute! Hold, on, here! I want to know how you—"

"Never mind," said the girl, entirely calm and confident. "I'll say who it was when the sheriff comes."

Eric Bull went to pieces before Darrah's attentive eyes. "Hardesty!" yelled the JT foreman. "Hardesty, you been holdin' this trick up your sleeve!"

Hardesty checked himself, turned on Bull with plain puzzlement showing. He muttered, "What in hell are you talkin' about?"

But Eric Bull, crimson from temple to neck, strode backward across the room, toward the lobby door. "You'll never get away with it!" he yelled. "By God, you never will!" And with that announcement ringing throughout the room he disappeared into the storm-blasted street. The slamming of the door recalled Nig Sommers from a long study. He looked around him, half startled; and then followed Eric Bull as rapidly as his long legs would take him.

Darrah moved away from the fire, all at once warned. "Go back," he told the girl. "Go back up. This room will be full of smoke in five minutes."

She hesitated, but he shook his head so quickly that she finally turned and ran up, out of sight. Darrah swung, pointed to the one man in that Circle Arrow crew who had made any sort of protest during the recent scene. "You—I want you to go to the landing up there and see that nobody gets to her. You hear? Nobody."

"Done," said the fellow and went for the stairs.

HARDESTY, meanwhile, had neither moved nor spoken. Darrah thought he had never seen a face so full of trouble and uncertainty and fear. But there was no time now to dally and he threw his hard command at the Circle Arrow foreman. "Blow out these lamps. Get away from the fire. Spread around. You'll have both those outfits on top of your neck right away."

"But I don't see—" muttered Hardesty. "I don't see what Eric's so worried—"

Darrah ignored him and motioned to the rest of the crew; and when those men got into motion, spreading along the walls, turning down the lamps, he knew that his long doubt of them was groundless. They were straight. Whatever part Hardesty played—they themselves were straight. Enormously relieved he ran to a corner of the room, seized a rifle standing there, and plunged on to the front door. When he opened it the wind struck him savagely and he had to brace his legs and push himself to the porch. Looking into the mealy smother toward the eastern end of the camp, he saw lights glimmering out of the saloon windows yonder. A file of men was at that moment coming up from the farther darkness and going into that saloon; and he thought he recognized Nig Sommers' angular body at the head of the party. He plunged to his armpits in the drifts, slogged across the street and entered the stable. There he turned about and posted himself.

This strange game was about to be played out—the uncertain end darkly suggested itself. Waiting there in the almost unendurable cold with a disciplined patience, Darrah knew that Sommers and Bull would attack Circle Arrow for no other reason than to get Lonzo Hardesty. Clearly as if it were written, Darrah realized this was the falling out of thieves who dared not trust one another—the ancient and inevitable disagreement of the lawless. And as a broken line of men came from the saloon and ducked forward toward the hotel, Darrah lifted the rifle and trained it with the clear realization that he was not fighting for Lonzo Hardesty, but for the girl, for the honest Circle Arrow crew and for himself. His first shot's echo whipped back along the gun barrel, struck him in the face and was carried off by the hurling Easter. As poor as the visibility was, he saw one of the advancing party stagger aside, turn and grope for the saloon.

They had not found him yet and he placed two more bullets with a grim, implacable

thoughtfulness. They had no mercy in them—and deserved none. One man pitched over. The others recoiled, flattening against the building wall. He was spotted then. A dimming crash of guns fled past him on the wings of the wind and one chance slug hit the stable above his head. He answered coolly, swinging the rifle from point to point. One rasping yell raced by. The group broke, retreated, losing shape and definiteness. The saloon door opened and on that rectangle of light he pinned his last shot as the men stumbled through it.

But one of the party—he thought again that it was Nig Sommers—remained in sight, firing at random with his revolver and shaking his free fist. About the same time another figure ploughed across the drifts from some obscure angle of the camp, passed Sommers and vanished in an alley adjoining the hotel. Sommers instantly wheeled and ran for the saloon's shelter.

This much of it was over. Wondering about that shift of the fight, Darrah dropped his empty rifle and drew his revolver. He beat a trail back across the street, reached the hotel wall and worked a cautious way to the mouth of the alley. He could see nothing in that blackly smothered strip. Half of a mind to follow it down, he heard the sudden roar and reverberation of guns in the hotel lobby. A confused crying and cursing passed out to the wailing street and then, as suddenly as the fury developed, it died. Darrah retreated from the alley, dividing his glance between the saloon and the hotel porch. He heard a faint sound and whirled to see a short, stout figure appear on the far side of the porch and come forward.

The man saw him as well and sprang against the hotel wall. He challenged Darrah. "Who's that?" And Darrah, his feet trapped in the hip-high drifts, recognized the blunt voice of Eric Bull. Knowing even then what was to come, Darrah called strongly:

"Bull, put down—"

But Eric Bull seemed to identify him at the first sound and he wheeled again and ran directly forward, his gun rising and exploding. That crimson-purple muzzle flash bloomed in Darrah's face and died; and bloomed again. The JT foreman's broad, squat body leaped at him as Darrah, grown rigid and relentless, tilted his own weapon and fired at the full, fair target. He heard Bull grunt. The desperate charge carried Bull on another five yards and when he fell it was directly

at Darrah's feet.

