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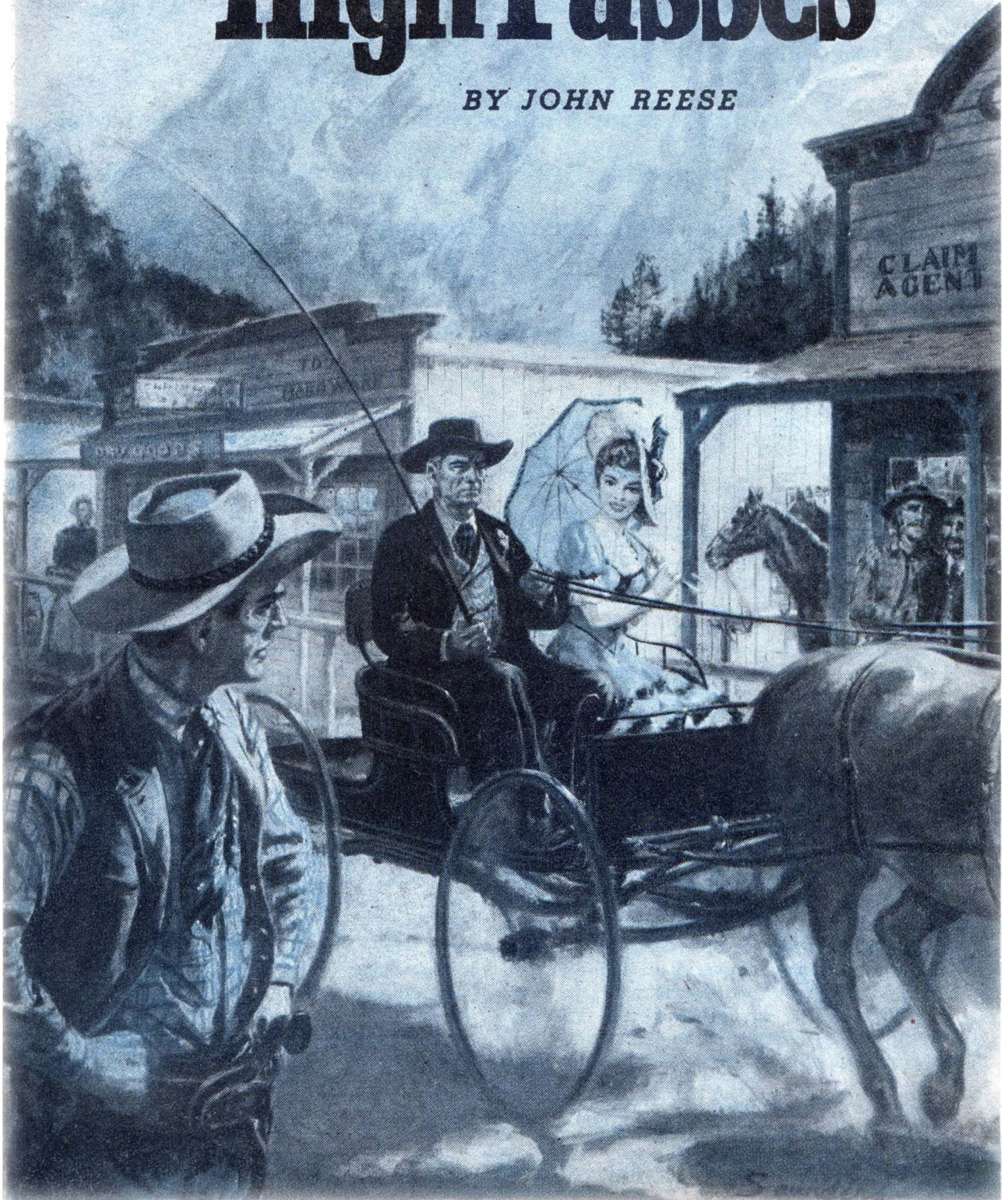
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A BLUEBOOK COMPLETE NOVEL

The High Passes

BY JOHN REESE



The High Passes



BY JOHN REESE

Young Wayne Staples rode back West resolved to stay peaceful. But with outsized neighbors poaching on his winter range, a down-at-heels gunslick snarling for his blood, and his father feuding crazily over a creamy actress, how could a man keep calm?

THEY CAME DOWN out of the steep canyon onto a mountain meadow where tawny grass sparkled between the live oaks in bright morning sunlight. The autumn chill of the canyon shadows vanished. Wayne Staples hung the halter-rope of the pack-horse over its saddle and turned the animal loose. It knew it was nearing home. It broke into a run, its tall load teetering awkwardly, and vanished into the gaudy foliage below the meadow.

Behind Wayne one of the two riders said, "Your pa won't like that. He never lets a pack-horse run loose."

Wayne hitched himself around in the saddle. "Lots of things Pa will have to get used to, Jud. When I do a job, I do it my way."

He pointed his horse down the worn, wide trail over which his father had driven Sliding S herds to winter range for nearly 30 years. Jack Staples had said be sure to bring Jud and Chuck home with him. Let the others go, said Jack, but Jud and Chuck were the pick of the crew and good men were scarce up here after the first frost.

Well, he was bringing them home. They had given him an argument when he paid the others off in Sacramento, after turning the herd into winter range down there. But Wayne had proved at Turnpike Soldiers College, down on Tidewater, that he had the knack of handling men. He was

23. Jud and Chuck were almost twice that, but that thing his old instructors at Turnpike called "the gift of command" made the difference. He was bringing them home.

That gift had come down from Wayne's father. So had his wiry health and straight brown hair and stubborn jaw. He was just under medium height, like his father, but supple and muscular where Jack had a grizzly-bear burliness. His mouth and nose and gray eyes were his father's too.

But his thoughts were like his dead mother's, and so was his way of talking. At Turnpike, where most of the grizzled old instructors had fought under Lee in the War Between the States, Wayne's accent had sounded broadly Western. Here in the Sierra Nevada he sounded like a raw tenderfoot. His mother's people, the MacAndrews—or the few that were left back East—thought Wayne too curt and direct, a little uncouth. Jack Staples, the father Wayne was just learning to know again, called him a mama's boy. In school in Europe, as a kid, Wayne had been "that odd American boy." Here in his homeland he felt like an alien.

"Sacramento's sure a good winter town," Jud sighed.

"Too many people think so," said Chuck. "No jobs. I dunno, I'm glad I come back. It'll be good to be home. . . . Won't it, Wayne?"

"Yes," Wayne said shortly.

Home. This was his second homecoming in a little over two months. Sixteen years ago, a child of seven, he had left Black Bear Valley with his mother, when his parents separated. He had grown up down in Santa Barbara, on the Coast, in the MacAndrews house; and in England and Switzerland and France. His mother had been a beautiful woman, noted for her grace and sweet dignity. And it was a graceful, dignified life she had led. But if Wayne had never lacked for anything, as he grew up, he could thank his father.

Jack Staples had been generous. Only one thing had he denied his son. As long as Wayne could remember he had wanted to be a doctor. There Jack drew the line. But if Wayne could not have his way, neither would he go back home and work for his father on the Sliding S. They had compromised on Turnpike, a Distinguished School for Young Gentlemen—appointments limited, tuition exorbitant.

There Wayne had restlessly put in his time, until his beautiful and (he thought privately) somewhat irresponsible mother died last spring. He had resigned from school at once. He did not know what he wanted to do, but he was sure he did *not* want to be an Army officer or marry the sisters of any of the Young Gentlemen at Turnpike.

Then came his father's letter:

I never tried to take you away from her while your mother was alive, but a boy belongs with his father and a man belongs where his money comes from. I'm an old man now—sixty-four—and I need you. This property will all be yours and you don't even no how to run it. . . .

Two months ago Wayne had returned to the mountains he barely remembered, aching not so much with loneliness for his mother but with regret that he had not really known her.

Home? Even less did he remember the huge log house in the aspen grove, overshadowed by the looming perpendicular walls of the canyon. This was the Eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada. The State line was only a few miles to the east. For years old Jack had thought he lived in Nevada, until a recent Army survey had located all of Black Bear Valley in California.

It was a wild country, beautiful despite the raw scars where men had gophered into the side of the mountains in the gold rush 30 years ago. Whole towns had been built overnight. In a few years most of their buildings had been abandoned and torn down or moved to the thriving mining towns that still existed in Nevada. Only a few mines still operated here. A few sawmills remained but most of them had also moved east to cut timbers for the Nevada diggings. Here and there, in little sheltered canyons, were the cabins of small farmers and trappers and prospectors, queer hermit-like folk

who wanted only to be left alone and who, after 30 years of disappointment, still were sure that next year—next year sure!—they would find the mother lode.

A picket fence of towering 10,000- and 12,000-foot peaks surrounded the valley. The Sliding S house set at an elevation of a little over 6,500 feet, the white-stemmed aspens almost hiding the city of sheds and corrals and haystacks that filled the wide sheltered canyon. The scope of his father's operations and the casual way he ran this vast business had taken Wayne's breath.

In the winter, the 9,000-foot pass that connected the valley with the warm western slope was closed by snow, and even access to Nevada was closed periodically by blizzards. Every fall about half of the Sliding S herds were driven down to the foothills near Sacramento, where old Jack Staples had cannily bought thousands of acres while land was cheap. Meanwhile he hired all the men he could get—hundreds of them—and put them to mowing the sweet mountain hay and stacking it in the canyons which had protection from the worst of the winter blizzards. Here, behind stout stone fences laboriously built when the big mines first shut down and labor was cheap, the other half of the Sliding S herds rode out the fierce mountain winter.

To fatten cattle here during the summer was easy, but there were only a limited number of these "winter meadows." That much Wayne had learned in the five weeks he had to get acquainted with his father, before Jack Staples sent him through the pass in charge of the last of the winter drives. He was on his way back now, and he wanted to see the look on Jack Staples' face when he came riding in with Jud and Chuck.

They emerged on another sunny slope, and at the foot of it they saw a big man on a handsome sorrel horse, holding their packhorse. The man was almost as sorrel as his mount, a beefy, brawny young giant Wayne's own age, with blue eyes and short, curly yellow beard covering his heavy jowls.

He handed over the halter-rope of the packhorse. "It's a good thing old man Staples didn't catch you lettin' a packhorse run loose," he said. "He'd just as soon kick you off the place as not, for that."

Wayne took the halter-rope and put out his hand. "I doubt if he'll kick me off, Dutch," he said. "How are you? Last time I saw you, you spilled buttermilk on your shirt."

The big man's face was foolish with amazement for a moment. Then he clamped down strongly on Wayne's hand.

"Wayne—Wayne Staples!" he shouted. "Floyd and Earl said they seen you. They said you was a

Illustrated by NORMAN SAUNDERS

runt and they shore spoke the truth! How much you weigh?"

"About one seventy-five," Wayne said, smiling.

Jack Staples and Chet Orrindorf had come through the high passes in search of gold 35 years ago, at the end of that massive stampede which made California. They had not found gold but neither had they limped home broke. Jack Staples had brought the first trail-herd through the pass, to butcher for rich and hungry miners. They paid him four dollars a pound for beef that had cost him 20 a head on the Coast. Jack was a single man. Chet Orrindorf had a wife and two sons back in Ohio. They were cattlemen by nature, and where others searched only for gold under the soil, these two saw the rich grass on top of it.

There were now five Sliding S beeves to every two wearing the Orrindorf CO brand. Jack Staples had a strong instinct to acquire and possess. Chet Orrindorf was comfortably well-off; Jack Staples was a wealthy man.

Wayne had run into the two older Orrindorf boys, Earl and Floyd, before leaving for Sacramento with the trail-herd. They were older men, and he had only dim and not very happy memories of being bullied by them as a child. He remembered Dutch more clearly; Dutch's real name came to him suddenly, and he hid a smile, remembering how this youngest Orrindorf had hated it: Clarence.

"Where's your gun?" Dutch asked.

"What gun?"

"Don't you pack a gun?" cried the amazed Dutch. "Hey, is it true what Floyd said—that you don't believe in fightin'?"

"I don't know what I believe," Wayne said. "In a way, I guess it is. It's not a crusade, Dutch. I don't care what other people do. It's only—"

"You're scairt?" Dutch said, gaping at him.

"No, I don't think so."

Dutch burst out, "You are too! Ain't no man would talk thataway unless he was scairt. Your pa said you was a mama's boy and you are!"

"There's no call for that kind of talk, Dutch," he said quietly.

"You're scairt!" Dutch shouted at him. "You're a runt and a mama's boy! I could spank you like a baby."

"I've whipped my share of heavyweights—better men than you, I think," Wayne said.

Dutch dropped to the ground and pushed his tall sorrel horse aside. "No man your size can talk to me thataway! Get down. Get down or I'll pull you down!"

It was no use. Wayne was hungry and tired and anxious to be home, but he slid out of the saddle and handed his reins to Jud. The pack-horse, free once more, resumed its pellmell flight down the slope to home.

Dutch came at him as though to overpower him by sheer weight. Wayne slid aside easily and stepped inside the thick, groping arms and drove

both fists into Dutch's stomach. Dutch's arms came down and Wayne circled him and rapped him on the jaw and temples.

It was a textbook situation and he fought it the way he had been taught to fight. Dutch rushed him again and again and Wayne sidestepped and hooked as Dutch floundered past him. He caught the big man off balance and moved in with his own chin tucked safely into his shoulder and cut him down little by little.

It was easy but it took time. He had to drop Dutch three times before he stayed down. The big fellow lay there on his stomach in the trampled grass, choking for breath, trying to shake the fog out of his puzzled head. Wayne took his arms and hoisted him to his feet.

"See what I mean, Dutch?" he said. "What does it prove? We're right back where we started."

Dutch blinked at him and said thickly, "Let me get my hands on you onest, that's all! This don't end it, Staples."

"Suit yourself," Wayne said.

Dutch stumbled to his horse. The big sorrel stood still as a rock while Dutch pulled himself into the saddle. He sat swaying in the saddle, flushed and beaten and bewildered.

"You always was so high and mighty!" he said. "You and your biggity idees! Well, wait till you get home and see your old fool of a pa! I wish I could be thêre! You won't dare to show your face."

He turned the sorrel and went loping away, reeling a little in the saddle at first, stiffening as he went out of sight among the trees. Wayne turned to Jud and Chuck.

"Now, what did he mean by that?"

"If I could fight like that, I'd lick somebody every Saturday just for the hell of it," Jud said.

Wayne got up into the saddle. "If it's fun for you, why not?" he said. "I just don't see any sense to it, personally."

For the first time, Jud and Chuck liked him. He could fight. Jud rode up beside him and studied Wayne a moment.

"You claim you want to stay out of trouble."

"If I can," Wayne said.

"Look at it this way, kid. When word gets out that a man can handle himself the way you can, and still don't like it—seems to me everybody's goin' to choose him. Wouldn't it be smarter to let on that you *like* to fight?"

"Put it this way," Wayne said. "Were you ever held up at the point of a gun? Did you ever have to stand there and let some man put his hand into your pocket whether you liked it or not? Didn't it grate on you?"

"Yes, but—"

"That's how I feel when I'm pushed into a senseless fight. What other people think of you can be as unreasonable a form of coercion as a gun. I'm just not putting up my hands any more when I'm told to, that's all. I do as I please."

The trail dipped into another steep canyon threaded by another foaming creek. The forest silence was broken sharply as, ahead of them, a sentry beaver rapped a warning with his flat tail on the water. They passed the elaborate dam and began climbing. Above the dam was an old, ruined mine, stripped of its timbers by the thrifty beavers. Only the rotten sills of the old cabin remained.

They crossed a last ridge and Black Bear Valley opened below them, an empire of crisscrossed canyons and rich meadows and stony peaks. In a little while they came down to a fork in the trail, a three-pronged one. The one straight ahead ran to the Orrindorfs' little secluded tributary valley off there to the east. The one to the right went to Bear Meadows, the only town on this part of the eastern slope.

They took the other one and an hour later were home. It was a regal place to live. Jack Staples had built at the foot of a protected canyon with a flat alluvial floor. Far above the house, at the head of the canyon, were his horse corrals; they could hear the squealing of the fighting stallions, the restless nickering of hungry mares, as they cantered through the aspen grove.

Back of the house, in the grove of silvery aspens, there were long stacks of hay marching off into the shadows like well-disciplined troops. In the barn nearest the house hung 20 sets of harness, and when his roads were clogged by snow Jack Staples could hitch 40 horses at once to his log snow-drags.

It was not quite noon when they reached the grove, but the high canyon walls had cut off the sun and a chill like evening had fallen. Through the trees they saw the twinkle of yellow light from the bunkhouse, which lay above the main house in the center of the grove. In the big house, only the kitchen chimney showed smoke. All the windows were dark.

"Let's unpack and get some grub," Wayne said. "Three weeks in the saddle is too long."

Jud and Chuck did not answer. Their mood had changed. In their minds they were already deciding to draw their pay and go back to the warm west slope. The packhorse waited patiently at one of the corral gates. They did not offer to help unpack. They unsaddled their horses and stalked up to the bunkhouse, grumbling to each other.

Wayne unpacked the horse himself. He threw all of the gear except the two riders' bedrolls into a little log tool shed. Where the big house stood there had once been a hardrock mine, and this old shed had been the miner's cabin. Wayne remembered it from his childhood because his mother had called it the "murder cabin." Someone—Wayne never could learn who—had been stabbed to death in it. There were dark little cabins with dark little tales back of them all over the gold country.

He took the two bedrolls to the bunkhouse. Jud and Chuck stood beside a cold stove, stripping

off the clothing they had worn for three weeks. The long tiers of bunks were empty.

"Where is everybody?" Wayne asked.

"There ain't even a cook," Jud said. "There ain't been a meal cooked in that kitchen back there for two weeks."

"I'll find out where everybody is."

He went down to the big house and opened the heavy front door quietly, and a cold mustiness gave him a clammy welcome. It was a living room 40 feet square, with a massive fireplace on one side holding two eight-foot logs in a ready bed of pinecones. The rustle of mice in the cones told him how long it had been since a fire had burned here. He had left three weeks ago, while it was still summer. No one here had noticed that fall had come.

Off the living room was the big front bedroom. Wayne remembered it from his childhood as a bright, sunny room, with clean curtains, with his mother's violin hanging on the wall and with her family pictures on the bureau and the scent of her perfume in the air. It was empty now, with the same musty smell. He went back to the living room and touched a match to the pinecones in the fireplace. Lennie Brody came in from the kitchen hall and said, "Howdy, Wayne. You made a good trip."

Lennie was Jack Staples' "house cook," a wizened little browbeaten man who was worked to death keeping—or half keeping—a house that should have had a staff of servants.

"Where is everybody?" Wayne asked him.

"There's only me and Ev. Everybody else quit."

"Where's Pa?"

"In town. Are you hungry?"

"As a wolf. So are Jud and Chuck."

"I don't have to cook for no saddle-bums," Lennie said with dignity.

Wayne clapped him on the shoulder. "Go on, Lennie—fix us up something. Where's Ev?"

"In the kitchen. I'll tell him it's you. He bet me a dime you wouldn't make it back fer another week."

He vanished back into the hallway and Wayne stood there soaking up the warmth, trying to relax. "In town" could mean either Bear Meadows, six miles away, or Angels Camp, which lay beyond the pass, fifty miles down the west slope.

"You made a quick trip of it," Ev Winkler said, coming in from the kitchen hall. "Bring Jud and Chuck back?"

"Yes, but they're not going to stay."

"They better! Wayne, I'm glad you're back. Things couldn't be no worse. We ain't ready for winter and we ain't goin' to be. I need six to ten men—six is the least—and I ain't got nobody. We stand to lose a thousand head of cattle if an early snow hits us."

Everett Winkler had worked for Jack Staples for 20 years. His hair and beard were white but he

had the same energy Wayne remembered from childhood. It was Ev who had driven the spring-wagon that took Althea Staples and her son away from this valley 16 years ago.

For Ev, Wayne had the feeling a man should have for his father. He smiled at Ev. "What's wrong? How come Pa let everybody get away?"

Ev swore. "The old idiot! Wayne, your Pa ain't drawn a sober breath in two weeks. Him and Chet Orrindorf are in their secont childhood, I think. They've fell out over a woman."

Wayne smiled again. "They'll get over it but I guess you and I will have to get to work. What's her name?"

"Pieta San Juan and they *won't* get over it, damn her soul!"

"Who is she?"

"A chesty little Mexican tramp that can't be more than twenty-four or -five. A singer or actress or something. They call her the Spanish Thrush. She sang down in the opera house in San Francisco and I hear they sold out the house two weeks straight. Then she come up to Sacramento and Angels Camp, and it taken five dollars in gold dust just to get in and stand up." Ev cursed again. "You never seen such a change come over two men. You know how close your pa and Chet always was."

So this was the vaguely dire scandal of which Dutch Orrindorf had warned him! Wayne smiled delightedly. "You mean Pa and Chet have fallen out over an actress—a young one at that? I didn't think they had it in them."

A pink flush spread under Ev's white whiskers. "It ain't funny. It ain't even decent." He called Pieta San Juan a bad name and went on, "She lives with her cousin and his wife—you know, Richard Rodriguez. They're real good people. Dick works for the British syndicate that bought out the old Metal Queen mine."

Wayne said, "It seems that Dutch Orrindorf takes this rivalry pretty seriously." He told Ev about the senseless fight with Dutch in the meadow below the pass.

Ev snorted. "He's a fine one to talk! She was his girl first. He went out with her and then let his own pa try to beat his time! Then Jack started chasin' her. They take turns takin' her out now."

"I'll go into town tomorrow and see if I can find Pa—or at least hire some men," Wayne said. "I wouldn't worry. She'll have to get out before winter, and that's not very far away."

