

Reg. U. S. Pat. Off.

WINTER — 1948

20c per copy
\$0.80 per year



Vol. XIX

No. 2

ACTION STORIES

T. T. SCOTT, President

MALCOLM REISS, Gen'l Mgr. & Editor

"YORE NAME'S ON A HUNDRED BULLETS!" . Thomas Thompson 4
Full-length Novel of the great Southwest

A blood-crazed mob moved into the California hills. Eyes blazing, knives honed, guns lead-heavy, they swore screaming agony and slow-death—for a weaponless girl who cowered wild-eyed in the brush.

THE DUDE HANGS HIGH Joe Chadwick 32

He wuz a hongry-lookin' critter from the East a-ways—plumb anxious tuh ride into every kinda trouble like a real cowpoke. The great and glorious West didn't disappoint him none!

THE COLONEL'S COLTS M. Howard Lane 50

Gleaming like polished jewels in their case, one's fingers ached to curl lovingly about their triggers. Yet the dead Colonel's bookish weakling son swore they would never be fired.

LAST STAND OF A LAW DOG Walter A. Tompkins 62

Old Giff Cragg didn't mind age crippling his magic gun, but he sure aimed to turn in a clean badge—bright enough for any killer to see himself by gunflame.

THIRSTY TRIGGERS Lee Floren 77

Barr Stackpool had the cattle. Jim Smith had the water. Big Dan Reynolds had only memories. But they all had guns.

THE HOUSE OF MAPUHI Jack London 84

America's master story-teller creates a screaming super-hurricane and then plunges into its black maw a helpless, naked human with only one resource—a grim, fanatical will to live. Can either side win such a titanic struggle?

BADMAN'S BRITCHES Allan K. Echols 97

Any ornery, owl-hootin' son could shoot up a bank and gun-whip helpless folks, the way El Toro did. But only one hombre was fit to wear his pants.

GUN-WITCH OF HOODOO RANGE Emmett McDowell 102

A Senorita Scorpion Novel

Burly Jess Morgan stared numbly at his grass swept clean of cattle, the smoking ruins of his ranch, the stiffening bodies of his crew. Was this the work of the famous Senorita Scorpion—the girl Robin Hood of the West?



THIS IS A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE



ACTION STORIES: Published quarterly by FICTION HOUSE, INC., 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y. Registered as second class matter January 26, 1937, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. This is a magazine of fiction. The characters named and incidents described do not refer to any actual person. The entire contents of this magazine are copyrighted, 1948, by Fiction House, Inc. All rights reserved. While due care is always exercised, the publishers will not be responsible for the return of unsolicited manuscripts. For advertising rates address: Advertising Director, Fiction House, Inc., 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y. Printed in U.S.A.



"Yore Name's On A Hundred Bullets!"

By Thomas Thompson

A blood-crazed mob moved into the California hills. Eyes blazing, knives honed, guns lead-heavy, they swore screaming agony and slow death for a weaponless girl who cowered wild-eyed in the brush.

THE SAN FERNANDO VALLEY simmered now, after baking all day under a low heat haze, and its cactus and sage-studded floor crawled with restless lizards, disturbed by the nightmare of intruding sheep that blatted their close-shorn way from grass patch to clump of nodding yellow mustard. The Santa Monica mountains were soft with new grass, white-blossomed chaparral and purple lilac. It was peaceful here.

And there was quiet in the town of Calabasas, for the party of Vincent Garfo, the sheepman, was over. Some said he

was a hard man and some condemned him for the killing of harmless old Tiburcio Urbanos who refused to learn the Yankee land laws. And there were some who laughed that Vincent Garfo would grow broke from hiring so many men who slept all day and grew fat like bandits. But it was natural that some should worry of this, for these days men shied from shadows and the talk was always of the lawless bands who robbed on the Camino Real and cursed with death the many turns in the stage road in the Canyon of Little St. Francis.



She moved swiftly. He saw the flash of the rifle.

But all admitted that Vincent Garfo was a man who could give a party. Everything in the saloon had been free and now Garfo and his men were riding back to their camp by the dam on the old Urbanos place in the lower Topanga, and they left behind many stomachs full of California wine and a better understanding. Most men agreed now that it was right Vincent Garfo should run his sheep where he would on the unclaimed land and if Paula Urbanos was not here it was right he should use the rancho. And as Vincent Garfo had said many times, it was better to worry more about the blood spilling of Los Coyotes and less of the land that went to waste.

On the canyon road Vincent Garfo had a smile of accomplishment on his broad face as he rode along, and behind him two supply wagons drawn by mules made musical tracks in the dust of the Topanga road. On the seat of the lead wagon a short fat Mexican sang snatches of a native song and then dozed noisily. This Pancho Garcia could drive in his sleep. Had he not driven this road many years for the good Senor Urbanos and his daughter Paula?

But Senor Urbanos was dead of a bullet now, and the daughter Paula was gone—no one knew where. Some said she had returned to Mexico—some said her mind was bad and she died in the hidden canyons of the Rancho. It was good to drink wine by candle light and speak as if the spirits of the hills had taken Paula Urbanos. There were some who said they had seen the ghost.

But Pancho Garcia was a practical man and a practical man must work. So why not for Vincent Garfo, the great sheep man? Did he not have the most money? The great sheep man was watching now, so Pancho lolled deeper in the seat as if the wine were getting too much for him. But his dark eyes were alert and not the eyes of a drunken man. He was watching a spire of rocks there ahead. Suddenly his voice broke into a ragged rendition of "Adios Mi Chaparitas." And hell struck the supply wagons of Vincent Garfo.

A DOZEN riders broke from the sandstone spires. They struck with the swiftness of coyotes out of the night and

they made yipping sounds not unlike that animal. In a matter of seconds a dozen heads were cracked and Vincent Garfo himself was tied and the saddle horses scattered. And while the dust was still thick in the air the supply wagons pulled away and headed up toward the brushy reaches of Topanga. On the seat of the lead wagon, undisturbed by the interruption, sat Pancho Garcia. And riding close to the off wheel was the thin-waisted leader of the robber band.

"A good night's work, little lizard," said Pancho Garcia, clucking to his mules. "A good night's work indeed. It would have been better had we cut the throat of Vincent Garfo."

"Quit calling me a lizard," the young leader said. Pancho shrugged his heavy shoulders and laughed.

They rode in silence and an impending tension built between Pancho Garcia and the leader of the bandits. It seemed to climax when they came to the Urbanos Rancho, sprawled across the rolling hills, its adobes squatted close to the willow rimmed stream backed behind its earth-fill dam. There was a light in the new shed that Vincent Garfo had built under the big black oak. Pancho Garcia's voice had a whip-like crack to it when he said, "Tonight, Paula?"

"No!" She had taken off her hat now and her blue black hair spilled down around her shoulders and curled away from her face. She looked very young, but there was a white hardness to her features that was somehow unhealthy and unnatural. It drew her mature mouth into a hard straight line. Pancho made a clucking sound with his tongue like one who despairs of making another understand.

"Your heart is still too big for your head, Paula," the old driver chided. "You think you can hide out like the coyote in the rocks, stealing your food like the wood rat, and still have people remember you as you were. I tell you again there is only one way to get Vincent Garfo from the Rancho!"

She tried to ignore what he said by countering, "How did they talk in town tonight? Did they say the stage robbery was the work of Los Coyotes?"

"Is not Valermo one of us?"

Her quick sob was clearly audible and the old driver shifted uneasily on the seat. He pulled the team to a stop and when he spoke his voice had a crooning tenderness in it. He said, “You come ride with me, my little lizard. Pancho will talk to you. Pancho knows sometimes how people feel inside. Once I had to kill a man for the first time, but I was not sorry when it was over.”

She dismounted, climbed to the seat beside the old driver, hid her face against his shoulder and sobbed brokenly. He held her close and rocked her gently, cooing, “There, there. Pancho knows.” He caught the other riders watching and he yelled, “What is the matter, you pigs? You think we have all night? Perhaps you wish to wait until the sheriff comes to visit, no? *Andale*, before Pancho carves his name on your backbone from the front side with his knife!”