The man was dead. Darrah knew that without looking. Meanwhile there was a hallooing from behind and he turned to see the saloon door emitting its gush of light again. A long cry carried Bull's name forward strenuously; and immediately afterwards Darrah heard somebody knocking against one of the lobby windows. Placed in this tricky position, Darrah ran down the porch to the hotel door and pounded against it, yelling his own name. It opened in his face. An arm reached out and seized him and a Circle Arrow hand, silhouetted sharply against the fire light, said: "Get in here, Tom!"

DARRAH rushed through and stopped, eyes touching a figure sprawled full length on the floor near the leaping blaze. The Circle Arrow hand muttered briefly, "It's Lonzo. He's passing out. Somebody shot through a side window and got him."

"Go to the porch," ordered Darrah, "and keep your eyes peeled." Then he crossed the room and bent over Lonzo Hardesty, whose half closed eyes stared up, brimming with bitterness and regret. The Circle Arrow foreman's words were labored and harsh.

"Bull got me! He said he would—and he did. Get that dog for me, Tom!"

"He's lyin' on the porch, dead," said Darrah slowly.

"Good!" cried Hardesty and seemed to draw on some yet untapped reserve of energy. His eyes widened; he talked with greater force. "I'm sorry I agreed to put the bug on you. God knows I've plenty to answer for—but I was against the wall and didn't see no other way out. I'll admit it, Tom. I killed Lewes DeSpain."

"On account of the girl, Lonzo?" asked Darrah.

"I won't lie," muttered Hardesty. "It was only part on her account. Here's the straight of it. DeSpain hooked up with Sommers to raid the Circle Arrow range. I met DeSpain a couple weeks ago and agreed to come in on the deal. These boys"—motioning to the Circle Arrow hands about him—"didn't know about that. They didn't know I was aimin' to drive the beef toward the ridges so that DeSpain and Sommers could get the stuff and run it out of the country. It was all agreed that way. Well, I laid back from the boys and met DeSpain just when the storm broke. I knew he'd been up to

Anita's place and it made me sore. Anyhow, I figured he was tryin' to double-cross me on the beef—cheat me out of my share of the profits. I shot him when he turned around to leave. Saw him fall. Then I got to hell out of there. That's all—"

Darrah said, "Well, Lonzo, make your peace—" But he stopped and laid his hand on Hardesty's chest; then looked quickly up to the other men in the room. "That's the end of him."

"Waste no sympathy on him," said one of the men emotionlessly.

The front door opened and the Circle Arrow hand guarding the porch put his head inside, shouting, "Sommers is here with his hands lifted! He wants to make talk!"

"Send him in," said Darrah.

SOMMERS came into the room rapidly and stooped by the fire, his attention fixed on the dead Hardesty. "I knew Bull got him," he muttered. "He said he would. Who shot Bull?"

"I did," said Darrah. "What do you want?"

"All I want," answered Sommers, "is to get clear of this business. So do my boys—and the JT gang. We don't want to fight a dead man's side. Listen—I'll tell you something Hardesty didn't know."

"Go ahead."

Sommers stared all around him, spoke swiftly. "Hardesty put a bullet in DeSpain. But he only thought he killed DeSpain. When Hardesty ran away DeSpain got on his horse and started for the ridges. Eric Bull found him, saw he was hurt. DeSpain told Bull what had happened and Bull, figurin' this was what he had been waitin' for a long time, let DeSpain have it. He finished the job right there. Then he came into Sumpter with his

men. When I came along he told me all about it. But he didn't tell Hardesty, for we figured we had to hang the killin' on Hardesty. It looked kind of serious for us if we didn't. So here we was for three days, jawin' about it—tryin' to pin it on Hardesty and make him admit it. When you came we saw all a chance to get clear. We tried to pin it on you. The rest is what you know."

"Get back to the saloon," said Darrah. "When the storm quits you mugs pile out of here. I don't care which way. I'll spill the story to the sheriff. It's up to him, then."

"When the sheriff gets here," said Sommers, "we'll be out of his reach." And Sommers, at once alert and suspicious, backed across the room and into the night. Darrah rose slowly to his feet, speaking to the Circle Arrow crew.

"That's the best way. We don't want any more gunplay. The affair is finished."

There was a sound above him. Looking up he saw the girl dimly outlined on the stairs, standing quite straight and watching him. He said to the crew, "Put Lonzo in a back room and put a blanket over him." Then he went to the stairs and rose toward the girl, smiling a little.

"I was at the lone tree," she said, "when I saw Hardesty and DeSpain meet. The snow was so thick in the air they didn't see me. Hardesty fired—and then I ran. That's where I lost the glove. But I'm sorry for Hardesty, Tom. For if DeSpain had caught up with me—I would have shot him."

"Hardesty was usin' you as an excuse of last resort," said Darrah. "Forget about it. There's better things to consider now."

"As you please," the girl murmured; and Darrah thought the long soberness of her eyes was breaking up, turning warm.