2

WAYNE LAY SLEEPLESS late that night, despite the deep weariness in his bones, staring out of his bedroom window and listening for the sound of his father's return. There was a frosty ring around the moon and a small local storm was blow-

ing a smoky fury in those darkly clustered clouds up there on one of the white peaks.

He slept eventually, waking when he heard Lennie shaking the kitchen grates. He dressed and went into the living room and stirred up the fire there. His father's bed in the adjoining bedroom had not been slept in. Wayne went to the kitchen, where Lennie was slamming five heavy plates down on the round kitchen table.

"Wait till Jack gets back, that's all," he was grumbling. "I'm a house cook. I got a notion to quit."

Wayne got his hat and jacket. He did not like Lennie. He did not like any man who let himself be abused the way Jack Staples abused this one.

"You can leave right now, for all of me," Wayne said.

Jud and Chuck were standing in the bunk-house door, arguing with Ev. The old man appealed to Wayne before he even reached the bunk-house.

"How do you like that? They want a rest today!"

Wayne looked at Jud. Jud was the firmer character of the two. Chuck would do whatever Jud did.

"Let's go, Jud. Let's saddle up. You asked for work when you came here."

Jud swallowed and bit his lip. He turned and started toward the corral, Chuck following. Wayne called after them, "Come up to the house for breakfast when Lennie rings the bell."

They did not answer or even look back, but when the breakfast bell clanged through the thin, cold air they came clumping into the kitchen, their good humor at least partly restored. "My old daddy used to tell me that Lincoln freed the slaves," Jud remarked slyly, as they ate, but I reckon nobody told him about the Staples outfit. Reckon we won't see you out there with the ordinary cheap help today, will we, Mister Staples?"

Wayne had them safe, for today at least. He grinned and said, "I've got a stray father to round up. Depends on what luck I have, when I'll get back."

Across flat, grassy meadows, through cool, shaded canyons, past the half-healed scars of abandoned mines, Wayne rode to Bear Meadows. Thirty years ago it had been a booming metropolis with 3,000—5,000—8,000 population—you could hear any figure. The Metal Queen had been only one of a thousand diggings then.

Today the Queen was the only mine still active, and it worked only when its constantly changing owners could raise the capital with which to drive its shafts deeper and deeper into the solid granite of the mountain that overhung Bear Meadows. There were no more than 50 or 60 people left in the town, another hundred or two—no one knew how many—scattered on this part of the east slope. Otherwise there were only the uncounted Indians,

the amiably self-sufficient Washoes whose complex family clans had never paid much attention to the gold rush and who had nothing to lose when it died here.

There was one street that twisted with the turn of the canyon and ended at its head, on it a store that was also the post office, a blacksmith shop, a livery stable that rented mostly freight-horses, and a saloon. Beside the saloon was a deeply worn foot-trail that rambled out of sight up another steep tributary canyon, at the top of which stood the peaked-roofed buildings of the Metal Queen. Tiers of old houses and cabins, almost all of them empty, lined one side of this canyon. Most of them, as well as the old gold-claims on which they sat, were now owned by Jack Staples.

Once, in Bear Meadow's heyday as a gold-town, a dozen honky-tonks had flourished here. There was only Joey Rose's saloon now, and Jack Staples owned it too. Back of Joey's place, in a shaded cove at the foot of the canyon, was a stone-fenced corral, watered by a tiny spring-fed creek that dribbled down from its source up near the Metal Queen. On a slope above the corral was the graveyard—the boothill found in every old mining town. Here it was six carved crosses that had been knocked over and replaced so often that no one knew where the graves were, and one soft lava slab with this inscription:

*Peter Kraus—1852
Damn the Bankers!*

No one knew who Peter Kraus had been, but his last words would live.

There were a dozen horses wearing a dozen strange brands in the corral of Joey's saloon. Riders were hurrying through on their way to the warm coast—not very good riders, to judge by their horses. There was nothing left to hire, at this altitude, but the dregs of the Nevada mines.

Wayne went into the dark, sweet-smelling saloon. Joey Rose said, "Hello, Wayne. You've had a fast trip. All went well, I trust?" He leaned across the bar to shake hands, a slim, civil, hard-bodied man, an educated man queerly miscast here. All Wayne knew was that Joey was Jack Staples' devoted friend, and Joey's eyes discouraged inquiry.

Wayne shook hands. "Where's Pa?"

"I don't know. Why?" Joey fenced.

Wayne smiled. "I'm not running a count on him, but somebody's got to run the place. I hear he's got a lady friend."

"He slept upstairs here last night. He went out about an hour ago."

Wayne went out. He turned up the narrow path and began climbing the steep canyon, and the higher he went the more familiar it seemed. It was a lazy-man's trail that wandered back and forth across the narrow gully, from house to cabin and cabin to house. It had been cut by the feet of tired and probably not very sober miners of a generation

ago, and the stepping-stones across the little creek had been firmly placed for unsteady feet.

The cabins sagged, the brush had swarmed over the red clay of the diggings; the gold sluiced out of here had been spent a thousand times since this strike went broke.

The queer feeling of having been here before persisted, yet no detail seemed familiar. He passed one tiny house that certainly was occupied, a cabin of redwood slabs whitewashed again and again, its steep Alpine roof patched recently with tin and its tall crooked stovepipe newly guyed against winter gales.

"Wayne!" came a sudden glad voice. "Aren't you Wayne Staples?"

There was a girl standing in the doorway of the tiny house and Wayne's memory of this canyon suddenly clicked into place, sharp and clear, in his mind. She had been just a toddler then, a little flaxen-haired, blue-eyed, pink-faced girl in a faded brown dress. She had been about three when he was six, and she had been quick as the squirrel is quick, graceful and sure-footed like the deer.

He turned and went swiftly up the little walk, holding out his hands. "Fern Utley! Fern, I had forgotten you, but I'd know you anywhere. It's good to see you!"

"And it's good to see you too, Wayne."

They clutched each other's hands and stared at each other. Fern's hair had not darkened. Her skin was the same perfect pink and white and her blue eyes still had that haunting, wistful look. She had become a tall, slim, lovely woman who made him catch his breath.

"You look just like your mother," she said, after a moment. She kept on smiling at him. "I was sorry to hear about her. She was lovely to us."

"It's strange you should remember her that well. You must have been pretty young."

"I saw her only that one day, when my mother was ill," Fern said. "The day we played together here. She took you away soon after that but she didn't forget. She wrote to me from Santa Barbara when she heard that my mother had died. That was the only letter I got. Do you think I could forget?"

"That's the way she was."

"And you're like her, aren't you?"

"I'm afraid not. Fern, you'll hear lots of things about me—that I won't fight—that I'm a coward—"

"I don't think anyone says that. Come inside and let's talk! Oh, it's too bad dad isn't here! He's so anxious to see you."

He followed her inside. "I'm ashamed to say that I'd forgotten your father too, yet he was one of my boyhood heroes. It's almost as though I had deliberately tried to forget everything here. How is he?"

"Dad's all right. He's been sheriff for ten years. It was your father's idea. He's been so good to us."

This girl's father had driven a 10-horse freight wagon between Sacramento and Black Bear Valley when Wayne was a small boy. Wayne remembered Troy Utley as a big, slouching, loud-mouthed man in a red-checked shirt who always came into the aspen grove at a dead run, his big canvas-covered wagon rocking and rumbling and swaying, his 10 half-wild horses leaping in the harness like rabbits.

It was no easy job, driving a richly-loaded wagon through the pass in those days. Once Troy had dragged home an 800-pound grizzly bear that had raided his wagon during the night. He had killed it with a knife, a six-gun and the oak double-trees from the wagon and then had driven the rest of the way in with a broken collar-bone. Several other times, he had fought off lawless miners who tried to rob him.

Wayne remembered his father saying, "Troy Utley has got more guts than any man I ever knowed. He just don't know the feelin' of fear."

They sat down. Wayne looked again at the girl and saw the faded, patched dress she wore, and the Indian moccasins. He looked at the house and its meanness and the meagerness of its furnishings stirred the anger in him. It was still just a miner's shanty, a living room with unfinished pine walls and creaking floors, and back of it a small kitchen. To the left of the kitchen was a lean-to behind a curtained door.

That would be Fern's bedroom. This rickety old sofa he was sitting on would be where Troy Utley slept. This was all a man could afford when he worked for Jack Staples. What a place for a girl like Fern—a ghost-shanty in a dead town!

Fern patted the worn arms of her low rocking-chair. That and a small redwood table by the front door, were the only other furnishings in the room.

"Wayne, do you remember this chair?"

"Why—wasn't that my mother's sewing-chair? The one that stood by the window in the front bedroom?"

"Yes. Your father gave it to Dad after your mother took you away. He gave us lots of things."

But not a decent, honorable living, Wayne thought bitterly. Jack Staples drove a hard bargain.

"Fern," he said, "what's this about my father and Chet Orrindorf and some woman?"

She flushed a little. "What have you heard?" she parried.

"Only that he and Chet have quarreled and that she's less than half Pa's age."

"I'll tell you what I know. It's a little pathetic. I feel sorry for the poor old man."

Wayne smiled. "I gather that Pa made quite a spectacle of himself. What's she like?"

Fern met his eyes. "She's very pretty, Wayne. When she first came here three weeks ago we became quite good friends. I was crazy about her. She's traveled everywhere—New York, Boston, New

Orleans. They called her the Spanish Thrush on the stage."

"But still a third-rate entertainer."

Fern shook her head and frowned. "Not third-rate. Pieta could never be third-rate at anything. She would be the best."

"Then why get married?"

"There's no secret about that. She was very frank. There's no safety for a woman except in marriage, she says."

"But why an old man?"

Fern flushed again. "I'm not taking her side, but I do understand. With an old man she's safe from love, too. Can you understand that?"

"Not quite."

"I don't think men have been kind to her. I think men have taught her this hard-bitten philosophy she has."

"You like her, don't you?"

Fern shook her head. "No. When she first told me that, I thought it was some kind of sophisticated joke. Then I saw her with your father and then with Chet, and when I asked her about it she actually suggested that—that—"

She choked on her embarrassment. The pink flowed up her throat and over her face, and her eyes misted angrily. It took Wayne a moment to understand.

"That you take one and she take the other?" he cried incredulously.

"I wish I hadn't told you!"

But suddenly she could not hold it in either—suddenly they were looking at each other across the tiny room and rocking with laughter. Fern wiped her eyes on her apron.

"Oh, Wayne, it's so wonderful that you can feel this way about it! Everybody thought you'd be ashamed and I so hated to be the one to tell you about it."

Wayne shrugged. "Pa isn't the first man in the world to lose his wits over a woman, and I doubt if he'll be the last. All I want is to get his mind back on business."

Fern sighed. "I had forgotten that people could be so—well, you know—tolerant. I got to go to school down in Sacramento, you know, and then I got a job in the convent, sewing and cooking. I got to know lots of people, but then three years ago Dad got poorly and I had to come home and keep house for him. I haven't been out of Bear Meadows since."

"What?" He tried not to show the pity he felt. "But what do you do?"

She smiled a stiff smile. "What is there to do?"

A girl like Fern, working in somebody's kitchen to get through school, then working for her board and room in a convent and thanking her stars for the chance. *These damned shiftless frontiersmen!* he thought angrily.

"If I bring the horses in, will you ride with me?"

Her hands clenched on the arms of her rocker but she met his eyes frankly. "Wayne, I have nothing to wear—nothing I could ride a horse in. I'm sorry."

Outside a woman laughed, a sound like a bird. It broke the embarrassment of silence between them. Wayne looked out the small front window and saw his father and Pieta San Juan coming down the zigzag canyon trail from above. Jack Staples wore his 64 years lightly. He had on a black serge suit that needed pressing, and he carried his broad-brimmed black hat in his hand. His boots were firm and steady on the steep trail. The sun shone on his bald head and on the fringe of gray that surrounded it.

He was a powerful, rock-like man with a stubborn and coarsely handsome face. He was an unshakable man, but he had been shaken, and when Wayne looked at the girl who tripped along with her small gloved hand on his arm, he understood.

"See?" Fern whispered. "What did I tell you?"

Pieta San Juan was young, all right, but she had a mature, full figure and she knew how to dress it. She had on a sedate brown dress trimmed with little bits of fur, and a huge hat—a very fashionable hat, if Wayne could judge. He could not see her face or her eyes because of that hat, but the skin of her wrists had a mellow creaminess, almost dusky.

Wayne went to the door to watch them out of sight. The girl did not stir him, but he could understand how she could affect two old men like Jack Staples and Chet Orrindorf.

"Poor Pa! He's really in trouble, isn't he?" He reached for his hat on the little redwood table. "I'd better catch them and see if I can get him to go home and tend to business. Fern, when will I see you again?"

"I would like to see you any time," she said simply.

He put his hands on her shoulders. "Fern, why can't I get you a riding habit, so we can ride together? What else is there for us to do here?"

"You know I can't do that, she murmured.

"Why not? We're old friends, Fern. For my sake! You'd do it for me, wouldn't you? No one needs to know. There'll be nothing to explain to anyone. Please try to understand."

"No."

"What else am I to do with my own time? Please! You'd let me bring you flowers or candy, wouldn't you? Our families have always been friends."

He was talking too much and too fast, and suddenly he could not take his hands off her shoulders without embarrassing them still more.

The stricken look in her eyes made him sick with shame at what he had done, yet to back out would be a confession and he had nothing to confess.

"You're just like your father, aren't you?" she said.

He let go of her. "In what way?"

"You do exactly as you please. I think I understand your attitude toward fighting. You're going to have your own way about yourself no matter what people think."

The embarrassment had passed mysteriously. He felt sure of himself suddenly. He picked up his hat and tucked it under one arm. He took his purse from his pocket and opened it. Currency was not much in use up here in the gold country, and he had quickly learned that a purse was handier than a wallet.

He had drawn money from his father's Sacramento bank to pay off the crew and buy supplies for the return trip through the high pass. All he had left, besides some small change, was a newly-minted double eagle. He took out the glittering gold coin and folded the fingers of her left hand around it.

"I'll say just this much more, to make sure you understand. Anyone would do the easy things for you, Fern, but I'd like to be the kind of a friend you can count on for the hard things. It's not easy to say I want to buy you something, but that's the kind of friend I want to be to you."

She began crying—quiet, helpless tears that made him swear under his breath. He took her right hand and shook it as he would have shaken a man's hand.

"Will you go riding with me?"

"Yes," she said. "Wayne, Wayne—you really are my friend, aren't you?"

He went out quickly, because in another moment he would have kissed her. And she would have let him because she was numb from loneliness. She would have been grateful for anything that would prove she still had feelings.

But she had been right about one thing—he was, in some ways at least, exactly like his father. It was strange to discover that Jack Staples could be so easily understood.

He reached the street and saw Pieta San Juan turn into the general store. There was no sign of his father, but he knew where to look.

He went into Joey Rose's place and there stood Jack Staples at the bar. He gave Wayne a surly look.

"What do you want?" he growled.

Except for Joey, they were alone. And Joey was the kind of bartender who heard nothing, saw nothing. Wayne went to the bar and put his hat on it.

"Got back last night, Pa, and Ev said you were in town," he said. "I was up at Troy Utley's place and saw you pass."

Jack Staples squirmed. "Oh! Yes, yes, to be sure. Did you bring him and Chuck back?"

"Yes, but they're not going to stay."

"We'll hire others."

"What others, Pa? Take a look at the riff-raff that's passing through."

"That's what I want—riff-raff," said Jack

Staples. "Orrindorf is hipin' riff-raff. I want men that'll stand up for me."

"Take it easy, Pa," Wayne said.

Jack Staples stared at him. "You couldn't be in town five minutes and not hear all sorts of ridic'lous lies about me. Chet Orrindorf stabbed me in the back. I been his friend for 35 years and he double-crossed me. That's the long and short of it and I don't care—what did you hear, anyway?"

"I heard you were both fond of the same woman," said Wayne. "That happens, Pa."

Jack's hand shot out and closed on his shoulder. "Don't give me your lip," he choked.

Stubborn and headstrong he might be, but before his son he was embarrassed. Wayne said, "You're a good-looking man, Pa. You don't show half your years, you've got plenty of money, and you'd treat a woman right. If she's the one you want, I hope you get her."

The strong hand relaxed on his arm. "But your mother—"

"My mother is dead," Wayne said. "All I care about is getting some help for Ev."

Jack gave him a look of hangdog gratitude. Joey Rose set out a bottle and two glasses and said quickly, "Let's drink to that, Jack. Here's the first sense I've heard spoken this day."

There were voices out back; someone was turning horses into the canyon corral. As Joey poured the drinks the back door opened and Floyd and Earl Orrindorf came in. They saw Wayne and his father and went to the other end of the bar. They nodded—that was all. Their father and Jack Staples had been friends for 35 years, but they merely nodded.

Earl and Floyd were as tall as Dutch but not as heavy, not as blond and soft-looking. Big, rangy men in patched work clothing, they towered over the two faceless nonentities with them. Those two were typical "mine bums," drifters of the type that, according to Ev, were usually sent right on through this valley with instructions not to tarry.

Earl wore one gun, Floyd two. The last time Wayne had seen them, just before leaving for Sacramento with the trail-herd, they had treated each other to a friendly drink and tried, like pups separated at weaning, to get acquainted with each other as grown dogs.

For his father's sake, he had tried to get along with these two. For himself, he did not care whether they liked him or not. He still did not care but he said, "Hello, Earl—Floyd. Have a drink on me?"

Floyd turned with a grin. "I'll drink with you, Wayne."

"Proud to," Earl said. "Howdy, Jack."

He was the oldest one and, Wayne thought, the one with the most sense.

"Howdy, boys," Jack said, in a low voice, not looking at them.

Joey set out more glasses and filled them. The

two drifters downed their whiskey in some haste. Floyd raised his toward Wayne and Jack.

"To your heart's desire, Jack," he said.

Old Jack flinched and Wayne said sharply, "No call for that, Floyd. Act your age!"

Floyd grinned wider. "Tell Jack that. He's been might frisky lately, for an old man."

Jack winced. "Now Floyd!" he said. "Now Floyd!"

"Let's leave it between your dad and mine, Floyd," Wayne suggested.

"Maybe I don't want to," Floyd said.

Wayne tried once more. "I had to whip your brother yesterday. If I have to whip you, Floyd, it'll be because you can't keep your big mouth shut. Let's cut this out."

He turned his back to reach for his drink but he heard Floyd coming. He slid aside and backed across the room, calling out sharply, "Stop it, Floyd. I told you I don't want to fight you, but if you start anything I'll knock your thick head off."

He got the big stove between them and then he heard his father's grunt, a sound that came from a man suffering from deep shame. And that, too, was gun-point coercion.

"All right, let's go outside," Wayne said. "No use making things tough for Joey."

Floyd unbuckled his belt and handed his two holstered guns to Earl. He threw his hat and jacket on a table and went out.

Wayne put his hat and coat on the bar. Jack Staples muttered, "Let me see if I can cool him off, boy. He's awful big."

Wayne said, "Too big, Pa. He's all hands and feet."

He went out to where Floyd stood waiting in the street. As jauntily as he could, he took the two steps down from the narrow, rickety porch to the dusty street. A door slammed farther down the street and he turned his head enough to see Pieta San Juan come out of the store.

She was beautiful, all right, but it was an affected kind of beauty that left him cold. He met her eyes—big, black, deep eyes—and then felt them flick down to measure him arrogantly from head to toe.

She stopped when she saw the formal, ritualistic stance he and Floyd had assumed. Earl and Joey and Jack Staples and the two riff-raff Orrindorf hands came boiling out the door to watch. Wayne heard his father give a little stricken whimper, because he did not want this girl to see an Orrindorf whip a Staples. Then Floyd came at him.

3

NO OTHER WOMAN that Wayne knew would have stood in the street in a rough mining-town to watch two men fight; but Pieta San Juan did.

Floyd jumped. Wayne dropped to the ground and rolled aside, and as Floyd's boots hit the ground, Wayne hooked his left arm around one of them and dug in his toes. He turned Floyd end-over-end on his head and dumped him on his back in the middle of the street. Floyd rolled over and looked around for him dizzily.

"Does that prove anything?" Wayne asked.

Floyd got his legs under him and came at Wayne like a locomotive. Wayne backed away, letting Floyd's fists roll off his shoulders and head while he jabbed short, hard rights and lefts into Floyd's stomach. He took a little more punishment than he had to take because he wanted to get it over quickly.

Floyd was stronger than Dutch, but that was all. He wasted his breath yelling at Wayne, and for a long time he ignored the steady pounding on his hard, flat stomach.

"Didn't hurt me!" he grunted. "Stand up and fight like a man, you damned mama's boy! Didn't even feel it."

He fought like a schoolboy and he quit suddenly like a schoolboy. His belly-wall gave in under that merciless drumming. His breath went. He ran out of wind without a mark on his face. His arms got too heavy to hold up, and then Wayne went to work on his face. He opened a big cut in one of Floyd's eyebrows and again and again Floyd left himself wide open to wipe the blood out of his eyes with his sleeve.

He was tough, really tough. He kept coming until Wayne got the range and caught him under the ear with his right. Floyd's eyes closed. His hands opened and he sat down heavily and rolled over on his stomach.

Wayne wiped his face with his handkerchief and went over to where Pieta San Juan still stood.

"You'd better go along home, Miss," he said. "I don't think this is any place for you."

She turned and walked up the canyon. Wayne made sure she was gone. He went back to where his father stood.

"Let's go home, Pa. Where's your horse?"