The team lurched again, steeper ground now, and the night breeze whispered across the white blooming chaparral. The girl sat there, her hands clasped tightly between her knees. She said, “I told him we must not touch the stages. I told him this.”

He made a scoffing sound of disgust. “Your head is crazy, Paula,” he said, slapping his knee with his fist. “Me, Pepe, Alberto—. Those of us who loved your father also love you. *Seguro*, we want more to see you get back the Rancho than anything else. Our heads are twisted like yours because we think first of the name of Urbanos. But these others? Poof! I tell you Valermo is right! Why should we not steal and burn and kill? When we have enough of the gold we go away. Maybe to Sonora. California is no place for people like us any more. We are from a different time!”

“You can go whenever you want,” she said softly. “I do not want to hold you against your wishes.”

He turned quickly, took her shoulders and shook her roughly. He said, “You are not so big that Pancho cannot spank you. More talk like this and I will put soap in your mouth!”

She squeezed his hand, but she did not smile. It seemed she was trying to force herself to ask the question. She said, “How did it happen?”

“I know only what I am told,” Pancho

said softly. “It was Valermo alone—no others. There was much gold on the stage. Four men are dead and there is talk of hangings in San Fernando.”

“And they scream for the blood of Los Coyotes.”

“But six dozen times Vincent Garfo’s men have done worse, I tell you!” The old man’s voice was explosive. “Valermo is a good man. Keep the gold. We can use it. If we have the bark should we not have also the bite?”

“No.” She said it softly, but there was bitterness in her voice. “At first the people in the hills were our friends and they kept our secrets. Now more and more they lock their doors in our face and one day, for gold, one will tell what he knows of us. Last week in Triunfo Canyon Garnita Flores took away her baby and hid it when I would hold it. I could see by her eyes she thinks there is blood on my hands!”

“I am sorry, Paula,” Pancho Garcia said softly. “If this is the way you feel I will speak to Valermo.”

He put his arm around her then and he held her close as the wagon jolted over the narrow road. In an hour they came to its end and stopped in a draw screened by elderberry that sloped down from a bare knoll. There was a tiny pasture here and a seeping spring and here a half dozen pack horses, tended by a single one-eyed Mexican waited. The one-eyed man beamed at Paula Urbanos and she said, “My good Alberto.”

THE raiders dismounted and fell to work unloading the wagons. Once Pancho turned to a handsome young man who was standing close. “Tie tight the ropes, Valermo,” he said, and the thin moon flashed from the old man’s teeth. The youth called Valermo walked like a dead man and as he went about his work he glanced from time to time at Paula Urbanos who stood there, clenching and unclenching her hands. When they mounted and rode on, taking the pack animals, Valermo fell in beside the girl.

“But it was for you, Paula,” he said softly. “I love you—I have told you so. No man could look at you and not love you. It was to get the money to take you away from this place that makes a fever

in your brain. The day of the Rancho is gone, Paula. Even the Picos have lost their land. Vincent Garfo will not go until the grass ceases to grow or he has a bullet in his heart. Pancho has told you this." He was pleading now. "And these Yankee who drive the stage. They are no different than the ones who trick the Dons with money lending and twisted laws that steal the land. One Yankee is no different than another——"

"Don Abel Stearns?"

"An exception. He came in the old days when men could trust each other." He was for continuing his argument, but he knew he had lost. They rode in silence, with only the ring of a shoe against a stone, the scratch of brush against the sides of the pack saddle or the uneasy creak of a saddle as a man shifted his position.

THERE was dawn in the air and the birds stirred in the lilac when the band dropped down across the last ridge and came to the hidden camp in the Canyon of the Red Rocks. Huge abutments of granite and sandstone hunched out of the brush covered slopes and leaned over the flat floor of the tiny valley where the stream wound through the gnarled sycamores. The entrance was narrow, and on three sides the rock rose straight and sheer. A fog from the Pacific nudged the west slopes and spiraled up in feathery plumes, its dampness unfelt here in the valley. Against a boulder wall a cabin leaned, and in a natural crevice the black of smoke told of many fires. There would be another fire tonight, for Los Coyotes ate well after a raid on Vincent Garfo's supply wagons. Pancho Garcia came to the girl.

"I must ride fast," he said, pressing her hand.

"You can make it look all right?"

The old man grinned. "Have I not done it before? I will crawl from the grass like a frightened rabbit," he promised. "When I untie the sheepman I will talk so fast they will not know what I say——except that I was so afraid I hid!" That seemed to please him, and he smacked his lips over it. His eyes were bright and his voice was half laughter. "And I will say there were fifty men——

all big ones——and they rode toward the Mission of Buenaventura! Ho! Vincent Garfo makes tales about Los Coyotes to cover his own tracks. I wonder if he will tell this one?"

She seemed to know he was trying to cover what must be said. She looked at him and he avoided her eyes. She said, "Valermo?"

The old man became deadly serious and he crooked a finger under her chin, tilted her face and kissed her on the forehead. "We have talked about it, Alberto and me and the others who worked for your father," he said softly. "It is not good Valermo remain with us. It is too dangerous." There was real concern in his voice now. "Remember, little lizard. You must not have the heart of a woman in this business."

She saw Valermo then. He was dressed in his best, and there was a red sash around his middle. She saw him give a knife and other trinkets to one of the men, then he gravely shook hands all around. He started for his horse, not looking at Paula Urbanos. She ran forward quickly and threw her arms around his neck. For a fleeting second she held him, then kissed him on the lips. Pancho Garcia had mounted his horse. He did not look at them.

After that they rode away, up the canyon toward the Calabasas road. Paula Urbanos went to the cabin against the rock. She threw herself across the bed and cried like a small child. Outside the men divided the possessions of Valermo and spoke in low tones.

And the next day the citizens of Calabasas listened intently as old Pancho Garcia, the teamster of Vincent Garfo, the sheepman, told of his narrow escape from the *bandidos*. And they whispered fearfully and debated once more whether Los Coyotes were devils as Vincent Garfo said or saints as some liked to think when they spoke of the horse and its grisly burden.

It had stood, that morning, ground tied in the middle of the street. On its back was a handsome young man and he was bound to the saddle. He was dressed in good clothes and there was a red sash around his middle. It matched the color of the streak that ran from the knife that was between his shoulder blades.

And tied to the saddle strings was a bag of gold, and on it a sign in Spanish. “Here is the man your Yankee law is seeking. We fight only those who steal the land. We have no use for stagecoach gold.” And it was signed in the dreaded charcoal scrawl of *Los Coyotes*.

II

IN THE WELL FURNISHED LAW offices of Anson Brunson on Spring Street in Los Angeles, Harry Travers, junior clerk, fiddled with a sheaf of papers and cursed his fate. Once he went to the window and stared out at the stream of dusty traffic that moved up and down. He spotted a Californio with flat crowned hat riding a single footing palomino, and a wistful grin crossed his deeply tanned but somewhat esthetic young face. This was more like it.

“Oh noble beast with coat of tan,
Oh muscled steed, thou friend of man—”

Harry Travers twisted his face at the sound of his own poetry and he said “Ugh!” and made a face, much as if he might have swallowed a fly. Damn it all, California was changing!

He sat down, but he did not return to his work. Instead he laced his hands behind his head, leaned back as far as he dared and hummed a snatch of a Mexican tune he had learned last summer in the cool shade of a tiled porch on a huge Rancho. A Rancho that was broken into garden plots now.

Everything was changing. Where the curling surf kissed the mouth of Santa Monica canyon tents stood now and there was a pavilion where one could buy peanuts and the like. And the blue that came only to the Santa Monica hills was being marked by the first shingles of Yankee roof tops. Twilight had come to the days of romance . . . He dropped his chair and to himself he said, “I have no business behind a desk. I am a poet. It is a damn shame I have to eat!”

Philosophy, that, he decided, but spring fever and a good healthy laziness prevented him from going deeper into the matter. Instead he took a knife from his pocket and started idly pegging it into the

top of the polished desk. After awhile he realized what he was doing and stopped sheepishly. Anson Bronson was a meticulous man. He did not like having his furniture marred by either knife blades or spurs. He had said so.

So once again Harry Travers tried to bring his attention back to the case of *Keller vs. Lewis*, but he had little luck. Instead of seeing the legal snarl that now enmeshed the old Rancho Topango Malibu Sequit he saw the land itself, and mostly he saw the passing of an era. It was a thing that worried Harry Travers greatly—this encroaching of formal law on a will such as Don Tapia’s original. In that document were such passages as, “And to Anton Carrillo I owe six dollars. If he says it is more it is so.” It seemed a sacrilege to add “caveat emptor” and “habeas corpus” to a phrase like that. Someday, in fact, he would write a poem about it. He rejected the idea. Esthetic poems such as Harry Travers planned to write were not built of such sordid stuff as law and empty bellies—

A blue fly buzzed lazily back and forth, beating its body against the window with annoying regularity. Harry Travers picked up a wad of paper and threw it at the fly. He missed. He tried a bigger wad and missed again. The fly left the window and settled on the wall. Harry took a three pound law book from his desk and gave it a heave. The book opened in mid air, changed its course and went through the window with a shattering crash.

Secretly, that did something for the soul of young Harry Travers. It was a symbol of what should happen to the law profession. Civilization as a whole, for that matter, for people had forgotten how to live. But that small corner of his mind that remained practical at times told him he was now sixteen steps closer to being fired, so to make up for it he delved into the papers with vengeance.

He followed it carefully from the time the Topango Malibu Sequit was originally granted to the good Jose Bartolome Tapia in 1804. A grant containing 13,500 acres, and granted without formal surveys. Thirteen thousand acres of hills, brush, live oaks and grass, bordered on one side by the long white sands of the Pacific and on the other by the indefinite line laid out by

a wave of the hand—"from the large rock to near the tree with two trunks—" It was this value line that had made Harry Travers first notice that there was no mention of the Rancho of Tiburcio Urbanos. And Anson Brunson had told him promptly to shut up, for the murder trial of Vincent Garfo was still in the courts . . .

DREAMS got the best of him again. Wonder if a small group—four fellows, say—could recapture the old times. Start a sort of civilization of their own. A place to dream on the white beach where the surf rolled in from kelp beds. Not likely. The free land was across the hills from the kelp. Kelp . . .

"Where the seal pups yelp
From their beds of kelp—"

Not bad. Have to remember that. The papers. Damn the papers.

The passing of the old order. It was all here, right in these papers, even to the coming of the Yankee Dons. In 1872 Don Mateo Keller appears on the scene and is now owner of the grant, having succeeded to the title. Yankee to Yankee, now, and the grant was sold to one Carrie S. Lewis, a resident of Cleveland, Ohio. No more paying of debts with the wave of the hand. On February 26, 1874, Mrs. Lewis defaulted in her payments and Anson Brunson brought an action for Don Mateo Keller against Carrie S. Lewis and her husband, G. F. Lewis, to quiet title to the premises—There, by George, he'd done it! Right up to date. And still no mention of Tiburcio Urbanos, he told himself stubbornly.

He was still mad about not being able to get involved in that Urbanos-Garfo case, anyway. But it wasn't likely that he would, seeing as how his sympathy was all for poor Tiburcio Urbanos who had decided to make his own law. Vincent Garfo, the sheepman, was a big man. He had legal leases to graze his sheep on the Topango Malibu Sequit, and, so he and Anson Brunson claimed, the Rancho of Tiburcio Urbanos was a part of the original grant. Probably wasn't, Harry Travers thought, and he had tried to prove it. But no one but Harry Travers seemed to give a damn, anyway. Tiburcio Urbanos was dead,

Vincent Garfo was free of all blame, and the sheep grew fat on the grass. What was one more killing?

It gave Harry Travers an idea. Glancing around to make sure he was alone, he slipped open a drawer of his desk and took out a cap-and-ball Colt. He spun it in his hand—tested its weight—worked the loading lever against the empty chambers. Then he sprang into a quick crouch, twisted his mouth into a vicious snarl and said, "Chu! Chu! Chu!" as he punctured the three corners of the room with imaginary lead. Then he stuffed the gun back in the drawer and plunged his arms into an open file that stood in the corner. Footsteps on the stairs.

A little too late to think of work, now. The door had opened and Anson Brunson stood there, his full beard bristling, a badly battered, dust-caked three-pound law book in his hand. Harry Travers let out a long stream of breath and started thinking fast. Brunson held the book out. His eyes were dark, and right now they looked as if they were holding back a lot of explosive. His gaze wandered from Harry Travers to the scatter of papers on the floor and then to the knife-scarred desk top. The explosives broke through. "Damn it, Travers!" he roared. And he threw the book.

"Now Mr. Brunson," Harry suggested, dodging nicely. "Your blood pressure—"

"Hang the blood pressure, you addle-brained nincompoop! You're sacked, you hear? Sacked! Get the hell out of here and don't let me see your face again!"

Harry Travers felt relieved, now that it was finally over, but he didn't like being told things so definitely. He kept thinking about that part of it while he took his hat from the rack and slipped into his coat. After that he went to the desk, pulled open the drawer and took out the cap-and-ball Colt. Anson Brunson stepped back quickly, as if not quite sure.

But Harry Travers had no intention of killing anyone. He stuffed the gun in his waist band, tilted his hat at a rakish angle, stepped lightly to the door and paused. Then he felt it coming over him. There was no way to fight it off. With a quick motion he reached out, gripped, and gave a sharp tug on Anson Brunson's full beard. Then feeling much relieved he

said, “Thank you for nothing, Mr. Brunson, and with my compliments you and the law profession can go to hell!”

III

SO IT WAS THAT HARRY Travers, ex-junior clerk, left the law offices of Anson Brunson free as the wind, full of poetry and short of cash. And the three, combined with recent exposure to the land grant of Topango Malibu and the murder trial of Vincent Garfo, gave him his great idea. With every step away from the confining closeness of the law office the idea grew and by the time he reached the Pico House where he owed a bill the idea had flowered into full blossom. Still not practical, perhaps, but it was a way that would let a man become a Yankee Don with little effort and give him time for poetry. After all, what more could any man want than a chance to roll back time?

And in the hills back of Calabasas a man could do just that. Hills that stood with their feet in the long white surf. Hills of a thousand canyons where there was game to be taken for the mere trouble of stalking it and where trout grew fat and lazy in a dozen streams. Broad hillside sweeps perfumed with the fragrance of cured wild oat hat, shaded by the black puddles of tremendous live oak trees. Paradise for a lazy man, and Harry Travers was that.

But a lazy man craves company for his soul, so he spent the next two days rounding up the three compadres of his whom Anson Brunson liked least. That, he felt, was recommendation enough. There was Tony Ferris, that handsome young lady-killer who was hurrying to spend a fortune left to him by his father. Then Willard McCauley, who spoke with a voice of thunder but carefully took flies by the wings and put them out the window rather than kill them. He had turned this business of not working into a new political theory. And Guy Larrimer would want to be in on it, too. Guy Larrimer, who in spite of his scant twenty years was a real figure out of the past. A hunter and trapper who wanted the Missions burned and all the land given back to the Indians. These were fit companions for

a man with time to listen to the dictates of his soul.

So he sought them out and he found them all finally in the bar of the United States Hotel. Willard McCauley and Tony Ferris involved in some violent controversy, while quiet Guy Larrimer with his nimble cards contemptuously stripped the wealth from a man from San Francisco who had looked upon the wine.

They were greatly pleased to hear that Harry Travers had lost his job, and they shook hands gravely. Now they were all of the same cloth. It had been a bit of a thorn having their favorite poet contaminated by sordid wages.