"Down at Ernie's—the livery stable. I'll get him," Jack said. "You saw her. What—what do you think of her?"

"She'll be a handful, Pa, but you can handle her."

Jack's gray eyes lighted. "I'll go get my horse," he said. He went walking proudly away down the street.

Earl and the two drifters were helping Floyd to his feet. Floyd still was dazed, and his face was ghastly. Wayne looked at it and thought sickly, *Did I do that? I did, because that girl was watching. . . .* He went over to Floyd and put out his hand.

"There's no hard feelings on my part, Floyd," he said. "I just didn't like to see you tease the old man."

Earl got between them and said, "Let him alone, Staples. Ain't you done enough? You didn't need to cut him up thataway." Wayne let his hand drop and stood aside. They supported the reeling Floyd on his leaden feet and walked him heavily back around the saloon. When they emerged on their horses, Floyd was sitting straight in the saddle. Wayne sat down on the porch and watched them ride out of sight.

"They're a tough bunch," he said.

"I'd watch them after this," Joey Rose said.

Wayne shrugged. "It's up to them. I don't want to fight. What do you expect me to do?"

Joey sat down beside him. "Why don't you carry a gun?"

"I don't like to carry a gun."

"You should." Wayne shook his head and Joey went on impatiently, "You're wrong about those boys—at least about Floyd. They aren't just big, ignorant bruisers. They mean business. Can you even fire a gun?"

"Could a man spend three years at a Tidewater military college and not use one?" Wayne said, just as impatiently. "We learned to shoot with mirrors—to take a gun apart and put it back together in the dark."

"You won't need mirrors," Joey said. "Put on a gun and make sure you can use it or one of the Orrindorfs will kill you. Get this through your head—your troubles with that outfit have just started."

"Does this Mexican wench mean that much to Chet?"

"Chet has nothing to say about it, boy, and the girl is only a pretext. I've been here quite a while, I've watched this come to a head, I know the background. They've never been happy, playing second fiddle to the Sliding S, seeing it get richer and richer despite all the money sent out to keep you in fancy schools, while they work hard and barely get by from year to year. It was big enough for Chet but it's not big enough to divide among three."

"I see," Wayne said.

"One thing more. It's not pleasant but I'll give it to you straight: All your life you've been a disappointment to your father. If you left the valley now I would say you were smart. If you stay, put on a gun and make sure people know that you can use it. Stop this imbecile talk about not liking to fight! That's just asking for trouble."

Joey smiled one of those thin surface smiles as Wayne stood up to join his father, who was returning with his horse. "Remember what I told you."

Jack Staples led the way. They reached the cross-trail where the deeply-rutted trail led over the pass to the left and two other trails led right to the Sliding S and the CO. Wayne stood up in the stirrups and took a long, thoughtful look around at the colorful grandeur that was Black Bear Valley by autumn. He could not even see clearly the ridge at the other end, beyond which the Orrin-

dorfs were contained. He had never been over that far, even.

The Orrindorfs had to cross Jack Staples' range to get into a town owned mostly by Jack Staples, to drink at Jack Staples' saloon. Why had no one ever understood before how this would grate on those three big loutish men?

Ev Winkler came out of the house to meet them. Jack Staples swung down out of the saddle and handed his reins to Ev. He yawned. "Didn't sleep much last night. I reckon I'll go to bed. Tomorrow I'll go in again and see if I can send somebody over to Coliseum to hire some men."

"It's time," Ev said.

"Tomorrow you drop the wires at Buckhorn and fill it up. How much hay would you say is in the stack there?"

"Right at two hundred ton."

Jack yawned again. "I'll tell you—that's a good place for calvin'. Sift out a nice bunch of old potbellied cows and run 'em in there. You and Jud and Chuck and Wayne can do that tomorrow."

"I reckon not," Ev said laconically. "Dutch Orrindorf run a bunch of CO cows in there this morning."

"Aw, no!" Jack snorted.

"Go see for yourself!" Ev shouted. "They had the wires down and the herd in there and the fences tight again before we even knowed about it. They run the hell out of them cows to get there before Jud and Chuck and me could get out this mornin'."

"But that's my hay," Jack said petulantly.

"It was," Ev snarled at him. "Don't look at me! Where's the men I need to get this work done? Where you been ever' time I look for you lately? I been dingin' at you for two weeks to fill them winter medders. Damn it, Jack—"

"Just a minute," Wayne put in. "Why didn't you run Orrindorf's stuff out?"

"With two men? Jud and Chuck ain't in no mood to fight for the Sliding S! Dutch had four men with him, and he made sure we seen him."

Jack Staples thought it over, snapping his fingers absently. "Dutch thinks he's cute," he said at last. "I'll get you some men tomorrow, Ev. We'll take them cows of Dutch's out a sight faster than they come in. I'll learn that boy a lesson he won't forget in a hurry."

He shambled into the house and Ev gritted. "All he thinks of is that woman! Did you see her?"

"I did."

"Now what do you think?"

"I wish he'd marry her and get it over with."

Ev's pale blue eyes blinked with relief. "I'm shore glad to hear you say that! Your pa was afeared you'd not like it. You see what I'm up against?"

"No I don't," Wayne said, "but let's find out. Let's get around and see what this place looks like. So far it's just scenery to me. I'd like to know what I'm doing."

"Let's eat first," Ev said, "if Lennie ain't poutin' too much to fix something. Wayne, I'm glad to see you take hold, because that old fool Jack ain't goin' to do it in time for winter. You don't know what winter is up here, and when you see it'll be too late. Damn that woman!"

Jack Staples did not even stir out of his room when Lennie rang the bell. Wayne and Ev ate in the kitchen with Jud and Chuck with a surly Lennie waiting on them indifferently.

"You two come along," Ev told Jud and Chuck as they got up from the table. "I want you to show Wayne what you and me seen this mornin'. You seen it too."

"Nothing to show," Chuck grunted. "Dutch Orrindorf just stole your' Buckhorn medder and you set right there and let him do it, that's all."

It was the size of the Sliding S, rather than its complexity, that made Wayne slow in understanding how it was operated. Little by little, as they covered the valley on the nimble, tireless mountain horses, he began to get the picture in his mind.

It was not a valley, really, but a series of valleys, and it was not fenced, but Jack Staples' mark was on every inch of it. The Sliding S fences were an efficient hodge-podge of stone, rails and wire. There was a drift fence across the low north end, to discourage cattle from drifting down that long, canyon-cut slope, and a series of barricades across the south. The west sloped up beyond timberline to the pass through which the Sliding S herds were driven to winter pasture, and up there the lean feed discouraged drifting.

Ev stood up in the stirrups and pointed to the east. "See that ridge yonder?"

"Yes."

"Beyond that is a little valley, purtiest little place to live in these mountains, but it's small. That's the CO. That ridge, I'd say, runs about sixteen hundred feet high. There's a half a dozen little canyons that you can get through, but in the winter they close up with the first snow and we don't pay no attention in the summer."

Ev frowned. "The Orrindorfs have shipped light for the last couple of years. They can't help but be short of winter feed over there. Now you come with me and I'll show you your pa's winter medders. There's plenty of summer feed here but you're in bad shape without winter medders."

They rode to a stony knob above the timberline, and Ev pointed out across the deep valley, wheeling his horse in a tight circle. Some of the canyons filled with snow each winter, others had no water after the first freeze, others were too small or too hard to fence.

But there were others where herds could live comfortably behind a short, cheap economical fence, feeding from stack after stack of sweet mountain hay, packing the snow down under them as it fell and living on top of it under the shelter of spreading pines.

These were the "winter meadows," and as Ev talked, as Wayne studied the topography, he came to see how critically important they were. Each Sliding S winter meadow had its own name, its own characteristics—almost a personality acquired through 35 years of experience. From where Wayne sat he could see the haystacks twinkling through the trees. Hay, Ev said, was bucked in for miles around during the summer and stacked in each of these sheltered coves.

"Yonder, to the north, is Buckhorn, where the Orrindorfs moved in this mornin'," Ev said. "It's small but it's one of the best. Yonder is Taylor, where old Chance Taylor used to have a gold claim and got bit by a rattlesnake and died. He's buried there. Yonder is Shady, closest to the ridge between us and Orrindorfs—that's one of the biggest and best. This side of that—you cain't see it from here but it's just under that bald hill there—is White-water.

"That one yonder is Black Skull Creek—you got to watch that one because in an open winter your water freezes over—and that one is Deer Flats, and that one's sheltered nice but it's a long way from hay because the timber is so heavy. It's quite a sight, Wayne, when we're hayin'—from late June through to roundup. We keep forty mowers goin' from daylight to dark, changin' teams at noon. Twenty men on bucks and sweeps. You can stack a right smart of hay thataway."

The white tops had turned orange as the late sun hit the peaks for the last time that day. In the timbered canyons below them, bluish cold night shadows had already settled in thickly. Wayne turned his horse and for the first time the Sliding S felt like home as he thought of the big fireplace, of supper cooking in the kitchen while outside the magnificent, strong house the stately aspens maintained their eternally dignified quiet.

All this riches—for comfort was riches up here—and a girl like Fern Utley lived like a bird in a box! He tried to remember her but only a faint, nagging impression of the feel of her shoulders under his hands would come back. It irritated him that he could remember the Mexican girl's face quite clearly.

Next morning before breakfast he took a stroll in the brisk air. Jud and Chuck were saddling up in one of the corrals. Ev was sitting on the top rail talking to a stranger who leaned against a black horse. Wayne heard Ev say, "You can talk to Wayne but I don't think he'll go that high. Nobody ever paid that kind of wages around here."

"The Orrindorfs are payin' it," the stranger said in a nasal drawl.

He was a small, wiry man with small dark eyes and a big red nose. Under his coat he wore two guns buckled high around his stomach. He was not very clean.

"Joey Rose sent this feller out to see about a

job," Ev said to Wayne. "Name is Johnny Cuesta." Ev's face warned, *No, no, no!* behind Cuesta's back.

Wayne was already of the same mind, but he asked, "How much do you want?"

"A hundred a month."

"Afraid not."

Wayne got down from his horse and tied it. Cuesta followed him, leading his own horse. "I don't work for less," he said. "I reckon you've heard of me. Johnny Cuesta."

"Afraid not."

Cuesta opened his coat. On his vest was an old bronze badge. "Special operative, Nueces Cattlemen's Association. I cleaned out the Bradley gang in Texas."

"That's not the kind of help I need," Wayne said.

Cuesta began breathing light, short, nervous breaths. He was at the end of a rope of some kind. He was a dirty bum with two guns and a broken-down saddle on a cheap horse, and the broken veins in his big red nose testified as to how he had become this. He followed Wayne down through the grove, hobbling along behind him on his runover boots, arguing in a snarling, breathless voice.

"Look, kid, you can use me. I'm Johnny Cuesta. You ain't talkin' to no ordinary range bum."

"No job, Cuesta. Get it—no job!"

Jud and Chuck quietly came to the fence and then as quietly clambered through it and began following Cuesta. Both boys shuffled along quietly with their hands on their gun-butts.

"I can work for the Orrindorfs but I always worked for big outfits whenever I could," Cuesta said in that nervous snarling voice. "A hundred a month—what's that to an outfit like yours? Look, kid—don't turn your back and walk away from me like I was some ordinary range bum—"

He began cursing and Wayne whirled and said, "Get your horse and get out of here, Cuesta—and keep your hands away from those guns! You're not as good as you used to be and you never were as good as you thought you were. I want you over the pass by sundown."

Cuesta stopped. His mouth opened tautly over his stubby black teeth. He turned his toes wide to set his feet in a solider stance and leaned back, and his ragged black coat swung away from his gun-butts.

He was only the shadow of the man he had once been—a dirty shadow, rundown and ill-smelling, no more than vile now where he might once have been magnificently evil. But there were nerves in him that still twanged to challenge, and as his narrow, humped shoulders pulled back and his arms arched, he sloughed away years and decay.

"Look, kid, you don't seem to understand," came Cuesta's soft voice. "I told you—I'm Johnny Cuesta."

WAYNE MEASURED the distance between them with his eye. He thought he knew the effective range of a six-gun as well as any man who ever fired one, but there was an irrational tingle of fear all over the skin of his back, a feeling that swarmed all through his body like a swift chill. His hand itched for the butt of his gun and in his ears the blood pounded and pounded and pounded.

A split second passed and then Wayne said, "Let's go, Cuesta. You're not going to hit the broad side of a barn from that range—and I am. Get on your horse and ride. Your kind can't stop in the valley. I want you over the pass by sundown."

Cuesta stood there watching him, half hawk and half snake as the man he had once been reclaimed his shell for a moment.

The hard evil will in him softened and suddenly he was just another range bum with a tomato-red nose and patched, seedy clothing. He turned and started back toward his horse.

Cuesta's nerves were in bad shape. He tried three times for the stirrup and then had to fit his boot into it with his hands. He swung up on the black horse and turned it. He buttoned his coat over the guns and rode past Wayne saying, "You and me will settle this some other time."

Wayne snarled at him, "Over the pass by sundown—remember! If I catch you around here again I'll have you taken over at the end of a lead-rope."

Cuesta hit his black horse over the withers with the split ends of the reins and it broke into a canter. He went out of sight and the breakfast bell clanged again and Ev Winkler came running down from the horse corral. Under his whiskers his face was gray.

"You don't know Johnny Cuesta, do you?" he said.

"I do now." Wayne smiled.

"You don't," Jud said. "You had a lot of luck, Wayne. I heard about Cuesta when I was a kid. He killed five men. He's bad—real bad."

"Maybe he was once," Wayne said, "a long time ago. I had an instructor at college who had known several Texas bad men back in the sixties. They were dangerous only at point-blank range. They had to get in close. You can't pull that fast and shoot accurately, and they all relied on speed. I was taught to use a gun at maximum range."

After breakfast, Wayne rode off with Ev, Jud and Chuck on a further inspection tour of the country.

Ev led them on up the ridge and down a long, winding trail into the canyon on the other side. Then they crossed ridge after ridge, and everywhere Ev pointed out where gold-hunters had worked this valley. The tough mountain brush had already re-

claimed these raw gashes in the earth. It would not be long before the trail of the gold-hunters through here would be lost.

They crossed a sloping alluvial apron and here the deep grass had been cut to a stubble. The mowers that had cut it—18 of them—were lined up in symmetrical rows under the pines in a nearby canyon, covered with brush. There they would lie until next year's haying-season.

Wayne missed something. "Where are the stacks?"

Ev pointed across the oak-dotted stubble to where the heavy timber began at the foot of the canyon, several miles away.

"In Shady, yonder. That's one of the best cow-medders anywhere up here. You and me and Chuck can go over there and see how that herd is while Jud goes over to the Orrindorfs. We always fill Shady first. You could bring a thousand head through the winter there. Stone fences, a warm spring-fed crick, good beddin'-grounds, plenty of pines for shelter, and all that hay nearby."

They crossed the stubble and entered pines and firs again, and cattle began moving down toward them, drifting aimlessly between the trees. "Now what the hell!" Ev muttered. "That's our stuff from Shady. How'd they break out?"

"Two bits says it's the Orrindorfs," Jud murmured.

They plunged into a steep canyon that rose above them into a lovely miniature valley with a flat, sloping floor. Here, on either side of the boiling creek, Jack Staples had stacked his hay—stack after stack, as far as Wayne could see. It was a perfect box canyon, closed at the top and requiring only that long stone fence with the wire gate at the bottom.

It took a man with nerve and imagination to raise cattle the way Jack Staples raised them. It was a big concept—only those were Orrindorf CO cattle back of that stone fence. Those were CO cattle eating Sliding S hay and chewing lazy cuds in the shade of Sliding S pines.

Ev's chin trembled with anger. He reached into his saddle-pocket for his wire-cutters.

"Hold it!" Wayne said. "What are you going to do?"

"Turn them cows out," Ev rasped.

"Just a minute." Wayne stood up in the stirrups for a look around. "Our stuff has already scattered badly. The four of us couldn't separate them from this herd, once we open that gate. You know that! What would we gain?"

"What are you goin' to do then?" Ev raged. "Let 'em get by with it?"

"They already have. Ev, how long will it take to fill the rest of our meadows?"

"With just the four of us?"

"Yes. Let's not count on any help."

"Say—a week."

"And how many head will we have left over?"

"This six hundred from Shady at least. You sure ain't goin' to try to drive through the pass again?"

"What else can I do? Be reasonable, Ev! If we turn Orrindorfs' cows out, we've still got them on our hands. I'm not going to be responsible for any man losing that many cattle in the snow. They're trying to make a fight of this, Ev. You saw that fellow, Cuesta, this morning. That's the kind of man we'll have to hire if we try to butt heads with the Orrindorfs. Is that what you want? Do you want to get somebody killed or do you want to save Pa's cattle?"

Ev was too shaken with rage to answer. He turned his horse and dug in the spurs. Wayne took one last angry look at the Orrindorf herd and followed more slowly.

"When you aim to start for Sacramento?" Jud asked.

"As soon as we're caught up here and I can get a crew."

"I'm goin' with you."

No use arguing. "All right," Wayne said.

In a few minutes they caught up with Ev. "I reckon you're right," the old man said. "It's a hard thing to do, but it's smart, and it's time somebody got smart. But I wish you had more time! If you get caught in that pass—"

"We'll have to take a chance," Wayne said.

"Then let's get at it." The old man changed as his mind changed. He stood up in the stirrups to give his orders. "Wayne, you and Jud git behind them cows the Orrindorfs run out of Shady and head toward Taylor's medder. Remember where I showed you where it was?"

"Yes."

"Me and Chuck will go ahead and see what shape it's in for that many head. We may have to th'ow some into Whitewater. Black Skull is full but we can put a few more head in there. Deer Flats is empty. I hate to put more than four-five hundred head in there but this winter she'll just have to carry more. But we'll fill Taylor's medder first."

He had work to do and he was a changed man. He wheeled his horse and headed down the slope and vanished in the timber, Chuck cantering along behind him. Jud hooked his leg over his saddle-horn and twisted a cigarette.

Jud took his time lighting and enjoying his cigarette. He looked through its smoke at Wayne. "You never worked for Ev before, did you?"

"No. Pa chased me out with the trail-herd before I barely knew my way around the place."

"Take yourself a good, long breath, Wayne, because it's the last one you'll have until Ev gets them cows in. I don't know where that old man gets the stren'th! You think you're pretty husky, kid, but Ev will have your pants draggin' out your own tracks every time you get off'n your horse before this week is out."

He did.

It had been hard work on the trail to Sacramento, but it was slow work, exhausting mostly because of the long hours.

Ev drove them hard. He treated Wayne no different than Jud and Chuck. He expected as much from Wayne as he got from the others. He worked horses harder and ran cattle faster than he had ever before in his life. He cursed continuously—at Wayne and Jud and Chuck, at the Orrindorfs, at the weather, at the nature of cows, which had not sense enough to come down out of the higher altitudes when fall came.

The mornings were colder, with white frost thick everywhere and remaining on the north slopes until noon. The afternoons were sweet hours of mellow, hazy beauty and warmth, only no one had time to enjoy them.

The upper slopes had all been combed by the round-up crew while Wayne and Jud and Chuck were going through the pass with the trail-herd. All these wild cattle, most of them born up there in the higher levels, had been bunched down in the center of the valley. There was feed enough to hold them there for any ordinary length of time, and the meadows would all have been filled long before this in an ordinary year.

Jack Staples returned to the ranch once, but neither his son nor his men saw him. He came in, spent a night there and went away again, in a filthy temper, according to Lennie.

Four men came out to ask for jobs, sent there by Jack. Wayne kept two of them. They were not bad men but neither were they very good. He browbeat Lennie into feeding the other two before sending them on, because up here no man went away with an empty belly. But he sent them on.

They filled the meadows and there were 11 hundred head left over. There were, Ev estimated, 70 or 80 branded CO strays in the bunch, another hundred with no brands at all, the balance Sliding S. The last gate was closed on the last winter meadow. They had done all they could and there were 11 hundred cows too many.

"Go git your trail crew, Wayne," Ev said. "Me and Jud and Chuck will start movin' this bunch up towards the high pass. We'll have to take it slow until they get trail-wise, but don't you waste no time. Tell Lennie to bring us out some grub."

The thought of seeing Fern Utley again was a strong tonic. He could see her clearly in his mind, and what his mother would have thought of Fern, and how she might fit in with the MacAndrews and their friends down in Santa Barbara did not matter somehow.

A mile from Bear Meadows he saw a man coming toward him on a steady old brown horse. They started to pass each other with a civil nod but then the man said, "Mr. Staples, if you please, sir—one moment." Wayne stopped his horse.

"Yes, sir?"

"My name is Rodriguez—Dick Rodriguez. I should like to express myself about the situation in my family."

Wayne liked the looks of this serious, decent-looking man. He shook his head. "It is not any of my business, Mr. Rodriguez."

"But I should like to express myself, if I may. Nothing like this has ever happened in my family before. We were always people of a certain respectability."

Wayne was seeing Fern Utley too clearly to be much interested in the Rodriguez family, but he had to be civil. "You've never heard me say anything against any member of your family, sir," he said.

"I know, but this girl requires explaining," Rodriguez said earnestly, painfully. "Her father was a teacher of music in the University of Mexico. He was a very fine musician and Pieta is, I think, quite as good. If he had lived, I think it might have been different with her, but he died five years ago and unfortunately there was not much money. Pieta got a place with an opera company, and after that I did not know what became of her until I heard she was in San Francisco, singing there. I went down to hear her and we became acquainted."

He looked down at the ground in an agony of embarrassment. "I did not know she was coming up to Bear Meadows. With my own small children in the house I wish she had not come, yet I cannot make myself drive her out. But I wish I could, because she is a bad girl. Bad, bad!"