With a bottle of good California wine they went to Harry’s room at the Pico House, and when he tried to sell them his plan they all said “no” without listening. So Harry Travers, the poet, re-phrased the idea he had and wove it more into the gossamer thickness of a dream. Then, with the aid of good California wine and the mellowness of time this dream became more and more acceptable until finally his glowing picture of beautiful girls in Calabasas enticed Tony Ferris to put up a hundred dollars for the necessary surveying equipment and the filing fees on the land.

It seemed as good a way as any to test his political theories, yawned Willard McCauley, so he would go along to this magic land of Calabasas where a man could sleep on his back and a thicket of fruit would grow up around him and drop its succulent morsels into his open mouth without disturbing his snores.

Guy Larrimer needed the least coaxing, for he had hunted every inch of that country, chasing the illusive white flag of a deer’s tail through the mat of mountain lilac. He knew of the trout that sunned themselves in the ripples of the creeks, and he knew of the perch and the golden corbina and the yellow fin that fed a hundred feet off shore in the cream like surf of the mild Pacific.

And that night these three helped Harry Travers out the back window of the Pico House leaving an unpaid bill and some empty bottles. They had a fuzzy remembrance of the Big Four Land and Water Company having been formed. A land and water company that had no dream of

conquest, no fight for future, and no plans to expand. It was built on careless dreaming, dedicated to the California that was dying, and it required only a section of land in the proper location to give it substance.

And when the night passed its noon and the moon, fat as a melon, waddled out of the hills, Harry Travers, riding across the Cahuenga mustard fields in all his costumed glory, knew how to get that land. He had a hundred dollars in his pocket and some good books of poetry in his saddle bag. There was a loaded Walker Colt swinging in a hand-tooled holster at his side. A flat-crowned hat sat solidly on his head and a pair of belled spurs made music at his heels. In the bright red morning he rode into Calabasas and he was greeted by a dead man in the streets and much guarded whispering about a wild bunch known only as Los Coyotes.

DURING the next two weeks as Harry Travers diligently searched the many canyons for the particular segment of the government land that was to become the utopia of the Big Four Land and Water Company, he heard more of Los Coyotes. And in time he no longer scoffed. For stages were robbed and wayfarers were killed, and it seemed that the very ground of Calabasas was steeped in human blood.

Sensitive, overly impressionistic, the mood of the land began to change with Harry Travers, and he shied away from the shaded canyons with their hint of swift death and looked more toward the open slopes where the sun poured strength into the already dry grass.

Thousands of acres of free land. From the edge of the Rancho Topango Malibu Sequit, now in litigation, to the reaches of El Escorpion, across the narrow valley. Land for the asking, and yet there were few takers. And the few who did live in the brush-hidden cabins raising their gobbling bands of half-wild turkeys as often as not faded into the seclusion of the towering rock piles and the fastness of the thickets rather than share a dipper of water and answer the many questions of the Yankee who dressed like a don and packed the surveyor's transit on his shoulder.

So it was that half through the second

week Harry Travers found himself scouting closer and closer to the little town of Calabasas. And it was then he came upon the lower Topanga and the Ranchito of Tiburcio Urbanos, now the main sheep camp of Vincent Garfo, who held a grazing lease on the parent Rancho.

And whether it was the possible companionship or the friendly beauty of the place, Harry Travers did not know. But it was here that his maps, his transit and level, and his memory of the original surveys made for Anson Brunson picked the section of land that he sought. It was good that he had found it, for within three days Tony Ferris, Willard McCauley and Guy Larrimer would be here to join him.

He was satisfied with the high knoll where a house would overlook the valley. There was strength in the towering sandstone cliffs that stood like sentinels across the back line of the section, putting on and taking off colors like gaudy garments. There was poetry in the perfumed slope where the plumed fragrance of the mountain lilac and the puffy white essence of the chaparral laid softly in two directions. It was a friendly place, more democratic than the gloom deep canyons, less commensal than the chattering marts of the flat valley. His partners would approve, he knew.

So he returned to Calabasas to make housing arrangements for himself and his partners. And this time it seemed that the old Mexican who drove the supply wagon for Vincent Garfo watched him even more closely. It was a thing that had gone on ever since Harry Travers had begun his surveys.

At first he had thought the harmless looking old Mexican was intrigued by the instruments; but later it had grown to the point where the man's eyes had a way of burning into Harry's back. He turned up sometimes at the shanties of the turkey raisers; again unexpectedly in an open spot on some high eminence. Pancho Garcia, they said his name was, at one time employed by Tiburcio Urbanos, the man shot down by Vincent Garfo.

Harry Travers tried to brush it off as coincidence. He was satisfied with all the legal aspects of his claims, now, so he went to the saloon to have a deserved drink. There he came face to face with

Vincent Garfo for the first time since he had seen him as a defendant in Anson Brunson’s office. Vincent Garfo, acquitted of the stupid murder charge, had grown big enough that he did not need polite preliminaries when speaking to a junior clerk, nor did he respond to Harry’s warm greeting.

He was a short, broad and heavy man. He had a flat face and a crooked nose that at one time was straight. When he spoke he had a way of holding his head to one side as if to favor a bad ear. He smoked a cigar and used it to punctuate his sentences. He downed his drink and looked steadily at Harry Travers with the unblinking eyes of a fish. He said, “I hear you and three others are figuring on taking up a section of land.”

It was not an attempt at friendly conversation. It was a challenge. For those few seconds no one else at the bar moved or spoke and Harry Travers saw the old Mexican driver, Pancho Garcia, standing there close with his head cocked to catch every word.

A bit of rebellion, never far removed, flowed through Harry Travers. It left a vacantness in his stomach and set up a burning at the lobes of his ears. He said, “You heard right. Did you have something to say about it?”

“Yes I have,” said Vincent Garfo the sheep man. “Don’t do it!”

He turned and left the saloon and he was followed closely by Pancho Garcia, the driver of his supply wagon.

IV

HARRY TRAVERS WAS A POET, and as such he would go to great lengths to avoid unpleasantness. But what difference is there between the emotion that drives a man to poetry and the emotion that drives a man to rebellion? There was something about a direct order that rankled the soul of Harry Travers. It had been that way when Anson Brunson had sacked him and told him to get out. No force in the world could have stopped Harry Travers from pulling Anson Brunson’s beard that day. Standing here now, the poet knew that sooner or later he would have to pull the beard of Vincent Garfo, the sheep man.

It fumed and burned within Harry Travers until it became an obsession. So that two days later when Tony Ferris, Willard McCauley and Guy Larrimer came to Calabasas they found, instead of their soft-eyed poet lounging with others in the shade of the giant oak in the middle of the street, a grim-faced young man trying devilishly hard to build up a righteous rage within himself.

Entangled with the glowing account of the section of land that Harry had chosen for them were such phrases as “Damn miscarriage of justice in the first place. He probably shot Tiburcio Urbanos in cold blood.”

“An odd phrase that, ‘cold blood,’” said Guy Larrimer, disinterested.

“Another case of the maggots of money disemboweling the poor,” Willard McCauley said, rolling his wine glass.

“If you’ll excuse me, gentlemen,” said Tony Ferris, “Up the street in a certain cantina is a girl who sings like a bird.”

“Who the hell does he think he is?” demanded Harry Travers. “Telling us we can’t file on public land!”

The three voices were nearly in unison. “Somebody says we *can’t* do something?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to say,” said Harry Travers.

They objected and growled, but they listened more closely now to his story of Vincent Garfo, the sheepman, whose word had grown to be law around Calabasas. And if there had been any doubt about the acceptability of the section of land Harry Travers had picked that doubt was now dispelled. The four board members, all vice presidents, of the Big Four Land and Water Company, were definitely agreed that they should be neighbors of Vincent Garfo.

They even went so far as to make a noisy show of neighborly friendliness from the backs of their rented horses as they went out to appraise their land. Vincent Garfo himself was not there to greet them, and his hirelings, caught, apparently, without orders, could offer nothing better than non-committal grunts and hostile stares.