Wayne shook his head. "Crazy, maybe, but not bad. Don't take it too hard, Mr. Rodriguez. When your own father turns into a gibbering fool at the age of 64, you'll have something to squirm over."

He got away finally, before it became as embarrassing to him as it obviously was to Rodriguez, a solid, sensitive, decent man torn between his own decent instincts and family loyalty. Wayne rode on into town, and when he saw how crowded Joey's corral was he thought, *My luck is with me. . .*

He went into the saloon and counted 14 men at the bar. One or two looked like cowhands but the rest were pretty bad.

"Who wants a job?" he said.

A moment of silence. Then a voice, "What kind of a job?"

"I'm taking a herd down to Sacramento. I'll pay a dollar a day for that, a dollar-and-a-half a day to anybody who'll come back and work through the winter."

An old man not quite sober stepped away from the bar, pulling blearily at the frowsy scruff on his chin. "Can ye use a good crew-cook? First cook for the Nevada Silver and Gold Production Company. Fed seventy men all summer."

"You're hired," Wayne said. "I'll take you along on the drive." He looked at the others. "Three hot meals a day—on the trail! What else do you want?"

He got six riders and a cook but only one of them, a hard-faced Missouri kid named George Candy, looked like a cowhand.

As he led them out from behind Joey's place, a buggy pulled by two nimble grays came spinning down the street. Sitting up stiffly with the lines in his hand was Jack Staples.

Beside him sat Pieta San Juan, in a scarlet dress with a dark red cape over her shoulders. Her hair was put up loosely in what, to Wayne, was too theatrical an arrangement, but it did frame her tawny, perfect little face exquisitely.

He was sure his father had seen him too, but old Jack gave no sign. The buggy went swiftly out of sight.

"Who's the old gent?" said George Candy, the Missourian, a ribald smile on his taut-skinned face.

"My father," Wayne said. "He came to town to hire men."

"Kind of got sidetracked, didn't he?"

Wayne saw the twinkle in the kid's eyes. He said, "When I'm Pa's age, I hope I'm sidetracked the same way."

Candy nodded. "Me too. There's two kinds of women, Staples—that kind, and the kind I get."

Wayne like this kid. He couldn't be more than 19 and he would be quarrelsome, hard to handle, but he had a tested, capable look. He'd work, he'd make a hand, but then he'd drift on and get drunk in the wrong saloon at the wrong time, say the wrong thing and get shot and buried without mourners a long way from home. That was the look he had on him.

"Take these men on out to the place, Candy," Wayne said. "Tell the old man out there—if there is one there—to get a cook-wagon rigged up. Tell him I'll be along in an hour."

He turned his horse up the canyon to the Utley house. A shaggy man with fierce gray eyebrows answered his knock. Wayne remembered this face vividly but he was shocked at what the years had done to it. The mighty hunter of his childhood, the grizzly-killer, the man who whipped wagon-robbers and then forgot to mention it, was an old, old man.

"Hello, Troy," Wayne said. "What did you bring me from Sacramento?"

Troy Utley charged out and picked Wayne up in his arms. "You little devil, if that don't take me back!" he shouted. "Come inside and let's have a look at you."

They went inside. "Where's Fern?" Wayne asked. "I'm in a hurry. I've got to make another trip to Sacramento."

"She went berry-pickin'. Set down, Wayne. I want to talk to you. I'm at a point where I don't know what to do next and Joey Rose says you got good sense. How are we goin' to keep them two old men from killin' each other?"

"They won't kill each other," Wayne said.

Troy shook his head earnestly. "They will!"

Two nights ago they drew on each other and if it wasn't for me and Earl Orrindorf, one of 'em would be dead now. I got holt of your pa in time and Earl knocked Chet down and his shot went into the ceilin', but next time we ain't goin' to be so lucky."

"They actually tried to kill each other?"

"I'll tellin' you what happened, Wayne. Chet's gone over the pass to Angels Camp—to buy something purty for that woman, I figger. I told him and Jack both that I didn't want both of 'em in town at once, but I cain't enforce that very long. Wayne, I want you to do something."

"What?"

"Buy that woman off! Jack will give you the money. Don't tell him what it's fer—just buy her off."

Wayne frowned. "What do you think her price is?"

"Oh—anything! Anywhere from five to fifty thousand."

Wayne thought of his father and he knew he couldn't do it. Stubborn, dictatorial, wrong oftener than he was right where other people's rights and feelings were concerned, Jack Staples still deserved better than that kind of interference from his own son. *If he wants her that badly*, Wayne thought, *let him have her. . . .*

He stalled Troy. "It wouldn't do any good. The Orrindorf boys are after property, Troy, and if the girl goes they'll pick a fight about something else. I'll think it over but I don't like it."

Someone was coming up the path in front. Wayne looked out and saw Fern, and a fierce possessive passion, a thing completely lawless in quality and intensity, suddenly choked him. The girl was dressed in a skirt and a faded old blue waist. Her ankles were bare and she wore the same old worn moccasins. Her sunny hair hung in a thick braid down her back. She carried a sunbonnet in one berry-stained hand, a bucket of berries in the other.

She looked tired, she looked tense with the continuous pressure of loneliness that was close to madness—but she suddenly saw Wayne's horse and her whole face lit up. She almost ran up the steps. Wayne opened the door and Fern put her bonnet and berries down and held out her hands.

"Wayne! Oh, it's been so long since you were here! Oh, Wayne, I'm so glad to see you—so glad!"

She would have come straight into his arms except for Troy—Wayne knew that. "Don't he look fit, though? He's got to hit the trail to Sacramento with another herd, honey," Troy said. "He just dropped in to tell you good-by."

"Then," said Fern, "why don't you go somewhere and let him do it?"

Troy said, "What? What? But doggone it, Fern—oh! Oh, I see!"

He got out clumsily and then Wayne did not have to do or say anything. She came to him. She melted into his arms with a little eager whimper.

Her mouth came up to meet his with pressure for pressure and warmth for warmth.

He had never kissed this way before, but it was good. It was the best thing in the world. It was all there was in the world.

5

THE HERD MOVED slowly. Long before that first day was over, Wayne thanked his stars for George Candy. The Missouri kid knew far more about this job than Wayne did—more, even, than Jud and Chuck. It was George who set the pace, who kept the heavy-gaited old cows shuffling along steadily and who held back the adventurous young steers.

By evening they had reached the slope below the pass where Wayne had whipped Dutch Orrindorf. Timberline was only a few hundred feet higher than this, but still several hours away. Here the cook had pitched his camp, where there were still a few trees to break the icy night wind. The tired cattle veered suspiciously from the cook-fire and sheeted wagon and tied wagon-teams. They circled it warily, tossing their heads with a noisy clatter of long horns.

"Yah, yah, yah-cows, yah-cows, ya-h-cows," George Candy sang, a rhythmic, soothing singsong that he took round and round the herd. A weary old cow lay down with a grunt, and then another, and another.

A tremble of decision passed from brute to brute and the whole herd bedded down suddenly. Soon Goodhew, the tail-man, came plodding in behind five old cows and their newborn calves. Candy unsaddled his horse, hobbled it, and spread his blankets.

"I'll catch me some sleep, Staples," he said, "and then I'll ride nighthawk. Them critters worry me. They're spooky. Maybe it's bein' up so high."

Three of the men started a blackjack game. Goodhew dealt. Wayne was sure he was crooked but it was none of his business. The game broke up with Goodhew holding an IOU for \$10 from one of the other riders, payable in Sacramento.

Wayne sat late that night staring into the cook's banked fire. When he thought of Fern it was with a curiously mixed and indecisive regret. He had pulled free of her clinging kiss and fled like a coward, knowing that there was no resistance left in the confused girl, knowing that loneliness and the fear of much more loneliness had betrayed her.

The surge of shame, that he had kissed her that way at all, followed quickly. *She didn't know what she was doing*, he thought, *staring into the dancing flames. She didn't, I know she didn't. But I did. . . .*

The wind grew colder. It died and the frost crusted like snow on the dead grass. The Mis-sourian shook Wayne out of his blankets just as the paralyzingly cold dawn wind rose. Candy was in his own blankets and sound asleep while Wayne was still trying to get the cook's head out from under the covers.

He began to dread this drive. The cold had a real alarm in it, more than a warning. As the sky lightened he found himself watching apprehensively for clouds. The slightest congestion of clouds over that high-tilted horizon, where the scarp of the Sierra blunted the pressure of masses of wet east-bound marine air, could mean snow. Ahead of them lay wide-open gold towns like Angels Camp and Placerville. How far he would be able to trust even Jud and Chuck when they got close to the honky-tonks, the whiskey and the girls, only time would tell.

The sun rose a swollen globe of golden light. A flush of warmth burst over the jagged eastward peaks and Wayne felt the tang of energy in every breath he drew. His spirits rose suddenly, as the herd hit the trail.

The last live-oak, the last stunted, twisted and half-starved pinon-pine were left behind. Thick grass gave way to wiry thin grass interspersed with great slabs of bare rock where the hard spine of the Sierra Nevada had broken through its sparse flesh. The air grew colder, thinner.

Wayne panted for breath. The horses gasped and resisted the spur. It was hard to keep the fat cattle moving at all. The lack of oxygen up here sapped man and beast alike. It was like drowning. There was nothing in the air here at all—no moisture, no dust except the local cloud raised by the herd. The unimpeded rays of the sun scalded the eyes, and between eyestrain and lack of oxygen Wayne's head ached. He heard the men snarling at each other and he knew their heads had this same nauseated splitting sensation.

The pass was not a single gap but a series of them. These myriad stony canyons all looked alike, but they were not alike. On the west side the descent was steep and swift. The wrong canyon could lead the front of a herd to an edge where footing ended and pressure behind could start a whole herd galloping over into thin air. It had happened before. It had taken many such mishaps before men learned that this was the best, the only "pass" across this divide.

The real trouble would not come until they started down the other side. There was no safe bed-ground until they got down close to the 5,000-foot level again. They did not reach the summit until nearly noon, and this worried Wayne.

Wayne dismounted on the summit to watch the herd plod past him, seeing red whenever he saw the Orrindorf's CO brand. Candy came threading his way back between the cattle, picking his way slowly and carefully so as not to disturb the rhythm

of their march. He slid off his winded horse and rolled a cigarette, frowning.

"I been through this pass before but I never taken a real good look at it," he said. "How come your pa don't winter over in Nevada?"

"Better grass over here, I suppose, or he's closer to market, or he got cheap land—I don't know," Wayne said. "There's a reason for everything Pa does—or used to be."

Candy squinted at him. "Come on, now, Staples—have you got any idee what the hell you're do'n'?"

"Not much," Wayne said.

Goodhew came drowsing along behind, crowding the protesting old cows and the calves they did not want to hurry. Goodhew had the newest calf across his horse behind the saddle.

"I thought you said three hot meals a day, Staples."

There was no use babying this whiner. Wayne said, "You'll get them, Goodhew. I'll see that you get two hot meals tonight—how's that?"

Goodhew gave him a sullen look and plodded on, flicking his rope's end at the teeter-legged calves and their clumsy, worried old mothers. Candy got back on his horse.

"You come see what we're up against, Staples," he said.

"I've seen it."

"Not from where I seen it. You wouldn't take a herd through here a second time if you knowed what it looked like all in one piece. Dad-blamed-est sight—it'll make you sick to your stummick, it's so fur up."

Wayne followed him over the hump, and the long descent had begun.

Instead of going down the trail with the herd, Candy put his horse to the steep upward slope to the left. Wayne followed him. Their horses' shoes clanged on bare granite. Wayne felt the saddle slip under him as his horse extended itself, grunting and straining. Up, up, up—another thousand feet, where no living thing grew and where there was little organic matter underfoot and even less air. The odd thing up here was the wind—the steady, hard, cold wind.

Candy had the breathless voice of a deaf man. "Look down there, Staples—ain't that somethin'?"

Wayne looked around first at an exhilarating vista of tumbled green and black and white mountains. Over there to the west lay the growling black bank of fog that meant the sea. To the east, Black Bear Valley was an insignificant hollow in a mighty empire of swooping peaks and huge rifts that seemed to cut the very world in half. A hundred miles at least—a man could see a hundred miles in any direction!

Then he looked straight down.

Wayne was not afraid of heights, but the sudden feeling of being marooned on a pinpoint at the very top of the world made him clutch his sad-

dle-horn and dismount hurriedly. The canyon through which the cattle were filing below them was only a wrinkle, an insignificant welt on the side of the mountain. It was not really a canyon at all. Those cattle shambling along there were only inches from the edge of—nothing.

"She feels different up here, don't she?" Candy said. "It ain't so bad when you can't see what you're up against. Look at them trees down there. They look like carrot-tops, don't they?" He grinned that taut, snarling and yet somehow attractive grin of his. "Look at old Goodhew! He's goin' to try to catch the cook-wagon while you ain't lookin'."

Wayne tensed. "The fool! If he runs that herd—"

Goodhew pushed on into the herd, snapping the end of his rope to clear the trail. The old longhorn mother of the calf he carried behind his saddle crowded after him. Wayne and Candy could hear nothing up here, but they could imagine her worried bawling.

There was a sudden boiling spot of motion down there, with Goodhew in the middle. The old longhorn mother passed Goodhew. She whirled in the trail to face him, demanding her newborn calf. She bumped into another cow and lost footing—with her hind feet only, Wayne thought at first.

But she began sliding backward as she broke through the crumbling edge of the trail. She began sliding.

It did not look that steep . . . but it was. Over the edge she went. Goodhew hauled in his horse and stood up in the stirrups and watched her go. The angle of the cliff dropped away under her and she fell off into empty air, kicking and squirming. She hit the cliff again, bounced clear, hit it and bounced again, a bone-crushing impact that spun her end over end.

She stopped kicking and fell straight down, into black shadows of firs and pines in the rich bottom of the canyon. Three thousand feet she fell, and not a sound came up to Wayne and Candy.

Another cow began sliding, and then another, and another. They went one at a time, as though death had to be very methodical about this, slipping almost gracefully over that crumbling edge and spinning and bouncing and then dropping inertly into those blue-black piny shadows.

"Goodhew!" Candy screamed. "There he goes!"

The Missourian's strong bony fingers dug into Wayne's arm. Goodhew's horse reared. Five cows went over the side before the horse lost its wits and danced too close to the edge of nothing.

Its hind feet went over. The calf behind Goodhew slid over its rump. It fell sprawling. It hit the edge and bounced clear. It did not kick.

The horse kept sliding. Its saddle slipped back around its taut flanks and turned over, and Goodhew spilled out of it head-first. He rolled clear of the horse and seemed to find a grip on the slope.

He sprawled there like a lizard on a fence, head-down.

The horse slid past him and turned end over end and went twisting out into empty air. Its saddle slipped off over its hind-quarters and it hit the cliff and smashed itself with its own weight. It followed its saddle inertly out of sight.

Goodhew moved and Wayne yelled at him silently, *Hold still, hold still!* He began running, yelling, "George bring the horses. Bring both of them. We'll need both ropes." He fell and slid and ran down to the trail somehow. He kept running, seeing the hub-marks on the rock wall where the cook had kept the wagon as far as he could from that crumbling edge, seeing the cloven prints in the thin soil and the scraped white places where the cattle had crossed bare, slick granite.

He kicked off his boots and put his holstered gun down beside him. He was not afraid of heights but this had him sick and trembling. He started down over the edge and the soft, cubed shale slid under his clutching hand. He was cool and steady suddenly because he had to be cool and steady.

He dug his toes in and let himself down inch by inch in the deep furrows dug by the sliding horse. Below him the sharp angle of the slope sharpened still more. Candy came galloping his own horse and leading Wayne's. He stood up in the stirrups and screeched, "No use, Staples. You git the hell back here! His face is all bloody."

"Throw me the rope," Wayne said.

Candy dismounted, swearing. He linked the two ropes together and sent the loop sailing accurately down to Wayne. Wayne tied the loop snugly under his arms with a hitch to keep it from tightening.

"You ain't pullin' me over the edge, Staples," Candy said. "I'll let you go first."

He squatted down with his back to the towering rock wall on the other side of the trail and kicked holes for his bootheels. He clutched the rope in his bony hands and let it pay out over his knee. Wayne slid down on the end of it, hearing the steady spill of Candy's obscenity. It sounded something like a prayer.

He came to that violent change in angle and the deep canyon yawned empty. A speck of black flicked over him—the shadow of a wheeling buzzard. Another speck of black was just below him. Wayne took one quick look.

"Haul me up, Candy," he said. "He's dead. The horse stepped right in his face."

Goodhew's body let go its precarious grip and sailed out into thin air. Wayne thought of Pieta San Juan as he was coming up on the end of Candy's rope. Except for her, these cattle would be snug in winter meadows back in the valley. Except for her, Jack Staples would be running the Sliding S with his old iron-fisted skill and Goodhew would be alive.

By late evening they were safe in the bottom

of the canyon with the herd. The cook had pitched a good camp beside the river under gossipy pines.

"How fur back did Goodhew go over?" one of the men asked.

"Ten miles at least," Wayne said. "Why?"

"Can anybody find his body?"

Candy snorted. "No. Wouldn't be enough left to bury nohow. How come you're so broken up about Goodhew?"

"I ain't," the other smiled. "He had my IOU in his pocket."

The heart of the Mother Lode country lay just below them. They camped the next evening near the first and highest of the old gold-rush towns, a dying relic whose buildings were in worse ruin than Bear Meadows. But it had a saloon and a "dance hall," and Wayne expected trouble in keeping his boys on the job.

He had none. Perhaps Goodhew's death had sobered them. They worked hard and their complaints were a liturgy rather than an assessment of fact. This much Wayne knew by now—all cowboys bellyached. When they did not, something was wrong.

Here, the mighty tide of the gold rush had swept everything before it a generation ago. The crest of that tide had long since broken and receded, but there were graves in these mountains that would never be counted, names lost to all record. Those thumping crushers beyond the ridge beat a requiem of lost hope for a hundred thousand luckless ones.

Jack Staples had been one of the big ones, the strong ones; and if a calculating woman with a face like a creamy tropical flower had stolen his wits in his old age, nothing could rob him of his place in the legend that the gold rush was swiftly becoming. Jack Staples' herd wound on, day after day, lower and lower, and the ore-wagons, the freight wagons, the big log-rigs, got out of its way.

Below Placerville, in the sweltering noon heat of a hot fall day, the herd suddenly milled in a narrow canyon. Wayne was riding tail with Chuck when the dust swirled up in a cloud below him and some of the cattle turned and started to move uncertainly back up the trail. He stood up and tried to see what was wrong, but the dust hid everything.

In a moment, with Chuck's help, he got the herd moving again, but something down there still had the cattle excited. Someone was yelling. The herd swung to the right like a river breaking past a sandspit and then drifted down into the center of the canyon again.

The tail of the herd passed with Wayne and Chuck behind it. Wayne looked up and saw two men sitting their horses high on the side of the canyon. One of them shook his fist at Wayne.

"Staples, you filthy thief, you got some of my cows."

Wayne stopped his horse. "What did you ex-

pect me to do with them, Chet—leave them out to die? Dutch lost them while he was stealing Pa's winter meadows."

This was the first time he had seen Chet Orrindorf and he found now that he did not remember him at all. Chet was a shapelessly fat old man with thick glasses that made his pale blue eyes look enormous. He had a piping voice and a tobacco-stained chin. If Jack Staples' longing for a nubile young girl was absurd, in Chet Orrindorf it was somehow repellent. Yet old men married mere children back of these frontiers all the time—Wayne knew that.

"You cut my cows out and take them back or by the Eternal, I'll swear out a warrant for you!" Chet raged.

Wayne said wearily, "Tell Pa—and tell that brat to keep his hands in sight. He'll never get out of this canyon alive if he tries anything."

The rider with Chet was a redhead who reminded Wayne of George Candy. He had the same lean, taut face, the same hard mouth, the same chained-wolf's eyes. Those quick eyes saw Candy and one of the new men galloping back toward them. Candy was yelling. "That big-mouth! Anybody that would risk stampedin' a bunch of old cows in this heat! He's the one that done it—old Fatty there!"

"How about it, Chet?" Wayne asked.

There was nothing very bad about Chet, nor nothing very good either. There wasn't much of anything. Wayne's mother had called him a good neighbor but slovenly.

"I seen my brand and got mad," Chet said weakly. "You say Dutch lost them cows? Doggone him—doggone that boy!"

Wayne rode to where the canyon wall sloped upward and looked up at Chet. "Chet, I'll tell you what I told your boys—if there's to be trouble between us, you'll have to start it. I'll go a long way to keep peace. I fought Dutch and Floyd and I'm sincerely sorry I had to do it. I let Dutch steal our meadows and I'm taking care of your cows for you. Now tell me what else you expect me to do."

"Your pa is a woman-stealer," Chet said. "He stole my woman."

"Then go after her like a man! Don't try to drag the whole country into it."

He turned his back on Chet and the redhead and trotted after the herd. All good sense had gone from the world when a man like Chet coveted a woman like Pieta San Juan, but he had done his best.

They rode a few minutes in silence. Then Candy said, "What would you pay a winter hand, Staples?"

"Whatever Orrindorf pays. At least fifty a month—up from that figure. You'll get ten on the coast. Every bum heads for the palm trees this time of year."

Candy said nothing.

6

THEY TURNED the herd into the brown grass above Sacramento and tailed them over the next range of hills, to make sure they drifted away from, rather than toward, the rickety fences.

In a hot, red sunset they returned to the road. The cook had tied his team and gone to sleep in the shade of his wagon. They stirred him out and headed for Sacramento. There Wayne would draw money from Jack's bank and pay the whole crew off.

He had hoped they'd change their minds. He thought once he was going to get the pick of the bunch anyway, when Candy asked about winter pay. Nothing had come of it.

It was a live town, this Sacramento, this gold capital of the world. He tied in front of the bank, went in and got the money and then, on the sidewalk, paid off his crew. He would have to drive the cook-wagon home, leading his own horse and Jud's. The other horses all belonged to the men who rode them.

"You boys pulled me out of a bad hole," he said. "I'll buy the drinks and then I've got to head up the slope."

Jud thrust his hand out toward Candy. "Pay me, you possum-eatin' sidehill-winder! I told you he wouldn't give us no trouble, didn't I?"

Candy dropped a silver dollar into Jud's hand. He looked at Wayne. "I told the boys we'd have to put up a holler for our money. I reckon Jud knowed you better'n I do. Let's go, Wayne. We're a hell of a long ways from home and I don't aim to get snowed in up in them high passes."

"First let's have a drink," Wayne said.

They painted the town. They had a spree coming and they got it. Along toward daylight Wayne, with the help of three deputy marshals and a brace of bartenders, got his gang together.

Wayne dumped them into the wagon and headed for the high passes. That was the night the sweltering heat broke and a thick ground-fog moved in over Sacramento.

Several times they almost turned over, but Wayne kept going because what was a fog down here could be a snowstorm anywhere above 4,000 feet. That was a different world up there. This warm, wet air would condense quickly up in that world, and once it dumped this moisture in that cold, thin air the Sierra Nevada would be an impenetrable barrier for months to come.

They by-passed Placerville—Hangtown, most of these boys still called it. At Angels Camp, Wayne felt sure enough of them to treat them to supper and a drink. They reached Angels Camp on a Sunday afternoon, when it was still crowded by miners and teamsters and lumbermen who were either enjoying a week-end rest or sobering up after last night. A woman in a boarding-house agreed to

cook chicken and noodles for them. While she was cooking it, he turned the boys loose on the town.

He liked the looks of this town. He let the boys drink while he walked the streets. In a store window he saw some women's clothing. The store was locked but a man was writing at a desk in the rear. Wayne rapped on the door and the merchant let him in. Wayne tried to describe what he wanted—a riding-habit, stylish but decent, something that a nice girl could wear—a nice girl who rode astride.

The merchant seemed to see nothing wrong in a nice girl riding astride. "What size?" he asked, as though this happened daily.

"I haven't any idea," Wayne said.

He bought a habit of wine-colored corduroy, daring by Eastern standards but acceptable here. "Wrap it in plain, heavy paper and tie it with good strong twine," he said. "I'm a long way from home."

He got his half-drunk crew out of town just in time. He kept them going until it was too far for any of them to stagger back to town.

Two nights later they passed the canyon where they had camped the night of Goodhew's death. They kept going. The fog had followed them almost to Angels Camp. They were above it now but it was cold—cold all the time, not just at night and early in the morning. They pushed on through the dark until the thin air told Wayne they were getting close to that treacherous shelf just below the summit.

This part of the trail he was afraid to risk by dark. Jud remembered a turnout where they could camp for the night. It was a small turnout, and the cook's fire showed them how close they were to the edge when all the outfit had been placed.

He slept deeply and when he came awake he wondered why he felt so rested. The blankets were over his head. When he stretched his cramped muscles something wet and cold struck his temple. He lurched out of bed and stared at a snow-covered world on which snow still fell.

The fire was almost smothered but he kicked it into flames and gave his watch a dazed look. Seven o'clock: the snowstorm had postponed the day and they had overslept.

"Roll out, roll out! Hit the grit!" he shouted; and dirty, sleepy, unshaven faces broke through their covering of snow and gaped at him.

They did not stop for breakfast. The old cook had chills and a fever. Candy took over the wagon while Jud and Wayne rode ahead to break trail. The other men followed the wagon.

They never did know when they passed the place where Goodhew had gone over the edge. All they could do was hug the wall.

The steady, quiet snowfall became a shrieking blizzard and they knew they were on the naked scarp of the summit. The horses danced and fought the bit. The loose corners of the wagon-sheets snapped like gunfire in the wind and riders bent

low in the saddle and gulped the thin air, gulping down the instinctive panic that touched them all.

Then the wind died as suddenly as it had risen and the divide was behind them. They hit the first scrubby live-oaks and Jud pointed and said, "I think I remember that piñon yonder—the one that looks like a church candlestick—don't you?"

There was a home-feeling in the very air. Fern's face came to mind, clear-cut, stirring. Her eyes were closed, her lips were parted, her face rose to take his kiss. Home was a woman. Not just any woman—home was Fern, whom he had seen only twice but who now was an urgent necessity.

The snow diminished, stopped. The squeak of wagon-tires on fresh snow, the high-pitched chanting of the delirious cook and the creaking of saddle-leather were the only sounds.

"She's over," Jud said. The clouds thinned out over their heads. They rode on and in a little while Jud said, "About four inches down here, more up there on top. She's closed until May or June. We cut it pretty close, Wayne."

They were home by noon.

There were lights in the bunkhouse as well as in the big house. There were fresh wires across the foot of the canyon and cattle were standing under the aspens. Two of the old sheds had been dragged down from near the horse-corrals and now stood in the grove, and in them Wayne saw barley—hundreds of bags of it.

He knew what that meant. The Orrindorfs had taken over another meadow and Ev had brought Sliding S cattle home to the grove because there was no other place for them. Jack Staples had hay enough here for his big horse-herd but not for cattle too. This grain had come in from Nevada. It had to come from there, and Wayne thought with a shudder of what it had cost, laid down here.

They cared for their horses. The crew went to the bunkhouse. Lennie Brody opened the door of the big house just as Wayne climbed the steps to the porch.

"I thought I heard somebody," he yawned.

"You're a dead man if you don't get some hot grub on the table," Wayne told him savagely.

He was in the big wooden bath-tub in the room off the kitchen when Ev came in.

"Which one?" Wayne asked.

Ev sat down wearily. "Black Skull. We had to set there under the trees and watch 'em run our stuff out and put theirs in. I knowed you wouldn't stand for a fight and there was six of 'em this time—Floyd and Earl and you remember that little gunnie you run out of here—that Johnny Cuesta? He was with the Orrindorfs."

"They're welcome to him," Wayne grunted.

"Watch out for Cuesta, Wayne. He gives me the creeps." Ev drummed thoughtfully on his own knee as Wayne dressed. "We ain't in good shape

for the winter but we could be worse. I was across the valley this morning. One more snow and they won't bring no more CO herds over here, that's sure as hell. Did you bring any money back with you?"

"I've got a few dollars left—why?"

"I haven't got any money to pay off the boys. Your Pa didn't even leave any in the safe in his room."

Wayne stopped putting it off and asked, "Where's Pa?"

"Bear Meadows."

"Since when?"

"Le's see—this is Thursday. He went in a week ago Saturday for the church supper and we ain't seen him since."

It snowed most of the night and by morning a foot and a half lay in the aspen grove—a record for this early, Ev said. "You don't need to worry about the Orrindorfs no more. The only way they could get another critter over here would be to lead it by the neck around through town. Now all we got to do is worry about fences and keepin' the water-holes open this winter, and we got plenty of men for that."

"All right," said Wayne. "I'll try once more to get Pa to come home and pay attention to business."

"And get me some money. These boys'll be over the hill to Nevada if they think they ain't goin' to get paid."

As Wayne was saddling, George Candy came to him. "Ev says you had a run-in with Johnny Cuesta."

"More or less," Wayne said.

"I thought you didn't like to fight."

"Don't worry about Cuesta."

Wayne stepped up into the saddle. Candy looked up at him and said, "Wayne, let me handle Cuesta for you," and Wayne thought, seeing the look on his face, how Cuesta himself had probably looked like this Missouri kid at the same age.

"What good would that do, George? What are you trying to prove? That you're faster on the draw than Cuesta? No matter how good you are, there's always somebody better. I haven't met him yet but I will, if I keep on. So will Cuesta. So will you. And what does it prove, George?"

He shook his horse into a run through the deep snow and did not look back. This tough little Missourian was, come to think of it, the best friend he had ever had.

Under Wayne's arm as he rode was a paper parcel tied with heavy twine. There was no sky this morning, only an opaque haze. The snow began falling before Wayne was out of sight of the grove and he put the package under his coat to save it from the fat, wet flakes.

Bear Meadows looked very small and lonely under this immense weight of snow. The canyon

corral back of Joey's place was empty. Wayne did not want to leave his horse out in the open. He trotted down to the other end of the street to the livery stable. Ernie Sabo, the liveryman, was contentedly patching harness in the cozy warmth of his barn. Ernie had a good business here. This country looked empty but in the summer there was more demand for his horses than he had horses to fill.

"When's your dad goin' to bring back my good top-buggy and gray team?" Ernie asked.

"Didn't even know he had them," Wayne said in surprise. "Where'd he go with them?"

It was Ernie's turn to look surprised. "Hasn't he got them out home?"

"Why would he keep them out there? He's got more horses than he can feed now."

Ernie scratched his head, looking embarrassed. "I just thought maybe he—you know, drove 'em home while he was tight and—you know—no offense meant. He had a fight with Chet over that girl and I thought maybe he got a black eye, or somethin', and didn't want to come in till it healed."

Wayne felt an apprehensive chill. "A fight?"

"Just a fist-fight. I don't like to carry talk, Wayne, but it's all over town—you can't help hear it." Ernie scratched his head again. "This beats me! Wonder if he went down to Angels Camp? Chet just came from there."

"So did I. I met Chet but not Pa. I might miss a man on a horse but not in a buggy, not with those flashy grays."

"He must've went to Coliseum, then."

"Why would he go there?"

"He does a lot of business in Nevada. Oh, well—Jack's good for it—I won't lose anything. I just wish he'd let a man know before keepin' a team away so long."

Wayne took his brown-paper parcel and went out into the snow, more angry, more worried than he cared to have Ernie know. He remembered Goodhew going over the edge and he remembered how those fine, fast grays had stepped out when he saw his father driving them with Pieta San Juan.

He stopped thinking about that and puzzled over what could keep his father in Nevada so long. The pass to Coliseum went up only to 7,200 feet and it was wider, not so winding and precipitously dangerous. It closed in several times each winter but one of Ernie Sabo's jobs was to hitch up his six big draft-teams and buck the road open with a push-plow.

He went back to Joey Rose's place, carrying his parcel. Joey sat reading by the light of a pink-shaded lamp, a relic of this saloon's more prosperous days. Wayne asked if he could borrow enough money to pay off the crew.

"Sure," Joey smiled. "They'll spend it all here anyway."

Wayne leaned on the bar. "Joey, where did Pa go?"

"Isn't he out at the place?"

Wayne went cold. "No. He hasn't been there for a week and a half. Ev said he came in for some kind of a church supper a week ago Saturday."

"I haven't seen him since then either," Joey said, and Wayne did not like the look in his eyes. It held back something Joey had been about to say. "Why don't you go see Troy Utley about it?"

"Why Troy? Joey, what's this about Pa having a fight with Chet Orrindorf?"

"It's not my place to talk, Wayne. All right, all right—they did have a fight. Nobody saw it that I know of. Chet was wandering around here early the next morning with his glasses broken, half blind and not very sober. Earl came in and took him home. . . . But you talk to Troy about it."

"Was it about the girl?"

"Your father took her to the supper, that's all I know. The supper was up at the old bunkhouse dining room of the Metal Queen and that's where the fight was—after the supper. That's all I know and that's all I'm going to say, Wayne. You go see Troy."

The parcel became heavy and conspicuous in Wayne's hand. He remembered the double eagle he had left with Fern.

7

TROY OPENED the door at his knock. Over Troy's shoulder Wayne saw Fern in the kitchen door and a wild sort of elation surged through him. Fern's face began to shine and she came toward him, holding her hands together to stop their trembling.

Troy pulled him inside, shouting, "You got back! I was feared this storm would cut you off at the pass."

"It was a narrow squeak, Troy," Wayne said. He tried to catch Fern's eye, to warn her with a quick glance at the parcel. "How are you, Fern?"

She misunderstood. She reached for the package with a little incredulous scream. "For me? Really for me?"

He stood there like a guilty fool while she tore it open. She began crying when she saw the rich wine-colored corduroy—crying and hugging it to her cheek as though she had forgotten the feel of new, pretty things. That look made it worthwhile to Wayne.

"You remembered!"

She held it against her and spun on tiptoe with a graceful sweep that made her skirts swirl across her hips. Her feet were bare in soft brown moccasins and the flash of her white legs filled Wayne with a queer mystical excitement.

"Well, now, Wayne!" Troy said. Wayne met his eyes and Troy went on firmly, deliberately, "That shore was nice of you. Reminds me of how

you used to run out to meet the wagon when you was a kid. You knowed old Troy wouldn't forget!"

Fern ran through the kitchen to her little lean-to bedroom. The curtains raked shut.

"What's this about Pa and Chet fighting?" Wayne asked.

"I told you they would." Troy reddened. His eyes burned. "I kep' them old studs apart as long as I could but I ain't takin' no more from either one of 'em. Your Pa don't own me, Wayne! I'm responsible to the attorney general of this State and I don't have to take no more talk like I took from Jack last week. I'll tell you what I told Earl Orrindorf—keep your Pa at home or I'll put him under peace bond as soon as I can get a wire to Sacramento."

"Pa isn't at home," Wayne said.

Troy looked startled. "How's that?"

"He hasn't been home since a week ago Saturday. No one seems to know where he is."

"Wayne, I hate to tell you this but Chet Orrindorf says he killed your Pa."

Wayne came to his feet quickly. "Killed him?"

"Now wait, Wayne! I never paid no attention to him—who'd think the likes of Chet Orrindorf could kill your Pa with his fists? But that's what he says. I taken it for granted your dad is out home all this time. I—I wish I knowed—"

"Troy, what happened?"

In his casual, disorderly way, Troy had done a good job of running down the truth about the fight—Wayne had to admit that. His respect for the old man increased. Improvident old bluffer he might be, but Troy had good sense, he knew people and he had iron in him. Neither the Orrindorfs nor the Staples could push him beyond a certain point.

The church supper was an annual affair, the last time Zeb Gray could count on getting everybody together before winter closed in. People came from as far as Coliseum and other Nevada towns, and even the Washoes turned out. The food was brought by the women, whatever they had—beef and pork, venison and other game, fruit pies, cakes and cookies. The supper was held in the biggest building at the Metal Queen—indeed, the biggest building in Bear Meadows.

All three Orrindorf boys were there. Meanwhile their father was down at Joey's drinking steadily because Jack Staples was taking Pieta San Juan to the dance. The three Orrindorf boys had left early after failing to get their father to go home.

After the supper, Troy said, Jack had left the team tied while he walked Pieta the short distance to the Rodriguez house. Troy and Fern saw them go. Troy took Fern home and then went on down to Joey's place to make sure the hard drinkers did not cause trouble and spoil Zeb's party. Chet was there, drinking and weeping and cursing Jack Staples for a woman-stealer, but there was no trouble. Troy went home.

"The next day Chet was still stompin' around town, drunk as a hoot-owl, with his glasses gone and him so blind he couldn't see to hit the ground with his hat in three throws. Near as I can find out, after I left Joey's, Chet went up there and waited by the livery rig until your Pa came back. Chet claimed he knocked your Pa over the tailings-dump into the bottom of the canyon. I never paid no attention because who in hell in his right mind would believe a thing like that?" Troy said.

"Did you look for—" Wayne had to make him say it—"for Pa's body?"

"No, but Earl claims he did. He come into town to take his Pa home."

"Let's go up there and take a look."

"Wayne, the snow will be ten feet deep below that tailings-dump. I hate to say this, but if your Pa is dead up there, we won't find him until spring."

Wayne felt an unexpectedly sharp twist of sorrow as he thought of that tough old man lying ignominiously dead down there under that snow.

"Troy, have you talked to that girl?"

"No. The fight was after Jack took her home—if there was one."

"Let's go talk to her now."

They rode over to the Rodriguez house, a comfortable brown cottage with the long narrow porch typical of mining-town architecture. Pieta San Juan was in the side yard, taking stiffly frozen laundry from a clothesline.

The girl turned as though to get into the house before they could stop her. Then she seemed to think better of it. A small brown dog came out from under the house, yapping insolently, and crawled between her feet as she waited for them by the side door.

"Be quiet!" the girl said; and the dog subsided into shrill, whining snarls. The girl's big velvety eyes came up to Wayne.

"You wanted to see me?" she asked, quite calmly. She had not a trace of accent—unless, Wayne thought, it was the accent of the educated Easterner.

"Yes, about my father. Have you seen him recently?"

"Not since the church supper."

"Have you any idea where he is?"

"Why—at home, I suppose."

"He hasn't been home. No one has seen him since the evening of the church supper, Miss San Juan."

"No one has seen him? But—but that's impossible!"

"I wish it were." He told her what they had learned so far.

She turned toward the door. The little dog at her feet turned with her, raising his hackles and snarling back at Wayne.

"You think something is wrong?" she asked.

"Chet says he killed him."

"I don't believe that. Each of us has a way to

go, and that is not his way. That's not true—I feel it."

She put her hand on the latch. Wayne touched her arm and said, "Miss San Juan, I don't want to butt in, but it's said you came up here frankly in search of a rich husband. What's holding you up? Why don't you marry one or the other of them and get it over with."

The huge eyes widened. "You would not care?"

"I'm in favor of whatever my father wants—whether it's best for him or not. I don't know where Pa is. I'm like you—I can't think Chet killed him—yet maybe I'll get over that too. If he comes back, I'll not stand in your way."

She opened the door and slipped in. The dog slid in between her feet. Her voice came back over the dog's snarl, "He never asked me to marry him."

They went into Joey's place and Troy said, "Joey, it shore don't look good."

"I was afraid of that," Joey said.

"You didn't tell me Chet said he'd killed Pa," Wayne said.

"It wasn't my place. I thought, like everyone else, that it was the rum speaking until you bowled me over by saying he wasn't at home. He was my friend, Wayne."

Wayne put some money on the bar. He shook his head. "He still is. Joey, the girl's right—Chet didn't kill Pa."

"Where is he then?" Troy asked.

"Where's the gray team and buggy?" Wayne countered.

Joey set out the whiskey and glasses. "What worries me is this—Jack drew a new will the day you left for Sacramento the last time. Why would he do that?"

"He had a reason—a reason for everything."

"I've got it in my safe, Wayne. Why don't you look at it?"

"No."

"Here comes Earl Orrindorf," Troy said. "Earl and one of their riders. You ask him about what he seen up there."

The sound, the sight, the very scent of an Orrindorf was unendurable today. Wayne pushed his drink back untasted. "No, I'm going home, Troy. I'll just get into trouble if I stay here."

"I ask you man to man to talk to him. He told me fair and square that he thought you was tryin' to do the right thing. Damn it, Wayne, you and Earl between you can put an end to these hard feelings right now," Troy pleaded.

"I'll wait," Wayne said.

Troy opened the back door and said, "Howdy, Earl. You come in here and talk to Wayne Staples man to man, tell him what you told me."

Earl turned to face Wayne with the clumsiness typical of all these rawboned Orrindorfs. He wore a tight oilskin slicker and the handle of his .45 made an angular lump under it.

Wayne worked his finger tips against the heels of his palms, fretting out his raw nerves. He turned lazily with his elbow on the bar, his gun in plain sight.

"Hello, Earl," he said. "Did it snow much out your way?"

Earl kept watching him intently as he said, "I'll kiss a pig if it didn't! I never seen so much snow this early."

"Troy says you looked all over the tailings-dump for Pa."

Earl swallowed. "Yes. I don't know what Pap was drinkin' that night but it shore had him seein' things! I tromped up and down that gully for an hour. Maybe somebody fought there but there wasn't no sign of Jack and there wasn't no sign of his team. There just wasn't no sign of nothin', Staples—I swear!"

Wayne nodded. "Understand your dad insists that he killed Pa, though."

Earl threw out his big hands. "I don't know what to think, Staples. Pap is plumb childish."

"I don't think Pa is dead," Wayne said. "Earl, I don't believe my father and yours have enough brains left between them to wad a shotgun, so I won't even guess where Pa went. I just want to say that as far as I'm concerned, this business can drop right here."

The suspicion and distrust left Earl's face. "Fifty-fifty is a good enough deal for me. Troy said I could talk to you, Staples. All right—I'll take your word—and so will Floyd and Dutch or I'll break somebody's back!"

Wayne did not want to shake hands, but Earl started across the floor with his big hand out, and Wayne pushed himself away from the bar to meet him.

"Watch out!" Troy Utley yelled.

It was almost a scream, a high, shrill, womanish one. The back door stood open and in it was a little, dirty man with a red nose and runover boots and two guns belted high around his stomach. Earl whirled on his heels and shouted something, an incoherent and totally useless order.

Earl tried to stop it but it could not be stopped. It had started too long ago, when Wayne talked to Johnny Cuesta as though he were an ordinary range bum. Wayne turned to face Cuesta, blaming the little gunman no more than he blamed himself, and the overbearing Staples blood that had made him talk that way to a fellow human being. He heard Johnny's soft, cool voice and saw, across the length of the saloon, that strange return of his springy, able, malevolent youth. The old bum became a young killer before Wayne Staples' very eyes.

"I told you, Staples, that you and me wasn't through."

Wayne saw Johnny go for his guns. He dropped to his knees and threw himself on his left side and kept rolling, knowing that Johnny's arms

and eyes and nerves could not possibly be as good as they once had been.