Once they had reached the knoll where they planned on making their camp and perhaps later building their house, they separated and went their several ways,

promising to meet here again at dusk to compare notes. Harry Travers carried his Walker Colt in its hand-tooled holster. The weight of it had begun to feel natural now. Secretly, he had been practicing a quick draw in front of a mirror. Guy Larrimer, never without a rifle, vowed that he would bring home a fat young buck to break the monotony of mouldy mutton and stringy beef put out by the restaurants.

Tony Ferris was wistfully concerned about the distance to the night life in Calabasas, from here an unimposing cluster of adobe huts in the fertile shade of the valley of a thousand oaks. Willard McCauley, they all suspected, would find a sunny slope nearby and sleep away the afternoon. But Harry Travers himself, still concerned some with legal descriptions and boundaries, rode off toward the towering cliffs and then angled off across a grass high meadow where he found the old original blazed tree that marked the corner of the Rancho Topango Malibu Sequit.

He lounged in his saddle, looped the reins around the horn, and let the loggy liverly stable horse pick its own way, wherever it would. The horse, drawn by the scent of water, ambled loose-lipped to the little creek that bubbled from the huge natural springs on the old much-disputed Ranchito of Tiburcio Urbanos. From the springs the water trickled away in a creek that was now narrow and swift, now broad and coolly deep. It was a creek that wandered through a twisting canyon with gentle walls and in time the water lost itself finally back in the ground from which it came.

He was beyond the borders of the proposed claim of the Big Four Land and Water Company, he knew, but it made little difference. He removed the horse's bridle, slipped the short rope that was tied on the saddle around the beast's neck, and secured it to the limb of an overhanging willow.

Then on foot he worked his way along the edging of narrow sand beside the creek, pausing here and there to lie on the rocks, baking his back with their warmth, absorbing with his face and chest the sunlight that filtered down through the gently swaying alders. Here he saw the silver

on the crest of the tiny ripples or watched the sycamore leaves, stems curved like the prows of Viennese gondolas, skipping across the placid pools.

Further on he came to a ten-foot waterfall that plunged over the granite and in years of ceaseless work had scooped out a deep basin. From this, the water, thrown into a slow whirling dance, had gradually pushed back the soft shale, ground it to sand, and formed a miniature white beach. Harry Travers the poet, caught by the beauty of the place, removed his boots and socks, rolled up his tight fitting trousers, sat down on a rock and dangled his feet into the cool water. It was the short, sobbing gasp of terror that caught his attention.

HE raised his eyes slowly, and there, almost directly across the pool from him, he saw her. He knew that she was quite naked, but she had pulled the soft willows around her to add to the protection of the water, and now all he could see was the whiteness of her shoulders, the flowing mass of black hair as it floated out on the water, and those liquid eyes.

She was like a wild thing out of these mountains. A deer, trapped in a box canyon. A rabbit, caught in a snare. A city girl in a similar predicament might have sent hot darts of devilish abandon scorching through Harry Travers, but somehow there was none of that in him now. Instead he watched her with the eyes of a perfectionist; watched her in the way an artist watches a model.

He saw her as symbolic of this wild and beautiful land that somehow was pitifully fighting back against the encroachments of civilization. Brush grew into the clearings; boulders snapped the shares of plows; and bands, like Los Coyotes, prowled the high roads. All these things he saw in the terrified face that seemed to float there on the surface of the shivering water.

Without saying a word he turned his back, put on his boots and walked back down the stream, the way he had come. Once he thought he heard a rustling of the bushes, the splash of water from her glistening white body. But he did not turn to see. Somehow he knew he would never forget that face and somehow he

knew that this was a secret he would not share with his compadres.

He rode slowly and it was near sundown when he found the knoll again. He saw that the others were there ahead of him and a feeling of keen anticipation ran out from them and reached him. It was the sort of feeling that puts a man on guard and Harry began thinking of defenses he would offer if they did not like his selection. *“There was no free land closer to town—”* That for Tony Ferris. *“As little to do here as any place we could find, less than most—”* That for Willard McCauley. To Guy Larrimer he'd say, *“You've got the whole hills—”* He galloped the horse the last few hundred yards. He was sure when he saw their practiced smirks.

“Did you look any place else except here on top of this knoll?” drawled Willard McCauley.

“Which end of that surveying thing you been looking through?” Tony Ferris wanted to know.

“Now leave him alone,” mocked Guy Larrimer. “He just hasn't told you yet, that's all. There's a beer spring right here where we're standing. Just needs to be uncovered.”

“As members of the Big Four Land and Water Company I think we should know such things,” said Willard McCauley.

“Just Land Company,” corrected Guy Larrimer. “Just Land Company.”

“Damn it to hell!” pleaded the poet.

And Tony Ferris took pity on him. He said, “It's a wonderful spot, Harry, and I don't mind your spending my hundred dollars to find it. But would you mind telling us where in hell you plan to get water on this little paradise?” Harry Travers felt suddenly thirsty. It was little things like this that had upset Anson Brunson so. He hadn't given the matter of water a thought.

By the time he got back to Calabasas that night he was laced raw by the practiced tongues of his compadres, and even the subconscious knowledge that any one of them would die for him didn't ease the pain. There was only one thing that helped. That was when he thought of the hills and the canyons and saw the beautiful frightened face that seemed to float on the surface of the water of a placid moun-

tain stream. But in time that too took on a sour note, for he kept remembering that the stream was claimed by Vincent Garfo.

V

THEY LET UP ON HIM AFTER awhile, but the chagrin of Harry Travers was a bright coal that was not quenched by the beverage he drank in the little cantina where the painted gourds and the strings of chili peppers framed the beamed door. He listened to his companions go to great lengths to explain the many uses of water, treating it as a subject of recent discovery about which all men were not yet versed. They even went so far, late into their drinks, as to include Pancho Garcia, the driver for Vincent Garfo, in their circle of elucidation. And Harry Travers drank and smarted.

But in time Harry Travers, the poet, felt that unmistakable delicious lassitude that always preceded an idea. Whether it was some word dropped by amiable Pancho Garcia who talked much and said nothing or some bit of logic accidentally left in the nonsense of his friends, Harry didn't know. But the idea grew until he forgot the smarting taunts brought on by his impractical short sightedness. In time he could contain himself no longer and he exploded his question.

For a long time old Pancho Garcia sat there, and his muddy eyes seemed to glow in the semi-darkness as they met Harry's and held. It was as if he were trying to see through this young one who tramped the hills with his surveyor's tools. At last the old man said, “That is true. I was with the household of Tiburcio Urbanos for fifty years.”

Harry felt a chill of excitement prickle the skin of his back. His scalp seemed to tighten and each hair became an individual point. He said, “Tell me one thing, if you know. Was the Ranchito Urbanos really a part of the original Topango Malibu Sequit grant as Vincent Garfo said in his trial? Did Tapia give the land to Urbanos?”

Again there was that long puzzling silence, then the soft voice of Pancho Garcia. “No, Senor. That is Vincent Garfo's lie. It was a separate rancho. In the old days I have seen the map.”

Harry Travers gave a wild whoop that elicited the comment from Guy Larrimer that the boy must have struck water. "Water, hell!" said Harry Travers, "Gold!"

"Can't tell you everything," he said excitedly as they pressed him. "Got to check up first." He paused, making sure that no outsider but Pancho Garcia was listening. "Look," he said, spreading the fingers of his left hand, pushing them aside as counters with the forefinger of his right. "Old Urbanos is dead. Shot down by Vincent Garfo." They did not notice that Pancho Garcia had taken a knife from his belt. "Two, the girl has disappeared, no one knows where and no one gives a damn!" The old man was feeling the edge of the knife with the ball of his thumb. "Three, that makes the Rancho Urbanos abandoned land and I know for sure that Garfo hasn't filed on it! I followed the case closely when Anson Brunson had it. I knew it was never proved Garfo had a lease on the land——"

The sharp whistle of excitement had a sobering effect on the other members of the Big Four. Here, now, was a ready-made paradise if what Harry Travers said was true. They had all but forgotten Pancho Garcia when the old man said, "But the Senorita Urbanos. Is this not her land?"