He heard the slugs rake the floor and snap through the hardwood of the bar with a vicious *h'tch* sound. He took his time because he knew now that he was right—he had the distance and that was all he needed. All Johnny Cuesta had ever had was speed, and when a man got his first shot away the advantage of speed was lost.

He saw Johnny step toward him and thumb his hammers back. He lifted the gun and even then gave Johnny another chance. He saw Johnny's thumbs go down from the triggers before he pressed his own trigger.

Johnny dropped both guns. Wayne got up as Johnny went down. Johnny hit the floor on his back. One of his legs doubled up and then straightened out, the worn boot making a scratching sound on the floor. His fingers crooked tight and then relaxed, like the claws of a chicken with its head cut off.

Wayne could not look any more. He put his gun on the bar and ran to the door. He leaned over the porch and held onto a two-by-four post with both arms and threw up in the snow. Behind him he heard Earl yell, "What'll we do now, Troy? How can I hold Floyd and Dutch back after this? Lord, Lord, I wish this hadn't happened!"

8

WELL, HE KNEW NOW. Lying in bed, staring out of his window at the white aspens and the white snow and the white moon, he knew how it felt to have killed a man.

Finally he slept. He came out long after the sun was bright in a gaudy blue sky. Wayne had tried to talk to Ev about it last night and Lennie had sat there listening. He understood, whether Ev did or not.

"I got some ham and mush to fry, Wayne," Lennie said. "Yaller-meal mush, like you like."

"I'm not hungry, thanks," Wayne said. "Where's Ev?"

"Dunno. He and the hull crew went some'rs early this morning."

Wayne followed the fresh tracks of the crew and at the first rise the splendor of the valley lifted his spirits and rang a sudden curtain down on yesterday, on all his yesterdays. He never would get over killing Johnny Cuesta, but when he saw this valley under the snow, its upthrust black rock weals glowering more blackly and its lofty white peaks soaring up more whitely than ever before, he knew he could live with himself.

Tracks branched off one at a time, where Ev had detailed men to look for storm-bound strays. A man came riding toward him and Wayne waited for him, recognizing George Candy's light and

reckless seat in the saddle. They trotted along together.

"I offered to handle that for you," Candy said.

"I know you did."

"I never killed a man but it wouldn't bother me none."

Wayne shook his head impatiently. "Where'd Ev go?"

"He went to Shady with Jud and Chuck."

"Why Shady?"

"I don't know."

"I'll bet I know," Wayne said, "and if I'm right—"

He shook his horse into a run. Candy followed him. They topped a rise and saw the CO herd strung out on a hillside, miles from Shady, moving steadily toward the southeast. Jud was riding point, sitting twisted in the saddle so he could look back and judge his pace. That was Ev riding up and down beside the herd, keeping them from drifting downhill. Chuck followed, swinging his rope at stragglers.

Ev saw them and waved for them. "Candy, get up there and give Jud a hand. He knows where he's goin' but just in case anybody gets in his way—"

Candy dashed away, his horse kicking snow back over Wayne. Ev trotted down to where Wayne sat. Ev's eyes were watering and his nose ran but he was enjoying this hugely.

"What's the idea, Ev?"

The old man cackled. "I'm givin' Dutch some cows. We found a hole where we could still get through onto CO grass. It'll snow again tonight. Don't you see, Wayne? Once we get through them draws and it snows in behind this herd, no power on earth can get it back till spring. I'd shore like to see Dutch's face in the morning."

Wayne held his temper. "Let's start those cows back," he said.

"This is your chanst!" Ev shouted. "You got to hit people like the Orrindorfs where it hurts—in their pocketbooks. Why should we grain our cows while he winters on our hay?" He rode closer and argued, "Wayne, you ain't goin' to get along with that bunch anyhow—not after Cuesta."

"I will get along with them."

"We can't get back with the herd. It's too late."

Wayne was too tired to argue. "All right, we're in for it I suppose. Go ahead—but next time, ask."

Ev would pout for a week now, Wayne supposed, watching the old man dash up the slope. Wayne followed idly.

Candy rode ahead and floated over the ridge out of sight. His yell came back, "No you don't, mister! Just stay right where you are."

One of the Orrindorfs answered. Wayne spurred up the slope, scattering cattle recklessly. The first of the cattle had spilled over the ridge

and were shambling awkwardly down the steep grade. Its leaders were wallowing in snow six feet deep at the bottom.

This was the last ravine and then the long, lovely floor of the Orrindorf valley spread before him. Just across the ravine sat Dutch Orrindorf and two men, strangers to Wayne. On Wayne's side of the ravine sat Candy and Jud.

The herd gathered speed as it streamed down the slope. The momentum of the herd pushed its leaders through that last barrier, the snow-filled ditch. They fanned out past Dutch, whose freshly-shaven, sleekly pink face had a look of comical consternation.

Dutch stood up in the stirrups and shook the mitten from his right hand. Then he seemed to remember Cuesta. He sat down and warmed the bare hand in his armpit.

"You can't get away with this, Wayne," he said. "You can't let cattle out in this country this time of year."

"Then take care of them," Wayne said. "This wasn't my idea but it's too late now. We'll help move them on down to your hay, but then they're your problem."

"Listen to reason, Wayne," Dutch pleaded. "We just haven't got the feed. We're overstocked bad."

Wayne looked at Ev. "Are they really that bad off?"

Ev looked away. "Well, whose fault is it?"

Wayne reached for him. He caught Ev by the shoulder and made him turn around. "Don't lie to me! I told you I didn't want to lose any cows for anybody."

"They got feed enough," Ev said.

"You lie!" Wayne let go of him. "Dutch, I told Earl we could settle this next spring. Tell him that still goes. Now let's get these cattle back to Shady. I don't know if we've got time before dark, but let's try."

Dutch and his two men helped start the scattered herd back on its own trail. It was hard work. They were hungry men, bad-tempered men. They swore at each other continuously, but they kept crowding the herd because Wayne kept crowding them. It had to be that way.

The sun slid down toward the west and the gray overhang oozed up to meet it. Shadow covered the valley swiftly. Dutch Orrindorf hated Wayne and his men hated Wayne and his own men hated Wayne worst of all, but he kept one eye on that thickening haze overhead and snarled at them the way his father would have snarled.

They kept the herd moving. He drove the crews like slaves for the sake of the dumb beasts who had been senselessly stirred out of their comfortable winter meadow and now had to be hurried back into it. The snow began falling just as the first cow lumbered through the gap in the stone fence at Shady.

Dutch helped close the gap in the fence. They all got back on their horses and sat looking at each other, each man thinking sullenly how after all this hard work they were right back where they started, thanks to Wayne Staples.

"Thanks, Staples," Dutch said at last. It came hard.

"That's all right. Remember what I said to tell Earl!"

"Well, Earl don't run things, you know."

Wayne felt in his pocket for his mitten. "There's no reason for us ever to catch any of your people on our range the rest of the winter. We'll see to your cattle and fix up a deal next spring, when nobody's mad. One thing more, Dutch. If I were you, I believe I'd stay out of the Washoes way. You know why."

Dutch tensed and he yelled, "What did that woman tell you about me?"

"What woman?"

"Fern Utley! I told her not to spread any more of her lies about me. If she told you I was—"

Wayne struck out blindly with the mittens and spurred his horse forward. Dutch's horse spraddled backward under the impact. Its shod right hind foot rang against the stone fence, showering sparks. The mittens caught Dutch across the mouth. He swore and leaned away from the blows and lost one of his reins.

Wayne slapped him again and again with the mittens. Dutch's horse went up on its hind legs and Dutch fell out of the saddle. He got his thick legs under him and stood up, ludicrously snow-covered, dribbling blood from the corner of his mouth.

Wayne pulled his horse back and pocketed his mittens, wondering why he had never realized before what a coward Dutch was. The big fellow lived a cringing life of minute-to-minute fear, and he went from man to man to pick fights only to keep other people from knowing what he knew about himself.

This crazy assault of Wayne's had caught him before he could shore up his nerve. His yellow streak broke through.

Dutch was, in his way, the bravest man Wayne had ever known. To shrink from violence with every atom of his nature and yet make himself seek it at every opportunity—that took guts. Wayne's fury died as he saw the shamed human being standing there with his yellow streak showing.

"Watch your tongue, Dutch," he said calmly.

Dutch turned abruptly, got back in the saddle, and plunged away.

It had never occurred to Wayne before that Fern and Dutch would know each other, but they would—of course they would! The girl's face came back vividly to his mind, and it was raw animal instinct that made him twist with a jealousy so sharp that it was like anguish in his guts.

9

THE STORM was only an excuse for a holiday; the real reason was that he had to know. A girl he had seen only twice had become a frantic craving, a necessity. When the sun rose in a coldly glittering blue sky, he had an excuse.

"Ev, we had a rough day yesterday. We've had it rough right along and so have the boys. Let's all go to town. I'll stand the drinks."

They turned their horses into Joey's canyon corral, making the first tracks in the fresh snow there. From the upstairs of Joey's place came the crackling odor of frying bacon. Joey was just up. He came out for a chunk of firewood and waited by the back door to let them in.

"You boys are pretty early," he said. "I haven't even built a fire. . . . Just a minute, Wayne. Can I talk to you?"

The boys trooped in through the back door. Joey picked up a chunk of wood and looked at Wayne. "It's none of my business, but I think you'd want to know. There's some bad gossip going around town about you."

"What kind of gossip?"

"That you bought clothes for Fern Utley—that you gave her money. Wayne, you might as well stick a knife in Troy's back as do that."

Wayne exploded, "Our families were friends. We played together as kids. If a man can't make a friendly gift—"

Joey caught his arm and said, "It's the girl I am thinking of—the girl alone. You can leave this valley any time but she has to stay. So does this talk, and the Orrindorfs are spiteful people."

"The Orrindorfs?"

There came that twist of jealousy again, like a knife. Joey said, "You knew, didn't you, that Dutch and Fern used to go together? They did, until Pieta San Juan came to town. There's always nasty talk when a man throws a girl over. Now this story comes out—that you gave Fern money and clothing. You know what they're saying, don't you? That Dutch probably knew what he was doing when he dropped Fern. That she's—well, that kind of a girl. What makes it worse, I think, is that Dutch is sorry now that he ever left her. That Mexican girl just twisted him around her finger. Now that it's too late, he knows better. But he's spiteful, Wayne—spiteful!"

It was odd how the irrational jealousy and anguish died in Wayne as he listened to this narrow-minded mountain saloon-keeper. His mind got a good, steady grip on things. So Fern and Dutch used to "go together." That was a small-town term, it had a small-town meaning. *Well*, he thought. *Well!* Her poverty had been worse than he had thought.

Wayne said, "There's one thing I can do."

"Killing Dutch won't help matters."

"Didn't I make it clear to you, Joey?" Wayne said. "I'm not going to fight the Orrindorfs—over this or anything else. I'm going to ask Fern to marry me."

Joey smiled. "I was hoping that would be it. A girl who becomes engaged is entitled to her ring on the same day, don't you think? Wait—let me stir up the fire for the boys and give them their drink, and I'll bring you a ring from my safe. Ah, Wayne, it was only the girl I was thinking of all along!"

He went inside and clanked the stove as he filled it. He joshed the boys as he set out their drinks. He came out with a small box in his hand. Its rich green plush cover had faded and its leather corners and latch were cracked with age, and it opened with difficulty in Joey's smooth, strong hands.

There were only three things in it. Joey touched them lightly, one at a time. "The ring and pearls belonged to my wife. They're worth more than you may think. The ring is small but it's a good emerald. Take it, Wayne. The pearls Fern can have on her wedding day, the brooch when I die. The brooch was my mother's."

Wayne kept it casual because Joey would want it that way. He dropped the ring carelessly into his pocket. "There's one other thing you may be able to do, Joey. No girl should have it said of her that a man threw her over—a man like Dutch, or any other man. If Fern turns me down; see that word of it gets around—that she could have married a Staples but turned him down flat."

"It will make you look like a fool."

Wayne shrugged. "Just do it, Joey."

His mind at last had a good, firm, steady grip on things. Up here food tasted better, and to stand by a warm stove warmed a man deeper, and the love of a woman was an urgent want. These mountains taught a man—sometimes against his will—the three deep needs of his nature: food, warmth and a woman.

What puzzled Wayne was how this gossip had started. People might see Fern in the riding habit and put two and two together—but when had she worn it? And how could they know about the money? But it was Wayne's fault and the start of the talk was not important. It's ending was.

He saw Troy Utley come out of the front door of his little house. They met in Troy's small front yard and stood looking at each other. There was no way one man could explain to another his carelessness in a thing like this.

Troy said finally, "Hello, Wayne. Get much of a storm out your way last night?"

He was reserving judgment, giving Wayne a chance. "Not much," Wayne said. "Troy, I'm glad of a chance to talk to you alone."

"I thought it was about time."

"I came up here to ask Fern to marry me," Wayne said.

Troy kept his dignity, even as the tears came to his eyes. "She can if she wants to, but she ain't beholden."

"I would be the one beholden," Wayne said.

Troy nodded and swallowed his tears and walked on down the canyon, keeping his dignity and his distance, reserving judgment until this unfinished business should be finished. The less a man had, the more he cherished it. His shaggy, shabby, straight-backed figure disappeared in the trees that screened the creek.

Fern opened the door just as Wayne reached for it, and the unexpected lustrous beauty of the girl made him catch his breath. She had on a new pink dress. She held the full cotton skirt wide at the sides for him to see and backed away on tiptoe, her lips parted, her eyes bright, her whole lovely face glowing with breathless, rollicking invitation. He had, he realized, never seen her look light-hearted and gay before.

He closed the door and went after her, and she stopped with her back against the opposite wall and put her hands out to keep him away. First she wanted him to see.

"Do you like it?"

"I like you." His voice went gravelly. He reached for her and she came into his arms and her mouth came up eagerly to meet his.

He knew now how that gossip had started. Fern had gone down to the shoddy store here, where only the Indians did much trading, and had put down that shining gold double-eagle for the pink material for this dress. It was foolish—of course it was foolish!

"Fern darling," he whispered, "will you marry me?"

She pulled away from him. The lighthearted look went swiftly. "Because people are talking about me? That's my fault. I knew they would but I just didn't care. I still don't!"

He stared at her. "Why, you little devil!"

She tossed her head. "You were kind and good and generous. You and I know the truth, whether anyone else does. You don't have to marry me."

His voice went out of control again as he reached for her. He got his arms around her and crushed the rebellion out of her and whispered, "Yes I do. You know me, Fern. You know how little I care about what anyone says. I just want to marry you, that's all."

"Why? Say it, say it!"

"Because I love you. I want you."

"I love you too," she cried. "I want you too—so bad, so bad!"

The pink dress rustled as she rose on tiptoe to kiss him, taking his cheeks and holding his head steady while she put her sweet, wet lips up to his again and again. He caught her fingers and kissed them, and that's when he remembered the ring. He took it from his pocket and slipped it on her finger.

It was a different kind of a kiss this time. This time it was Fern who broke it off.

"Let's go for a ride! I haven't had a chance to wear my new habit yet. You promised!"

"All right. I'll go get a couple of horses while you change."

He got his own horse and Candy's nimble, tractable little pony. Fern was full of gay excitement. She talked continuously as he boosted her into the saddle and adjusted Candy's stirrups to fit her. He mounted his own horse.

"Where shall we go?" Fern cried.

"Let's parade the town. They like to talk—let's give them something to talk about."

She laughed. "You are a Staples, aren't you?"

They rode down the canyon and turned up the street and rode to the end. But there were houses still higher on this hill too, and here also the snow was roughly mounded over the debris thrown out by the miners as they gutted the steep slope. Fern pointed out the cabins that were still in use.

They emerged at last on the very spine of the ridge. The town huddled in the deep canyon below them like a picture-postcard Swiss village.

The wind up here was cold, strong, insistent. It whipped the heavy corduroy skirts of Fern's habit against her boots. It made her eyes glisten, her cheeks glow. The horses stirred restlessly as they tried to turn their tails to it. Fern leaned from the saddle toward Wayne.

"Kiss me. I dare you!" she teased. "You're afraid someone will see you."

He kissed her primly. Her lips were cold and firm and sweet. Wayne sighed.

"I suppose I had better go down and rescue my boys from the demon rum," he said. "Better not try to ride down. Turn your horse loose and let him find his own way down."

The horses were waiting patiently at the foot of the slope. Wayne held out his arms and Fern ran the last few steps to him. Her arms locked around him and her lips came up in another of those wanton kisses that rocked his senses. She pulled loose and took him by the hand and led him to an old sheet-iron shanty that stood back of all the other Metal Queen buildings.

"Come in here and kiss me again that way," she said exultantly. "Where no one can see, Wayne. You may go away and leave me tomorrow. We may both be dead by tomorrow. Anything can happen, Wayne. Kiss me once more like that."

She opened the door and pulled him inside. She came into his arms but he did not kiss her.

Lying on one of the heavy timbers that framed the shed was a tobacco pouch of heavy cowhide, stained by use until its Indian penwork design was almost indecipherable. Wayne unrolled it and smelled the tobacco in it; and if that familiar odor had not been enough, there on the ledge, where it had been covered by the pouch, was a little brass box with a mother-of-pearl cover. He opened it.

Inside was a flint-and-steel "pipe igniter" with a wick, a patented spring device in vogue some 20 years earlier.

Fern clutched his arm. "What are they?"

"They're Pa's," Wayne said unsteadily, seeing Jack Staples clearly in his mind. "I knew he wasn't dead. Look, Fern—he spent a lot of time in here. Here's where he sat. He emptied his pipe two or three times—and he doesn't smoke much! And he left here in such a hurry that he forgot his tobacco-pouch and igniter."

"When could he have been here?" Fern asked, round-eyed.

"I don't know. Fern, your dad had better see this."

They rode down the canyon, and near her house he heard Ev screeching furiously at someone down there on the street. Someone else was yelling—an Orrindorf, but he could not tell which one. He looked back at Fern and said, "You go home. Those wild boys of mine might cause trouble."

"No, I'm going with you. Dad's there."

No use arguing with her. He freed his horse at the bottom of the canyon and ran around in front of the saloon. There, in the very place where he had fought Floyd, his outfit and the Orrindorfs faced each other with Troy Utley holding down an uneasy truce between them.

Wayne went up to Troy. He took the pouch and igniter from his pocket.

"Troy, look what Fern and I found. Did you ever see these things before?"

"Why, they're your pa's," Troy said. "Where'd you find 'em?" Wayne told him and Troy frowned. "Now why would he do that? At least we know he's alive, but why don't he come home—why does he worry us thisaway? He's up to somethin'. I never knowed Jack Staples when he didn't know exactly what he was doin'."

Earl reached over Troy's shoulder and took the pouch in his hand. "That's Jack's. I was with him in Placerville when he bought it. Staples, now I reckon you know I told the truth when I said he wasn't dead up at the mine."

"I never thought anything else," said Wayne.

Chet had taken the tobacco pouch from Troy and was holding it up to his nearsighted eyes. "I thought I killed him," he was saying softly. "I thought I killed old Jack. My best friend! I kin sleep now of nights."

No one had noticed the girl who sat in a new wine-colored riding habit with her hands folded over the horn of her saddle, a new ring twinkling on her finger.

He went over to Fern and gave her his hand. "Your father will take you home, dear. You won't mind, will you?"

All Fern said was, "No, I understand." All she did was give him her foot and step down from the saddle. She smiled good-by and touched his sleeve lightly with her fingers—that was all.

But they knew. Off came their hats, and now it did not matter if the whole world knew that Wayne had bought the clothes she was wearing. This was the gold-fields and she was a gold-fields girl. There was not a man here who did not believe in the rightness of whatever she did.

They were almost home when Ev reined in. The others looked at him questioningly.

"By ginger," said Ev, "maybe that Indian rumor was right, at that."

"What rumor?" said Wayne.

"Why, the one I just heard in town this afternoon. I give it no heed at the time. One of them Washoe Indians hereabouts told somebody or other he'd seen your pa headed for Coliseum the night after the fight with Chet."

"You believe that?"

"I dunno," Ev said. "But the Washoe is supposed to have claimed he seen him go over the east pass about daylight."

"With the gray team and buggy?"

"Dunno. But with that team he'd make Coliseum by noon easy. The mail-driver does it all the time."

Wayne stared at Ev coldly. After a moment Ev dropped his eyes.

"You knew all this was important," said Wayne evenly. "But you weren't going to tell me—until your conscience got the better of you. Why not, Ev?"

Ev swallowed and shifted in his saddle. "Well," he said. "Well—aw, hell, Wayne, you know damn well the old man's better off away from here and that woman for a while. And I figured if you knew where he'd gone, you'd go get him."

Wayne swung his horse around. "See you later," he said. "I'm going back to town and look at Pa's will."

10

"I'LL GO WITH YOU," Candy said. Wayne shook his head and the Missourian snarled, "I didn't ask you—I told you. You don't know if the Orrindorfs went home or not. That old windbag Utley cain't handle them people."

Wayne smiled grimly. "Come on, then," he said.

They headed back toward Bear Meadows.

When they entered the saloon, Joey sat beside his stove, reading. "Troy told you people to go home," he said. "He got the Orrindorfs to go only because you had already left town. You shouldn't impose on the old man that way."

"We're not looking for trouble," Wayne said. "I'll take a look at Pa's will now."

Joey's eyes narrowed. "Why now?"

Wayne told him what he had heard from Ev. "Pa has a reason for everything he does. Apparently, after taking the girl home, he spent several

hours sitting in that sheet-iron shanty. Then he went to Coliseum and hasn't come back. I want to know why."