"If she were here to claim it, sure," said Harry, brushing it aside. "If she had pressed her case the law would have given her the land——just as it would have given it to her father. But he tried to push Garfo off and Garfo was smart enough to force Urbanos to lose his head. Result? Poof! Self defense!"

Pancho Garcia seemed to talk to himself now, and he toyed with the point of the knife absently. "But Tiburcio Urbanos did not believe in the law," he said softly. "He had seen too many times where the court took from a man his land——"

Harry Travers leaned forward suddenly and put his hand on the old man's arm. "Listen, Pancho," he said softly, "Be quiet about this until I can get the papers I want and you won't have to work for the man who killed your best friend!"

The old man seemed dazed. He sat there, unblinking, his bare feet planted

firmly on the cool dirt floor, the sharp spike of the tequilla and the sourness of the beer laying around him, part of the semi-darkness. After a while he finished his beer and the foam remained in a frothy crescent above his thick lips. He drew the inside of his arm across his face and said, "I will say nothing to Vincent Garfo about this."

Harry Travers said, "Good! We won't forget you."

"No, you won't forget me," Pancho Garcia agreed.

WHEN he was gone Tony Ferris, more suspicious than the others, said, "If you're on the right track, Harry, do you think it was smart letting that old boy in on it?"

"Why not?" shrugged Harry Travers. "You boys don't see the insides of that man the way I do. Hell, there's hatred for Garfo sticking out all over him!"

"He gives me the creeps," said Willard McCauley, shaking his shoulders.

But creeps or no creeps, they found Pancho useful and willing. It was Garcia who produced an old *diseno* that showed the north boundaries of the Rancho Malibu distinctly excluding the little ranchito of Tuburcio Urbanos. It was Pancho Garcia who planted the first seeds of revolt that would lead to open seizure of the property. But it was Harry Travers who made the legal moves to claim the ranchito in the name of the Big Four Land and Water Company.

It took some padding of the truth and a lot of swallowing of pride to get what he wanted from Anson Brunson, but once inside the lawyer's files Harry's knowledge of sure victory made it worth while. And without telling his purpose he got Brunson to agree that there was no legal doubt the Ranchito of Urbanos was abandoned land, subject to homestead. Then armed with the exact wording of the lease that let Garfo sheep graze on the Rancho Topango Malibu Sequit, Harry Travers went back to Calabasas, legal claimant with his three compadres, of the Ranchito of Tiburcio Urbanos, subject only to contest of one Paula Urbanos who had not been seen since the death of her father. Pancho Garcia took the news silently and thoughtfully, and during the celebration of the

new owners there at the cantina he disappeared. And that afternoon, fired by wine and success, the Big Four rode to their new Rancho to personally serve notice on Vincent Garfo, the great sheep man.

It was a rancho little different than a dozen others, except that it was small. There back of Calabasas, Topanga, chewed out of the upheaval of peaks and tooth-marked by the hungry gods, twisted deeper and deeper through blood-red sandstone cliffs or curved gracefully and coyly away from blossomed slopes. Here in the lower reaches was the rolling land and here was the life-giving stream fed by the springs at the base of the cliff, a stream that was below the ground as much as it was above, invaluable in this land of scant rain.

On a knoll was the cool-porched adobe, and here the stream was placid and broad in its slight valley, backed up against its earth filled dam. And from its lip *zanjas* reached out black-tipped, like fingers with uncleaned nails, to give water to the thirsty plots that had been gardens in a happy past.

NOW there was nothing but the trampled black-pelleted barrenness of the sheep camp, the sprawling unloveliness of the poled shearing corrals, and the listlessness of unhitched wagons and empty pack saddles under the brush roof of an open shed. Down near the stream were a half dozen tents where the shearers and herders slept, and it was this that made the natives of Calabasas say many times that Vincent Garfo hired more men than he needed.

There was a long plank table, supported by saw horses, under one of the spreading live oak trees. And on either side were benches similarly constructed. Here a dozen tattered men, reeking of sheep, sat thumbing grease-thick cards, playing for stakes seldom found in a sheep camp.

The cards remained exactly as they were at the second the players had turned to see the four intruders. There was not a movement of a hand nor of an eyelash, and there was no sound except that one man swallowed noisily. Harry Travers said, “We came to talk to Vincent Garfo. They said in town we’d find him here.”

A bearded man, larger than the others, a man with glittering blue eyes, thought for a long time, then said, “I’ll take you to see him.” He put down his cards carefully, as if they were breakable. Then he wiped his big hands on his bibbed overalls. After that he indicated the main house with this thumb but he did not lead the way. He stayed slightly behind, and his feet made no sound on the hard packed adobe trail.

And Vincent Garfo greeted them as if it were no more than a neighborly call, his ever present cigar making quotation marks around his welcome. But the welcome came from his loose flat lips and not from his eyes and the two Mexicans who appeared with a *jolla* of wine moved with the stiffness of men whose bellies recoil from the flat touch of cold steel inside a waistband.

Willard McCauley, usually harmless in his blustering wild-eyed bellowing, was suddenly quiet. Guy Larrimer, as inscrutable as a Fennimore Cooper Indian, drew even more within himself. Voluble Tony Ferris drank his wine too hurriedly and Harry Travers forgot the glib words he had planned. But the law was with them. Harry Travers said, “There’s been a change of ownership in this land and we wanted to talk to you in regards as to how it would affect your enterprises——”

The left middle of Garfo’s upper lip curled slightly, exposing the tip of a pointed eye tooth. He said, “Before the Topanga Malibu went into litigation I made sure that a change of ownership wouldn’t affect me.”

Harry Travers looked for help in the eyes of his companions, found their support, cleared his throat and said, “But you must know by now, Garfo, that this land is not part of the Malibu grant. We four here,” indicating his companions, “are the newcomers.”

There was no betraying emotion on the face of Vincent Garfo. He toyed with the ash of his cigar—a bit more deliberately, perhaps, and said, “Oh?”

It put Harry Travers at a disadvantage and he fumbled with words, trying to make it positive, yet avoiding an open threat. And at last Vincent Garfo, tired of this juvenile diplomacy, stood up suddenly and said, “Gentlemen, if you have

filed on this land and it is all legal, success to you. I hope you enjoy it—after I'm through with it!"

He left no doubt as to his meaning and the finality of it struck the rebellious spark in Harry Travers that seemed always to be fired by flat demands. He said, "I'm glad to see you take that attitude, Garfo. We feel that ten days should be sufficient time for you to move your sheep and your headquarters elsewhere."

Vincent Garfo was smiling now. A full, tantalizing smile. He looked at the four young men and seemed to find amusement. He said, "Suppose I tell you to go to hell, gentlemen?"

"It will become a matter of opinion as to who makes the trip!" said Harry Travers.

They left then, unmolested and apparently unnoticed by the men who still played cards. They said nothing, but Harry Travers kept hoping that he was not the only one who had the dribble of fear on the crease of his back. The night met them, and the fog came through the canyon. It was a night that was balmy, yet somehow a night in which a man might shiver.

It was in the cantina, over tequila, that they admitted to themselves frankly that they had declared war, and it seemed that each one shuddered more than usual over the sting of the liquor. They joked, they laughed. And it was all hollow. This had happened before, here in Calabasas, this trying to move Vincent Garfo from land he chose to hold. It was said it was as hopeless as trying to capture Los Coyotes.

Instead of seeing Pancho Garcia himself they saw the change in him. He was like a man who has thrown off fetters with one blanket decision. He wore riding boots, knee-length, and he moved with a certain quickness they had not noticed before. He smiled as broadly as usual but there was no mirth there. He singled out Harry Travers, refused a drink, and whispered rapidly in the ex-law clerk's ear. Bewildered, Harry Travers followed him outside. He said, "Why all the secrets, Pancho? If you've found another map as you say we should all know about it. Besides, it makes little difference—."

In the dim glow that came from the door of the cantina Pancho Garcia's eyes

seemed to be all whites. He said, "It was not a map, Senor Travers. It is about the girl, Paula Urbanos, I wish to speak!"