Without a word Joey went to the big cast-iron safe in the corner. There had been a time when to find 50 or 60 thousand dollars in raw gold in this safe was not unusual. Now there was a small bag of coins taken in over the bar, a little casket covered with worn green plush, and a red envelope.

Wayne opened the envelope with his knife and took out three folded sheets of paper. He spread them on the bar.

No one who had ever seen Jack Staples' strong, cramped handwriting could have contested this will. And the words were Jack's too. There were no legal flourishes, but this will would stand up in any court. Jack Staples had always known how to make his exact meaning clear.

First he named Wayne, Joey Rose and the cashier of his bank in Sacramento "to wind up my affairs and share out my propiety as I direct below."

Then came miscellaneous bequests, small enough in view of Jack's riches but big money to the legatees—\$1,000 to Ev Winkler, \$500 to Lennie Brody, \$500 to Zeb Gray for the building of a church, \$500 each to three distant cousins in Kentucky and one in England, and \$1,000 "and the cabbिन he lives in to Troy Utley or to his daughter if Troy's time comes before mine."

To Wayne he left all the money on deposit in the Bonanza Bank of Coliseum, all the stock he owned in the bank, all of his real estate in Santa Barbara and Los Angeles, and Jack's own personal effects—his guns, his collection of nuggets from the gold-rush days, and his two personal riding horses.

That was a little pitiful to Wayne. Old Jack wanted his son to want these things.

Then Jack had written, "Have \$1,000 put out at interest until time to build a school in Bear Meadows, this money and the interest to be used for building said school, providing it is known as the Staples School, otherwise the money is to go to Zeb Gray's church."

It was the last paragraph that took Wayne's breath:

"Everything else of which I die possessed and which I have not already heired to others above, I leave to Pieta San Juan so she won't have to marry any man she don't want to marry."

Wayne put the papers back in the envelope. He handed the envelope to Joey. It was hard to speak for a moment.

"There, Joey, is a pretty big man."

He walked out of the saloon and stood on the porch a moment, listening to the ringing of an ax up on the ridge. In a moment Joey and Candy came out and stood beside him.

Wayne burst out. "Why did he leave? Why would a man with gall enough to envision a school here run away in the night? He's almost the sole proprietor of this town. It's his! Yet he left it."

"I don't understand it," Joey fretted.

"Neither do I," said Wayne, "but I'm going to. I'm going to Coliseum."

"I'll go with you," Candy said quickly. "I know that trail and you don't."

"All right," Wayne said. "George, take the horses down to Ernie's and give them a good grain feed. I'll meet you here in an hour."

Fern did not seem surprised to see him. She came straight into his arms and her questing mouth found his and he thought, *She does not know what she does to me. . . .* She had changed back to the pink dress and she wore the old soft moccasins without stockings. The sight of her white ankles, the strength of her arms around his neck and the trembling of her slim body against his filled him with a mystical, somehow reverent excitement.

"I've come begging, Fern," he said. "I need food for the trail and Joey thought you'd be kind to a beggar."

Her face showed alarm. "But where are you going now? The pass is closed, Wayne."

"I'm going the other way. I'm in a hurry, dear. I'll tell you everything I know but can you get something—anything—for two men to eat?"

"Come in the kitchen—"

A stilted constraint settled over them as he sat down and drank coffee, as Fern bustled about stirring up the fire and slicing venison and cutting this morning's cold cornbread. Her cheeks were too pink, her voice too shrill, and Wayne understood; for to have her moving swiftly past him in the dress he had bought for her, preparing food he was to eat, was too dangerously intimate and possessive.

"We're almost out of everything," she cried. "Dad was going over after a deer tomorrow but the Indians told him it's going to snow some more and he probably can't get down to where they winter."

Wayne cleared his throat and made conversation. "How far does he have to go?"

"Over by the lake. He gets a horse from Ernie and hunts for both of them, but last week he had to pack back almost ten miles on foot. You know—the snow drove the deer down too far."

Fern kept talking, talking, talking; and through the door between the kitchen and her bedroom he saw stark poverty. There was no bed—only a wooden bunk nailed to the wall. There was no furniture—only a curtained corner—but then she'd have few things to put away. The walls had been insulated by tacking layer after layer of old newspapers over the siding, between the studs, until the paper padding was almost an inch deep. Over it Fern had pasted pictures, cheap black-and-white prints that were vaguely familiar to Wayne.

Fern finished packing his food and put it in an old canvas saddle-bag. He got up to take it and she put up her lips for a good-by kiss, and memory came rushing back with piercing, painful clarity.

"Fern! Aren't those the prints that used to come as premiums in the flour-barrels?"

She slipped an arm around his waist. "Yes. Your dad gave them to me when you and your mother left. Do you really remember them?"

"Very clearly. I'm glad you got them," Wayne said.

"Come look at them." Fern pulled him through the door.

"No, Fern," he said thickly.

She was a dead weight in his arms. She was crying and shivering and her lips had a strong demanding urgency. He kissed her once and pulled loose and said thickly, "This is all wrong, Fern. I've got to get out of here. Let me go."

"Oh, my darling, my darling!" she wailed.

He held her and let her cry it out. She quieted a little at a time. The trembling of her body stopped. She needed comfort, he thought, not for any specific sorrow but for the general, pervading meagerness of her whole life. She needed many things, but most of all she needed to know that she was alive, that she had value, that she counted in a world where very few things really counted.

She stopped crying and stepped back into the kitchen. "I'm sorry. You'll never see me cry again. It's only that I hate winter so. I couldn't have stood another winter here—without you, I mean."

His last view of her, standing in the doorway, was a strangely poignant one. A dreamy sort of lassitude had dulled both her frank passion and her gaiety. As he hurried down to Joey's place, Wayne wondered if it was the same as his own let-down feeling of having been cheated. He made himself think of other things because if he did not, he knew he would go back and take her.

Candy was waiting with the horses. He was the old edgy, wire-nerved Candy; to be on the move again had stimulated a harsh spirit in him. "Look what time it is! You said an hour. It'll be dark afore we git anyways near the pass."

Candy held them to a stiff canter. Then pointed ahead of them on the trail. "Look, Wayne—ain't that the Mexican girl?"

Pieta was trudging along with her head down, switching at the brush beside the road with a stick she had picked up. She was wearing boots, a man's pants, a woman's short jacket and a man's old felt hat.

She heard their horses and looked up, startled. Wayne tipped his hat and Candy quickly followed suit. Then on impulse Wayne turned his horse.

"Wait, Candy."

The girl had stopped in the trail, watching them. He did not dismount. "Nothing to be afraid of, Miss San Juan," he said. "I just wanted to tell you I'm going after my father."

He threw his leg over the saddle horn and sat studying her. She returned his bold gaze boldly. Then her long lashes flicked up and her huge black eyes stroked lingeringly over his face.

"Don't bother," Wayne said. "You're not my type."

"Type?" She was a little late in understanding. "Oh, you like nice girls and I'm not a nice girl—is that it? When you kiss a girl you want to be the first."

"Not necessarily first, but I don't care to be too far down the list."

She swore at him. He slid out of the saddle and took her by the shoulders. "Pieta, whatever you're dealing, just pass me. It occurs to me that you and I are a lot alike. We just don't give a damn. I don't know what's wrong, but I wish you'd understand that I have no ill-will at all for you. I am not one of your enemies. How can I make that clear?"

"You don't like me," she said. "You think I'm evil."

"What does it matter what I think? All I want is to find the old gentleman, my father, and help him get what he wants out of life. I'll try to make him see that he ought to offer you marriage. How can I be any fairer? I don't think it will make either one of you happy but if it's what you want, I'm for it. Understand? I'm for it."

He watched the change come over her. Her mouth lost its hard lines. "I've told the truth—he never asked me to marry him and I don't know where he is. I'm sure he had no idea of leaving when he left me that night. That's what makes me afraid."

"Afraid of what? The Orrindorfs?"

"I don't know."

"Did he ever talk to you about dying?"

"No. Oh—he always said he'd leave me a lot of money in his will if I'd let him buy us a house in San Francisco, but I knew better than that."

"I've seen his will. You'll be a rich woman, if he is dead."

Her eyes widened. "Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes!"

"But what about you?"

"I'm not broke. What Pa wants, I want—I've told you that."

She laid a hand on his arm. "You've been my friend, haven't you? Now I'll be yours. Don't give the Orrindorfs a chance to laugh at you."

It was as though he knew what was coming and it was a thing he did not want to hear. "Laugh at me?"

"About Fern. She's still Clarence's girl and always will be—the one you call Dutch."

"You lie!"

Her eyes never left his face. "No, I don't lie. She started the gossip herself. She knew you'd ask her to marry you. Don't you see? She's been Clarence's girl since they were little children and she's like that—she never could be in love but once."

He reached for her. "You lie!"

She did not flinch away from him. She said, "She never could forget the first one and you know

it. If you love her so much, she'll be a good wife to you—but you'd want to know, wouldn't you? Oh—in a way she loves you, but Clarence was her first and a woman like Fern loves that way only once. Can't a man tell by the way a woman kisses?"

Another of those bewildering changes came over her. It was deep and fundamental, in her very tissue. She caught his hand and squeezed it between hers and he saw something in her eyes that he had never believed could be there.

It was pity. "Or is she your first too?" Pieta cried. "That's it, isn't it? Oh, I am sorry for you—sorry from the bottom of my heart! Because you'll never get over your first one either, will you?"

11

CANDY TWISTED back and forth between trees, leaving the mail-road when it was drifted shut, returning to it when it opened up. They began climbing, not a steep ascent but steady.

Candy led on. The misery in Wayne settled down to a steady throbbing raw spot. A man could stand this the rest of his life, if he had to. He could even start thinking about it now.

At least she had made him forget what it felt like to kill a man. He had no regrets.

Only—what did he do now?

The snow began falling, the huge, fat, wet flakes typical of this separate world where the weather was made. They pushed on blindly, groping through the snow and thickening darkness. They rode their resentful horses sidewise, with their backs to the icy, penetrating gale. They reached the summit—and from this point it was all downgrade.

They made good time. They rode into Coliseum just before midnight. In the number of houses, this Nevada town was smaller than Bear Meadows, but there was a difference—here the houses were filled with people. There was one big mine and this whole lower slope was cattle country. There were several restaurants and saloons still open. Patches of snow lay here and there but most of yesterday's storm had hit this 4,000-foot elevation as rain.

First they took care of their horses. They ate in a saloon, and here Candy found several riders with whom he had worked last summer. Wayne was afraid that if he left the kid here he would never see him again. He took him along in search of the Bonanza bank.

It was closed but the banker's home was pointed out to them. Wayne stirred him out of bed—a white-haired, ruddy giant of a man who put on hand-stitched, high-heeled boots to answer the door. He sat in his pink nightshirt and boots and tried to remember the details of when he had seen Jack Staples last.

"I've wondered about that. He come to the house here on a Sunday morning and wanted money. I wasn't going to open the bank for nobody but I let him have what I had in the house. About eighty dollars, I reckon. That's the last I seen or heard of him."

"Was he driving a gray team?"

"Yes. That team was nigh foundered, too. That's another thing made me wonder. Jack was always good to horses but them grays had been punished hard."

"He gave you no idea where he was going, or why?"

"No, and I didn't ask. You don't, with Jack."

"How much did he keep on deposit here?"

"I'd have to look but it was usually around thirty thousand."

Wayne whistled. "That much?"

"Jack liked to have money handy in case he got a chance to turn a quick trick. Me and him own this bank fifty-fifty. You think the old man is dead?"

"No, I don't, but he left me in a bad position. I can't even pay off the crew. Can I draw against his account? I'll need money for expenses for myself, too."

"Sure! Tomorrow's mail-day, if the road opens. You can send coin back to Ev Winkler. How is old Ev?" The banker followed them to the street in his nightshirt and boots and stood gossiping sociably. "Try Los Angeles. Jack always liked that town and he's got prop'ty there."

"I just heard that. Does it amount to much?"

"He's got a sizable ranch down on the ocean. There'll be twenty, thirty thousand people in Los Angeles someday, he thinks. If he's right that ranch will be worth money. Me and him used to go down there and hell around them Mexican rodeos till my old lady put a stop to it. Look for him amongst the Mexicans."

"I will," Wayne said.

They got a hotel room and slept the sleep of exhaustion, rising late the next morning. They visited the bank and mailed a small envelope full of gold coin back to Ev. They spent the rest of the day searching for anyone who had seen a fancy gray team and top-buggy.

They found no one. To Wayne's surprise, Candy stayed close to him and he stayed sober. They spent another night in Coliseum and early the following morning they saddled their horses and tied their bedrolls on behind.

This time Wayne led the way. A fairly well-traveled road led south out of Coliseum, winding gradually down to lower levels and hugging the Nevada side of the border. Every few miles they saw mines, some abandoned, a few still running. Here and there were rich-looking cattle spreads, now and then a recently abandoned gold-town, the windows of its buildings still intact but their doors swinging, their interiors gutted by looters.

They slept that night with two brothers, wild-horse hunters in the desert in the winter, Mother Lode-seekers in the summer. The next darkness caught them far from any shelter. They huddled around a fire all night, listening to the doleful chant of the coyotes and sleeping on their haunches in fitful dozes.

Two days later they rode into a lively little cow-town and there, through the rails of a corral, Wayne saw the gray team. It was a commercial stable and freight office. Wayne went in to interview the proprietor, a hard-eyed, lumbering, raw-boned man who leaned on his counter and answered questions curtly. Yes, he had bought the grays, badly run-down, from a man answering Jack Staples' description.

"Where did the man go after he sold it to you?"

"Ketched the stage south," said the freighter. "He was pretty drunk. He sold his watch to the feller that runs the saloon down the street before he came here with his team. Was he kin of yours?"

"A little," Wayne said.

For five days they followed the meandering trail of the stage, at every overnight tavern and meal-stop finding someone who remembered Jack Staples.

On the fifth day the trail ran out. Here Jack had left the stage and for \$10 had bought a worthless pony and saddle. The garrulous old horse-trader who sold them to him had pointed out the eastward trail across the desert.

"I told him not to try to get through by himself but he said to mind my own damn business. Ever seen the Mojave?"

"No," Wayne said.

"Neither've I," said Candy.

"He was pretty old to tackle the Mojave on that old crampy mare. You'll see what I mean. Go take a look."

They took a look.

West of town a low range of barren hills, purple and beige in color, stood like a fortress wall. Above and beyond them hung a vague chocolate-colored haze. A long morning's ride brought Wayne to the wall of low hills. In another hour they broke through a bleak and lifeless pass and reined in. The Mojave lay before them, lit by a bright winter sun.

"Lord Almighty!" Candy said.

Wayne felt sick as he thought of one lonely old man on a broken-down horse trying to cross those endless, lifeless miles. That chocolate haze was the Sierra Nevada; from here Wayne could see its conical white peaks clearly. Up there were rich valleys. Up there grew mighty forests. Up there were high, deep, eternal snowdrifts that defied the sun, and thin air that never slaked the starvation in a man's panting lungs. He knew that country now.

But between him and that white range lay a hundred miles of broken, barren country that rolled and swirled in a million cruel canyons, garish-

ly shining with reds and blues and purples and browns—everything but the living color of green. This was the desert.

They circled Death Valley to the south, threaded the magnificent desolation of the Inyo Slope, and rode down through the Joshua-tree forests behind long trains of mule-drawn wagons. They limped their sore-footed, sore-mouthed horses at last into Los Angeles, and here Wayne's money could buy clothing, food, grain for their horses.

Wayne was no stranger to this sleepy town of 10 thousand. His mother had friends here and Wayne, as a small boy, had often visited stately old homes in the San Gabriel Valley ranchos. That was too far in the past, a thousand years ago, for him to think of now.

At the registrar's office he tracked down the property Jack Staples owned. He shook his head in amazement when he saw it. Hundreds of fat cattle, hundreds of acres of lush winter barley—it was rich, rich! And this place Jack owned without even thinking to mention it to his son.

But no one had seen Jack Staples. The next day they went down into "Old Town," to the Mexican shacks along the waterless river. They worked eastward and outward from here and at last stood on the edge of a newly-leveled field where hundreds of men were digging *zanjas*, or irrigation ditches.

"Want a job?" a man asked them.

"Doing what?" Wayne asked.

"Plantin' orange trees."

"What the hell is an orange tree?" Candy wanted to know.

Between the ditches moved a fine four-horse truck, loaded with tree seedlings. The driver of the team, perched up on a high seat, had his back to Wayne and Candy.

But those burly shoulders were heartbreakingly familiar. It was now 41 days since Wayne and Candy had left Bear Meadows. Wayne caught the Missourian's eye.

"I'll wait here," Candy said.

Wayne nodded. He could not speak. He crossed the field, and the *zanjeros* leaned on their shovels and watched curiously. He swung up on the back of the truck and picked his way between the seedling trees and laid his hand on the thick shoulder of the driver of the fine four-horse team.

"Hello, Pa," he said.

12

JACK STAPLES' ruddy face turned ashen. His eyes blazed and his mouth twisted. "Get away from here!" he grunted at Wayne, trying to shake off his hand. "Get away before somebody sees you!"

Something was wrong. "Take it easy, Pa," Wayne said. "Let's get this straightened out. What's the trouble?"

Jack struck at him. "You always was a fool! Straightened out! I killed my best friend and you want to straighten it out. Why couldn't you leave me alone?"

They had been following the trail of a broken old man, but this was almost the Jack Staples that Wayne remembered. He was thinner and older, but he had found some kind of peace.

Wayne struggled with the great, the incredible, the impossible truth. "You mean Chet?" he cried. "But Pa, Chet Orrindorf is as healthy as the day he was born! He's not dead."

Jack's hand shot out and clutched his wrist. "What?"

"Pa, it's the truth. There's nothing wrong with Chet. Is that what you've been thinking—why you ran away?"

The color returned slowly to his father's face. He clung to Wayne's wrist and said harshly, "You lie! What kind of a trick is this? I knocked him down the tailings-dump. I killed him—killed him over that no-good woman."

The senseless hostility was over, despite all the Orrindorf boys could do to keep it alive—ended by the most hilarious joke life could play on two solemn, self-centered old men. All Wayne could feel for a moment was complete weariness. It was like winning a hard fight. Not even the victory meant much; a man got numb.

"You may have knocked him down but you didn't kill him. Chet thinks he killed you, too. Pa, Chet has aged ten years with that on his conscience."

"But Floyd told me he was dead! Floyd helped me get out of town! He—he said you never wanted to see me again. He wrote me a letter—here, I got it here, I'll show it to you—Ira Silver, that's the name we made up. Look!"

Wayne's elation died. It was not a joke. It was a cruel and pointed betrayal of both old men. He had underestimated Floyd, not just his tenacious stubbornness in going after those winter meadows, but his quickness of mind in how he had handled this situation.

He skimmed the letter quickly:

Deer Jack, everything is about the same, Earl and Dutch are sore but I am your friend, you know that. Do you need any Munny? Lay low and I'll send you some, Ira Silver, care Post Master L. Angeles.

Wayne still dont want to see you agin. Well he wont stand by you in your time of trubble but I will, just lay Low till this blos over. Everybody greeves for pa but I no he started it and I am your friend.

Floyd.

Wayne refolded the letter and handed it back. "Let's go home, Pa. We've been played for fools."

They walked off and left "Ira Silver's" job without a backward look. They sat down in a

Mexican café and ordered food, and Jack Staples told all he remembered of the night of the church supper. He was still dazed and shaken. He kept saying, "Wayne, you wouldn't play a trick on me now, just to get me back? Chet really is alive?"

"It's no trick, Pa."

Hard work and enforced self-discipline had been good for Jack Staples. So had the ordeal of the desert—which for him had been no ordeal at all. He had enjoyed every minute of it, he said. "Them's my kind of people. I like that country. Never knowed I was so tired of snow."

Candy stirred restlessly. "How about the fight?"

"I'll tell you."

After taking Pieta home, Jack had returned for the gray team where Chet Orrindorf, more than a little drunk, was waiting for him. At first Chet talked fairly reasonably, Jack said. No bluster, no name-calling. He just wanted to straighten this thing out man to man.

Jack had dropped the tugs, for safety's sake, when he tied the gray team. He leaned against one of the horses and talked with Chet until he saw it was no use.

"He got mad and started callin' me a woman-stealer. He had that idee in his head and you couldn't get it out; so I started to hook up my team to go. I wasn't going to stand there and talk all night. Chet started to help hitch up but he up and got mad, and I see him swing the end of a tug at me—"

The iron clip on the end of the tug caught Jack over the ear and dropped him. He did not quite go out. He remembered the threshing of the startled horses, the hind feet of one of them flashing dangerously close. He rolled under the buggy with Chet kicking at him. One of the wheels of the light buggy ran over him, frightened him more than it hurt him. He saw Chet looking for him with a chunk of wood. He started around the buggy to take it away from Chet. One of the horses reared and the buggy rolled back against him. He heard the scream of the tire on the rub-iron as the buggy cramped and that was the last he remembered.

"The next thing, Floyd's helpin' me climb back up the tailings-dump. Seems to me it took us hours to get to the top. Floyd said he seen the fight start and I reckon he did, because he knowed his pa had hit me with the tug. He said he seen me take that chunk of wood away from Chet and knock him over the edge of the dump. He said I jumped down after him and kicked him to death. He said it wasn't my fault and I ort to get out of town. I told him to go get you and Troy but he 'lowed he was afeared of what Earl and Dutch would do."

"Earl had too much sense and Dutch didn't have the guts to do anything," Wayne said. "You never did actually see Chet after he had that chunk of wood?"

"No, but—"

"It was Floyd had you wait in that sheet-iron shanty?"

"Yes. He said to wait there till he got a chance to help me out of town. He rode a few miles out on the Coliseum road with me to make sure I got off safe. He said he'd tell you where I was, the minute you got back from winter range."

It took no great intelligence to do what Floyd had done—just a little crafty quickness. *He wants those meadows badly*, Wayne thought. Probably Jack had been stunned by that blow on the head with the harness-tug and had not been clear-headed at all after that. With Jack half-senseless from a blow and Chet full of liquor, it took no great guile to convince them that they had killed each other.

"Let's go home," Jack Staples said.

"Then what?"

"I don't know. I don't want no more fights."

"What about the girl?"

Jack shook his head vigorously. "I was a fool. I reckon every man has his second childhood. That was mine."

There was one thing more to be said. "Pa, I made Joey show me your will."

Jack looked startled. "Why?"

"I thought it would tell me where to look for you."

Jack squirmed. "I was out of my mind. I'll change that soon as we get back."

Wayne was tired. He dreaded the long ride home, but Jack said they'd take the train to San Francisco. "Long time since I been on a train. We'll go in style."

"How'll we get through the pass?" Candy wanted to know.

Jack's gray eyes twinkled. "We'll go around it, on snowshoes. I'll learn you young'ns a trick or two."

In San Francisco Jack bought a pair of glasses for Chet. "The old jackass is blind as a bat without his specs. I seen him walk into a bronc once and nearly get his head kicked off. I'll take him these before the old fool kills himself."

That was the old Jack Staples talking. It was a good sign.

They caught a river boat to Sacramento and there took a stage that traveled circuitously north, east, its destination Reno. That evening they got into the snow. The first sight of it brought back the memory of Fern—a whole kaleidoscopic blur of memories. And Wayne wanted to turn and run.

Even the lower-altitude passes to the north were closed, and the stage stopped at the halfway house a thousand feet below timberline. Here the proprietor, an old gold-rush chum of Jack Staples, said he had never seen so much snow in all his years in the Sierra Nevada.

Here Jack bought a rifle and three pair of snowshoes and pack-gear. Here he rented three

horses; and as the stage started its return trip to Sacramento at daylight the next morning, Wayne and Jack and Candy pointed their horses toward the peaks.

By noon they were over their horses' depth in snow. They dismounted, laced on their snowshoes, and shouldered their packs. The horses started back eagerly toward the inn.

Wayne had never worn snowshoes before and, from the look on Candy's face, neither had he. They let Jack take the lead and imitated his movements until they got the hang of it.

They passed the last trees. Still they climbed. Now and then Jack took a practice shot with the rifle. The crack of the gun in the cold, thin air pleased him. He loved guns and skill with them seemed to be born in him. He took no time drawing a bead, but he hit his targets.

Long before dark, Jack began breaking off chunks from the sparse brush that grew above timberline. Wayne and Candy did likewise. By the time night fell they had the fuel for at least a small fire. They spent the night at the very top of the divide, with a freezing wind screaming through the narrow chute over their heads. The snow had been blown away here. The rocky ground lay bare and bleak.

The fire Jack built was an Indian's frugal one. He ate like an Indian, munching whatever was handy from their pack. He could sleep like an Indian too, squatting over the fire with his face relaxed, his breath light and steady.

Candy whispered, "Tough old cuss, ain't he?"

Jack was instantly awake. "I heard some place in Nevada that you'd killed a man," he said. "Whot was he?"

Wayne told him. He could talk about it freely now. "I rode him, I guess. When the time came, I had to shoot in self-defense, but the time would not have come if I had not talked to him like a dog."

"That's a guess," Jack grunted. "The time always comes for them fellers. They make it come. You had luck. Don't push it. Next time it could be you."

"I don't think it makes much difference, Pa. The killer dies, in part, along with his victim."

"You'll get over that. You can't let things lick you."

Something made Wayne's head jerk up. "You've killed a man yourself?"

"Yes." Jack frowned at Wayne a moment and then said, very carefully, "Didn't your mother tell you?"

"No."

Jack laid another small stick on the fire. "I will then. It's a long time ago, though."

Sitting around a fire up there in that shrieking high wind, with a million stars glinting overhead and the Northern Lights flickering faintly at his back, Wayne heard the story of his parents' mar-

riage. Its stresses had been built into it. He had been born of conflict.

He knew that Althea MacAndrews came from a "good" family down on the Coast. He had grown up with them until all his elderly aunts and uncles died and he and his mother alone were left. He knew that the MacAndrews money had run out, that they had been able to keep up the old home in Santa Barbara only because Jack Staples bought it and sent regular drafts from his Sacramento bank. What he had not known, and had always wondered, was how a pretty, vivacious and headstrong woman like his mother could have met, let alone married, a rough, crude, gold-fields adventurer like Jack Staples.

Althea had run off from Santa Barbara with a good-looking New Yorker who posed as the advance agent for a New York syndicate interested in Sierra Nevada mining properties. His name was Harry Neff and apparently he had at least some connection with New York money, because he did sign an option here and there and on some of them, at least, the capital was forthcoming.

But he was a grafter, a parasite, an easy-money shark utterly devoid of principle. He had served a prison term in New York and had a wife and two children in dire want back there. That much came out afterward.

Neff was 30, Althea 17, when they ran away from the MacAndrews rancho, stealing a MacAndrews team and enough MacAndrews money to get them to Sacramento. There Neff refused to marry her. Althea had caught cold and was ill when he took her to a disreputable rooming-house and locked her in, saying that when she got well she should have no trouble making a good living for both of them in the gold-fields.

But he could not resist bragging, and Jack Staples happened to be in Sacramento that night.

Wayne knew what was coming; it was a thing he might have done himself, it was a bull-headed, well-meant blunder like the time he had given Fern Utley money.

Jack heard the story and spent a day verifying it, digging out details in that methodical way of his. He found the rooming-house and bullied the woman who ran it into unlocking Althea's door. The girl was too ill even to know when the strange man came in and looked her over. Jack had her moved to a doctor's house, where the doctor's own wife could nurse her.

That night he baited Neff into drawing the .38 the grafter carried in the waistband of his trousers. He shot Neff between the eyes and there were plenty of witnesses who saw Neff draw first.

The next day Jack took a preacher—the same one who had read the funeral service over Harry Neff—to the doctor's house where he had left the sick girl. With the doctor and his wife as witnesses, Jack Staples and Althea MacAndrews were married. Three days later the doctor said

Althea was well enough to travel, if she had good care.

"She'll have the best," Jack said. He bought a fine carriage and had it converted into a luxury ambulance. He hired a driver and a cook and took along five men on horses to clear and repair a road and, where necessary, build one. Jack rode beside the converted carriage on his horse, never taking his eyes from the sick girl.

They were almost to the top of the pass when Althea looked up from her bed in the carriage at the burly, silent stranger and asked, "Who are you?"

"I'm your husband."

"I wondered if I dreamed it."

She was high in the mountains with a husband she did not know and certainly did not want, a gruff, silent, crude and domineering man twice her age, before she was actually out of her delirium.

Jack Staples had seen a young, pretty, well-bred, spirited woman to be had for the taking—for the simple, offhand act of killing a man. He had seen his chance to beget sons, as Chet Orrindorf had begotten them. Sons were necessities up here in the mountains, like food, warmth and a woman.

"She stuck it out for three years and then I told her go ahead, she might as well go if she wasn't ever goin' to like it. Only then she found out she was goin' to have a baby—you. She allowed she'd try it a while. The funny thing is, we never did fight. She just up and told me one day she wasn't goin' to have you brung up like a damned hard-rock miner or an illiterate cowboy and I could like it or lump it. She told Ev to hook up a team and 40 minutes later she was on her way to'rds the pass."

"I know what was the matter with my mother," Wayne said. "She never got over Neff, did she?"

"I reckon not," Jack said. "Some women just never get over the first one."

They got down to timber the next day, and Jack shot a young bull with his rifle. They feasted that night on fresh liver and slept soundly on a padding of pine needles.

Wayne and Candy had long been lost but Jack trudged on, from landmark to landmark, skimming canyons filled with snow, skirting great open flats where the flat drifts lay 30 feet deep. They climbed again, descended again, twisted around steep slopes and climbed and descended again. Toward noon Jack leaned on his rifle and sighed.

"Looks good, don't she?"

It took Wayne a full minute to orient himself so he could recognize Black Bear Valley. They were high on the north slope, above Buckhorn meadow. They had traveled a gigantic circle, half the length of one State and back half the length of another.

He had brought Jack Staples home and now he must see Fern again and make up his mind.

Not until the buildings of the Sliding S came in sight did this actually look and feel like home.

They came down the steep tanyon-side. They took off their snowshoes and carried them through the grove. Jack asked no questions when he saw the grain-fed cattle behind the fence.

Ev was out with the boys, but less than two hours later the whole crew came trooping in. Ev had picked up the tracks of their snowshoes at Buckhorn, where he had gone to check fences. He came in and found Wayne and Jack and Candy still at the table. They had long since finished eating but still they sat there, gluttoned with food, tired all over, surfeited at last with warmth.

Ev's contemptuous eyes swept over Wayne and met Jack's. "Howdy," he said. He sailed his hat into a corner and put out his hand to Lennie for a mug of coffee. The other riders bunched uncomfortably in the doorway.

"Howdy, Ev," Jack said. "How'd she go?"

"Jack," Ev said abruptly in an angry, crackling voice, "The Orrindorfs been using our medders while you was away."

"Wayne told me all that," said Jack.

"What you goin' to do about it?" demanded Ev. "They're all in town now."

Jack yawned. "Ev, Wayne has been right about this all along. Me and him can settle this with Chet and Earl in five minutes next spring. Ev, me and Chet hiked into these mountains together with nothin' but a clay-pick and a gold-pan. I don't want to fight with that old fool!"

"But that Mexican woman—"

Jack called Pieta a name. Then he sighed wearily. "It's late but maybe I better go in and see the Orrindorfs."

Wayne sat there feeling heavy-bodied and dull, held not so much by indecision as pure cowardly dread.

But he had to see her sometime.

"I'll go with you, Pa," he said.

Candy's little eyes widened. "Me too," he said.

13

IT BEGAN TO SNOW as they reached town. They went at once to Joey Rose's saloon.

As they approached, the saloon door opened and Joey came out, his face tense. His eyes threw Wayne a warning signal. Wayne tried to answer him the same way: *Don't worry!* He did not know whether Joey got it or not because behind him came Floyd Orrindorf, talking to his father in that loudish braying voice of his.

Chet felt his way to the edge of the porch and blinked up blindly at the sky. "Still snowin'. I declare, this is a mise'ble winter!" he said, and his petulant voice was deeply pitiful to Wayne.

Jack Staples went up to him. "Howdy, Chet."

Chet flinched back. "Is that you, Jack?"

"Yes. Wayne said you busted your spectacles so

I brought you some from San Francisco. Now don't bust these, you damned awkward old fool!"

Chet unrolled the long winding of tissue with fumbling fingers. He put the glasses on and peered down at his old friend. He seemed surprised to see how Jack had aged, just as Jack seemed to be surprised at how Chet had aged.

Jack came a step closer. "Chet, you called me a woman-stealer the last time I seen you. I always made my brag that I'm man enough to own up when I'm wrong. I own up now—I tried to steal your woman. I don't know what got into me but I done it, and I'm sorry. It ain't easy to say but I said it—I'm sorry, Chet."

Chet's mouth worked. "She wasn't my woman, Jack. I wish to God I'd never seen her!"

Floyd was thinking of the winter meadows, of being bottled up in their tiny valley again, of losing this last chance to keep his father nerved up for a fight. He was the hardest, the boldest, the crookedest, the most ruthlessly single-minded of all the Orrindorfs.

Then someone laughed—a sound like the ringing of a little golden bell.

Pieta San Juan and Dutch Orrindorf came down the canyon and around the corner of the saloon. The girl had on a dress of bright yellow silk, low-cut, short-sleeved—a dress like a spot of flaming sunshine in the snow. Her heavy black hair hung down her back, tied with a small yellow ribbon. There was a high choker of pearls around her creamy throat and a tinkling gold bracelet on her wrist.

Her hips swayed. One hand touched Dutch's arm lightly, the other held her skirts just high enough to betray the yellow slippers she wore and the gold chain that encircled one slim, bare, tawny ankle. She was all gold—dress, ribbon, shoes, bracelet, anklet. Even her skin was gold.

She was dressed for summer, and it was winter. She was the great illusion—the Mother Lode, eternal wealth, eternal warmth, eternal spring. The two cold old men stood in the snow and stared at her and forgot they were friends again. To Wayne, the ironically cruel thing was that Jack Staples had bought Chet Orrindorf the spectacles that let him see this woman. The queer thing was that Wayne should suddenly remember Johnny Cuesta, and grow weak again with the horrible sickness that had followed his killing.

Poor Dutch, he thought.

Dutch did not want to do this but the girl had made him do it. Wayne had come close to winning. He had almost kept the peace, but there were no measures a man could take against a bright golden girl who offered two cold old men the great illusion of eternal wealth, eternal spring. Wayne saw the ugly black look, fierce and murderous and primitive, sweep back over his father's face.

Jack's voice rasped out: "*Dutch!*"

Dutch turned white and staggered backward

away from the girl. Pieta looked at Jack and saw what she had done. She put her hands to her cheeks and began screaming, one insane scream after another.

Floyd Orrindorf saw his chance. One excuse was as good as another to this most single-minded of all the Orrindorfs. The girl meant nothing to him, but the winter meadows did. He saw his chance and took it. He pulled his elbows back and his hands opened to claw at his guns.

"Dutch—I'll handle this—get back!" he shouted. "Jack, you make one move and I'll blow your head off."

He called Jack Staples a filthy name. Jack was a split-second late in understanding that Floyd meant to kill him no matter what happened. His grizzled head swung up and he stared at Floyd on the porch with a puzzled look in his eyes. The girl kept on screaming and Wayne fought the sickness in him, but he knew that this screaming golden girl had already murdered his father.

And then George Candy crouched and flung out his arm. His mean eyes had a happy glitter in them, as though life had finally found time to give him some important thing. His voice slid up stridently, pulling Floyd around to face him like a jerked wire.

"No you don't, Floyd—don't try it, Floyd—keep your hands away from them—*ah-h-h-h!*"

He let Floyd get his hands on his guns. Wayne never did see Candy's motion but suddenly his gun was barking. That thin kid was braced against its recoil, crouched like a spider with his good-looking face taut with joy.

Floyd dropped both guns. His knees buckled. The holes in his chest welled two thick streams of blood. He pitched off the porch into the snow on his face. He rolled half over and did not move.

Pieta San Juan bunched her skirts in her hands and began running up the canyon. Wayne followed her, thinking, *I'll kill her. I owe this to Johnny Cuesta because he was the wrong one—I killed the wrong person. . . .*

The girl leaped for the stepping-stones across the creek. The yellow slippers slipped on the mushy fresh snow and she went into the icy creek to her hips. Wayne almost got his hands on her, but Pieta was young and quick and strong, and she had nerve. She scrambled up the bank on her hands and knees, her teeth chattering, the sodden yellow dress clinging to her legs. She turned on her knees to face him.

Her arm flashed and a rock as big as a door-knob hit Wayne on the cheekbone, turning the world dark. By the time he could see again, she was out of sight. That ugly little dog of hers barked. A door slammed.

He started walking up the canyon. At Troy Utley's house he remembered a thing he had yet to do, but not today. There were no tracks in the snow there, no smoke from the chimney. Fern had

gone over to the lake after a deer with her father. No doubt Dutch Orrindorf had strutted back and forth past this little lonely cabin, with Pieta on his arm, until it was more than she could stand.

He knew he would never see this girl's like again. Fern had a grand simplicity of nature. She probably did not even know that she loved a loutish coward. Or perhaps she saw in Dutch a thing no one else had ever seen because Dutch was ashamed, and kept it hidden—a basic gentleness of nature, a simple, decent tenderness.

No man could hate Dutch. That anguish twisted his guts again as he walked on up the canyon. He knocked at the Rodriguez front door. Inside, the vile little dog snarled until Rodriguez cursed it in Spanish.

Rodriguez opened the door, round-eyed but not afraid. "What do you want?" he asked, with some dignity.

"I want to see Pieta," said Wayne.

"Are you going to kill her?"

Wayne was too tired. He said, "I guess not, but I want to see her. I guess I lost my nerve but I'm still going to see her."

Rodriguez threw back the door. He pointed to an inner door and said, "In there. I hope you will do what needs to be done. Pieta would be a good girl with a strong hand on her neck."

The dog nipped at Wayne's ankles. He picked it up and handed it to Rodriguez and said, "Keep that damned thing out of my way."

He did not even knock at Pieta's door. He opened it and went in. The girl had taken off her outer clothing. Her petticoat was half down and her teeth were chattering. Her black hair was tumbled about her face and bare breasts. Her eyes went blank with terror. She pulled the petticoat up and shrank back against the wall.

He started across the room toward her. He kicked a chair out of his way and it fell against her dresser and rattled the chimney of her unlighted lamp.

The harsh sound mobilized something in her. The fear went out of her eyes. She tossed her head.

"Get out!" she said contemptuously, not bothering to raise her voice. "Get out of my room! Where do you think you are?"

His open hand caught her across the mouth, hard. It was something he had wanted to do for a long time.

Her head hit the wall and her knees buckled, and she went down.

In the open closet hung the short jacket she had worn out on the Coliseum trail, the day he had heard about Dutch and Fern. He threw it to her.

"Put that on, and get up."

She put the jacket on with a look in her eyes that suddenly, treacherously broke his heart. No man, he was sure, had ever seen her look like that—whipped, frightened, docile, tame.

He knelt down, put his hand on her shoulder. "I wish you'd tell me why you did it," he said. "You're tough and brave and smart. You're not a quitter, but when a girl like you wants a rich old man for a husband, that's quitting. Why did you do it?"

"A man," she said.

"Was he your first one?"

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"He was no good. Just no good."

"But you still never got over it, because he was your first."

"Yes."

"That's how you knew about Fern. You're that way too."

"Yes."

He cupped her chin in his hand. "We're in the same boat, Pieta. We'll never get over the first one, will we?"

"No. I won't and you won't either, till you die."

"Don't you think we ought to get out of town? We've caused enough trouble."

"Yes."

He helped her to her feet. "You're a great girl, Pieta. You're the finest girl I have ever known. You make big mistakes but you own up big. Get a few things together—just a small pack."

Her eyes showed fright again. "This late?"

"Don't be afraid, Pieta. This storm won't amount to much and I know where we can camp tonight. We'll be in Coliseum tomorrow."

"Then what?" she cried. "Are you going to marry me? I won't go if you don't. *Madre de Dios*, I can't stand any more—I can't stand any more! I'm scared, I'm scared, I'm scared!"

Their faces were very close together. "I'll marry you," he said, "and it may work out better than you think. We can help each other. Why do we say we can't get over the first one? We *will* get over it."

Her eyes clung to his eagerly. "All right."

"There's nothing you and I can't do, Pieta. Pick out a few things, now, and make a saddle roll. Do you know how?"

"Yes."

"I'll be back in half an hour."

He passed the little Utley cabin, the clean snow still untracked, the chimney still cold. He passed the place where he had played with Fern when they were small children. He crossed the creek and saw his father and Joey Rose standing at the corral, talking together. Joey shook his head at Wayne, a silent warning signal; but Jack Staples had to take his licking too.

"Pa, where's George?" Wayne asked him.

"In there liquorin' up. His guts are on fire—but I reckon you know. Why?"

"I want his horse. That kid has no business drinking."

Jack grunted. "Kid? He's as old as you. What do you want with his horse?"

"Pa, I'm leaving town. I'm taking Pieta with me."

The girl's name evoked nothing in Jack. He said, "Where'll you go?"

"Back East to study medicine."

It was not what he had planned to say. It just came out of its own accord as he came to the point where he could no longer waste his life just putting in time.

"It's something I should have done long ago," he went on. "You shouldn't have stopped me from doing it."

Jack rubbed his face wearily. "What'll I do without you? I need you, son!"

"Make a son of George Candy. Give him the chance I didn't want—the chance you never gave me. He's a good boy and now he knows something that he needed to know. I've got one more thing to do. Where's Dutch Orrindorf?"

"They just took Floyd's body up to Zeb's," Joey Rose said sharply. "You can't horn in there now."

"All right, I won't," Wayne said. "Joey, give him the brooch and the pearls. See that he uses them. Tell him that if he mistreats her, I'll come back here and horsewhip him clear through the pass."

Joey's eyes lighted. "He won't mistreat her. He'll spend the rest of his life thanking his lucky stars he got off so well. Wayne, I'd like to shake hands with you before you go."

Jack Staples was just an old, tired, bewildered man. "So would I," he said.

They did not make camp in a cave until long after night had fallen, but the snow had stopped, there was a full moon, and travel was easy.

First he made a bed for her. Then he tied the horses and gave them the feed of barley he had brought from Ernie Sabo's place.

Wayne built a big roaring fire close to the overhanging rock. By now he knew exactly what was needed on the trail. He had brought fried beef, a can of coffee needing only to be warmed up, and a small flask of whiskey. When his gun got in his way he took it off and hid it under Pieta's pillow.

They drank a little whiskey and then he warmed the beef over the fire, and they ate together.

Afterward she went into the cave. He thought she went straight to sleep then, but he had no sooner settled down on his haunches beside the fire when he heard her voice.

"Won't you be cold out there?"

"No—I'll be coming in after a while."

"All right. But don't—don't be too long."

Wayne smiled in the firelight. "No," he said, half to himself. "I've been too long already. . . . Much, much too long."

He began to bank the fire. —BY JOHN REESE