Harry dropped the cigarette he had started to roll. That was different. Was some female going to come out of the past at this moment to spoil everything? "What about her, Pancho?" he snapped.

The old Mexican motioned Harry closer, in that confidential way he had. And as Harry leaned down to hear the half whisper, Pancho Garcia's hand moved up, down, then slowly aside. The whites of his eyes grew even wider as he tucked the gun he held back in his sash and caught at the body of Harry Travers to keep it from falling into the dust. There was almost a sob in Pancho Garcia's voice when he said, "That is what about Paula Urbanos, Senor Travers! I do not understand these things but if you would steal the land that belongs to my little lizard you are no better than Vincent Garfo himself!" He made a hissing sound and two dark shapes appeared from nowhere. They lead a saddled horse.

VI

THE SWAYING OF THE HORSE and the throbbing of the cut on his scalp combined to make Harry Travers sick when he opened his eyes. He found that his hands were tied and his feet were drawn tight under the horse's belly. Additional ropes secured him in the saddle. Ahead of him, leading the horse, Pancho Garcia rode a ragged pinto. He was singing "Adios Mi Chaparitas" in a cracked voice.

They rode through a draw, thick with chaparral, mountain lilac and an occasional elderberry, and the air was fragrant with the summer bloom. By the laboring of the horses he knew they were climbing fast, and by the faint patch of sky that seemed to grow constantly brighter he knew they were near the top of a ridge. Then he closed his eyes against the nausea that swept him. At the moment the outcome of his plight did not bother him. He wanted only to lie down—have a drink of water. The horses stopped and a voice hailed them from a pile of sandstone boulders. Pancho Garcia made a satisfactory answer, and the horses started on, turning

constantly on the many switch-backs.

When Harry Travers dared open his eyes again they were riding up the sandy floor of a narrow canyon, and a stream babbled aimlessly over smooth rocks. It was cooler here in the shade of giant sycamores and the rocks were rich with green moss and outcropping of goldback and maidenhair fern. Harry spoke for the first time. “A drink of water. I’m sick.”

“Ah, you crazy one,” Pancho Garcia said. “You are sick, eh? If it was not for the little lizard you would be dead, my friend. She tried to keep the blood smirch from the name of Los Coyotes. Poor innocent little lizard. A drink, eh? If I had my way the ants would eat you when they had finished with Vincent Garfo!”

The little lizard . . . Paula Urbanos . . . Los Coyotes . . . The words piled up in Harry Travers’ brain. They connected, but they only set up a throbbing and made little sense. His tongue felt as if it would burst in his mouth and there was a burning fever in his cheeks. The tinkle of the stream was a tantalizing thing that wore on him like the drip of water on a drum. The sudden murmur of voices broke on him and jerked him partially to his senses and he opened his eyes to see the cabin against the rock and the smoke-stained natural fireplace. There was a girl. A girl with black hair and wide eyes and a face that was frightened and beautiful. A face that seemed to float on the surface of a placid stream. She gave the orders to cut his bonds.

He slid from the saddle, helpless as a child, and when he tried to stand his feet went out from under him and he fell heavily. Vaguely, he saw the girl’s face, close to his. A beautiful face. The same face that had haunted his dreams since that day there at the natural pool near the foot of the cliffs. He tried desperately to know whether this was a continuance of his dream or a reality. He heard her call for water.

WHEN HE opened his eyes it was grey morning, and he did not know how many days had passed. The fog, in from the ocean for the night, had settled in the little valley. The damp fragrance of it was wine to his senses and the jeweled fringe of it across his grey blanket was



like the winking eyes of a friend. He sat up stiffly and felt a rifle barrel press gently against his chest. A deformed little man with one eye spoke to him in Spanish, and though he did not understand each word the rifle made it clear.

After that he lay there, trying to puzzle things out, until at last Pancho Garcia came to him, late in the afternoon, and ordered him up. “You are to eat, pig,” Pancho Garcia said, his mouth drawn in a distasteful grimace. “Perhaps to fatten before butchering. I hope.”

A pitcher of chocolate. A haunch of roast venison. A sputtering trout browning on a green willow stick. Good wine that might come from a Vincent Garfo supply wagon. Harry Travers eyed them thoughtfully, then saw the girl come from the cabin by the rock and he felt a twinge of

pain somewhere inside his chest as he put the two together and considered the naiveness of his captor. Was this, then, the leader of the dreaded Coyotes?

She tried to make herself seem such when she spoke to him. She tilted her chin up and kept her eyes level. Her pronunciation of English was perfect, yet her phrasing held a hint of musical Spanish. He found himself wondering more about which church school she had attended than about the fate she had planned for him. She said, "They tell me you have information about the Rancho Urbanos and can show me legal ways in which I can get what is rightfully mine."

Harry Travers got up. He could feel the faint smile playing across his lips when he said, "Won't you sit down?"

She said, "Do not forget you are a prisoner!"

"How can I forget?" he asked in mock concern. "Every man knows of the blood-letting and thieving of the terrible Los Coyotes!"

"That's a lie!" she said, too quickly. "My fight has been with Vincent Garfo who killed my father!"

"You are beautiful when you are angry," he said softly. "So pitifully beautiful."

And suddenly, there in the Canyon of the Red Rocks, Harry Travers was again the poet. He saw the tragedy of this girl's life and the tragedy of Pancho Garcia—that strange brigand who would cut out the heart of a man with as little concern as he would show for a fly. A man who thirsted for blood, and yet was like a kitten of Paula Urbanos. And this girl, vitally alive with all the natural longings of a nineteen year old, shut off here away from the world a fugitive from justice. But worse than that, a fugitive from reality. was his epic poem! These children of the past. He said softly, "Paula, let me talk to you."

He was not surprised when he saw tears in her eyes. She was confused, making excuses. She said, "I want only that which is rightfully mine."

He said, "Has running away helped you get it?"

He had hoped for an answer, for he could have talked to her then, he knew, and he might have convinced her that

holding him would accomplish nothing. But at that moment a look-out came at a dead gallop into the Canyon of the Red Rocks. Excitement colored his face and foam flecked his horse. There was a quick gathering of the men, and in front of them Paula Urbanos became again the leader of Los Coyotes.

She listened, tight-lipped, and from snatches of conversation that he could understand Harry Travers learned that hell was loose again in the Canyon of Little St. Francis. The stage station was a smouldering heap, four men were dead and there were two who were not expected to live and one was a woman. The horses had been needlessly slaughtered, and twenty thousand dollars in gold was gone. And now in the valley and from as far away as Los Angeles men were gathering and a lynch-hungry posse was forming to put an end to the devilry of Los Coyotes.

Harry Travers could not control the heavy pounding of his heart as he saw this girl, a moment before so helpless, a confident leader now, reassuring her men, climaxing with a haughty command that the prisoner be guarded well. She went back in the cabin and Harry Travers the poet had a strange knowledge that she had done so just in time to avoid showing the tears that he had known were so close to the surface.

BUT that night after the fire in the clearing had died to a bed of coals Paula came to see him. At first she made it seem like an accident. She paused, surprised, and to the guard she said, "I did not know this was the place you kept the prisoner."

The gnome-like guard smiled, his teeth flashing. "A handsome prisoner, no, *Senorita*?"

For a second Harry thought she would slap the man, then she said, "Leave us alone, Alberto, and keep your lips sealed. There are things I must know."

The guard said, "Sometime there are things you should ask your heart, *Senorita*. You forget I have known you since the time you were a little girl."

"*Vaya!*" she commanded sharply. "There is no room for such nonsense!"

"I will be close by where I cannot see

but I can hear if you call,” the guard said, still teasing.

They were alone then and an awkward silence came between them. It was a moonlight night such as comes only to the Santa Monica hills. The mountains stood in veiled blue mistiness, looming twice their size, and the leafy shadows of the sycamores made no movement on the red earth. The faint breath of the day’s heat lingered yet in the Canyon of the Red Rocks. It was Harry Travers who spoke first. “I hoped you would come,” he said simply.

“I came only to discuss the laws that concern the Rancho,” she said tartly. “Soon now I am going back to claim what is mine.”

He shook his head. “Why don’t you tell me the truth, Paula? You’ve come here because you are trapped and you know it. It’s in your eyes. You were young and there was no one to tell you, so you dreamed of men riding at your beck and call. Handsome young *caballeros* who would drive Vincent Garfo from the valley and people would proclaim you a heroine.” He clicked his tongue against his teeth and moved a step closer to her. “The Sister who taught you your lessons was a great admirer of Joan of Arc, no, Paula?”

She was suddenly angry. “You have no right to talk to me like this!”

“I have, Paula, because I too am a dreamer.”

THE MASK of reserve fell from her as easily then as if she had been a little girl. Standing there with her head half turned he could see the change. The moonlight softened her features and left a glint of light in her blue black hair. He tried to picture her in a low-necked gown with high combs in her hair dancing at the *baile* in San Fernando. She turned to him suddenly and her eyes were blurred. “What must I do?” she said helplessly.

“Give it up,” he said quickly. “Go back to Calabasas. Say you were visiting with your people in Mexico.”

Her lips set in a hard line. “You said you knew what they said of Los Coyotes. Murder—robberies—if I were to go back now your law would hang me!” There was a cutting bitterness in her voice and

Harry Travers was suddenly annoyed at her childish insistence and at the same time he felt she should be in his arms with her head on his shoulder. He tried to reason, gently.

“Do they need to know you are the leader of Los Coyotes?”

He thought he saw the tears spill and then he caught the silver on her cheek. She said, “Someday, somehow, they’ll have to know the leader. Do you think I would let someone else take the blame?”

There was a heaviness in his chest and an emptiness in his arms. He said, “This isn’t what you came here to talk about.” He nearly whispered it.

“I don’t know why I came here.” She said it as if she were frightened.

“You came here because it was important to you that I see you as you are.”

She spoke rapidly. “You are conceited. Why should I care what you think?”

“But you do.”

He had taken two steps toward her, and there in the soft night he could see the loveliness of her and the yielding smoothness of her creamy skin, the luscious deep red of her generous mouth. It was as natural as if they had known each other for years and planned this moment. He took her into his arms tenderly and kissed her and from the burning pain that ran through him he knew that she had never kissed a man this way before. He was exquisitely happy and yet he felt as if he were on the verge of tears. The Canyon of the Red Rocks turned slowly in the moonlight. Then he let her go and she walked away from him, back toward her cabin. He could hear the soft sobs in her throat. The heaviness in his chest seemed to drag down and press against his legs. Alberto, the guard, came out of the darkness, whistling a small tune.

After the silence of sleep came to the camp Harry Travers could not rest. His mind kept twisting like the strange winds that sometimes lift the dust from the floor of the canyon. There was a steady aching in the back of his legs and when he tried to figure out what had happened to him he came to the realization that in those few seconds he had fallen in love. And in time, when he could reason, he saw that the guard was being lax in his duty.

Harry felt a quick thrill that was pinned

suddenly by a spike of fear. Was this a trap? Had she come here tonight knowing and planning what he would do? Knowing that in the mental turmoil that was sure to follow that kiss he would be given a chance to escape? She had a strange code, this leader of Los Coyotes, and too much time alone had twisted her thinking. She would not let a man be killed by her orders, but a bullet in the back of an escaping prisoner. Was that a different thing? He'd have to risk it. He studied the guard closely, tossed a rock near the sleeping man's feet. The guard shifted lazily but did not open his eyes.

The kiss was still fresh on his lips. She couldn't do a thing like this. So he started crawling on hands and knees. He moved slowly and he kept an eye on the guard. Once he thought the man was looking at him, but he made no move. Harry felt his heart pounding against his ribs with a noise he felt sure would arouse the camp. He crawled on, out of the circle of dim light thrown by the candle set in the cut half of a can. After this he got to his feet and walked quickly into the deep shadows.

He made his way to the horse corral where he knew saddled animals were kept always ready. He took the first he came to, slipped on a bridle that was hanging from a peg in a post and he threw himself into the saddle. The horse snorted loudly, and the loose animals nearby shied away, tails high, hooves heavy against the packed ground. Harry reached down, opened the gate, then sunk his heels in the animal's flanks. It jumped out in a burst of speed and he bent low to dodge the slashing branches of the trees along the creek. From behind him came a startled yell.

He looked back in time to see the door of the cabin open. Paula, a robe tight around her slight body, stood there, her hair falling loose over her shoulders. He felt a quick thrill stab through him—almost a desire to go back. Then lumbering out of the shadows came Pancho Garcia. He had a rifle in his hands.

The loud curses of Pancho ripped through the narrow Canyon of the Red Rocks and the rifle snapped to his shoulder with a speed borne of long practice. Harry tried to pull himself deeper into

the saddle. He watched the rifle with the fascination of a squirrel watching a snake. There was a sharp cry from Paula Urbanos. She moved swiftly, and he saw the flash of the rifle blast. The bullet thudded harmlessly into the hill. She was struggling with Pancho for possession of the rifle.

It was not a release from fear that swept through him now. It was not the sinking weakness of a man who has received a stay from death. Rather it was a singing lightness that brought a surge of power and stung his eyes with tears. He swerved the horse into the brush and broke through onto the trail that led up the ridge.

At the top of the first rise he paused to look back. He was no longer afraid to outline himself against the heavy moon that silvered the brush around him. He could see down into the clearing. Paula stood there, and Pancho and the rest of the men were at her side. He turned the horse and made a full run toward freedom.

And where the trail joined the rutted road across the hill Harry Travers dismounted. The summer daylight was on the hills now and the night dew was sweet in the fast drying grass. He dismounted, looped the reins around the saddle horn, headed the horse back toward the Canyon of the Red Rocks and slapped him sharply across the rump with the palm of his hand.

On foot, Harry Travers headed down the road toward Calabasas. He was dead-ly serious, but a singing kept humming inside him and once it spilled over in a whistled tune. And when the sun came up across the hills it threw a pink cast on the white dust.

VII

USUALLY AT THIS HOUR CAL-
abasas was steeped in the perspiring open-mouthed slumber of a hot summer morning. Dogs, with noses between paws, should have been in from their night of prowling and roosters through with their morning alarms. It was not yet time for the flies to bestir themselves to speckle the refuse piles.

The air was sticky with the first blast

of the sun and the dust was cool with the lingering of the night. And Harry Travers wondered how much he should tell of The Canyon of the Red Rocks. The unaccustomed stir of activity he found made the decision for him. If he had any regard for the life of Paula Urbanos he would tell nothing.

For it was in the air, all around him, pulsing like the throb of a drum, disturbing the usual calm. In front of the main General Merchandise store men hurriedly stuffed supplies in a dozen pack saddles. From the insides of the four saloons blasts of voices cracked out over shots and bottles, a weird sound at this hour of the morning. At the edge of town, behind a white picket fence, two women stood, their hands twisted in their apron. Men’s voices were a tone lower and a shade louder and they walked with the stiff-legged awareness that told of their sudden consciousness of the importance of being a man.

Activity and anticipation lay over the town of Calabasas. It could have been the making up of a gold stampede, except that the ribald jesting was missing. A veiled intentness marked it for what it was. Men in their primitive state. Men, questing the blood of other men.

ELBOWING his way to the sagging adobe where he and his companions had taken rooms, he heard it on every side of him as men charged their own furnaces with blood-encrusted tales of Los Coyotes. For every ten feet of street and sidewalk there was at least one self-appointed orator with his small cluster of listeners. City-bred Angelenos, for the most part. Derbied, fist-against-palm fighters who would be saddle-sore in five miles and ready to give up the chase at the first smell of gunsmoke.

But at this stage they were useful, for they could quote the editorials that had been appearing for a year in the newspapers and they could make them sound like fresh ideas of their own making. They had a way of making the death of the station keeper’s wife sound more heinous than it was, and they had a way of insinuating it was not a bullet alone that had killed her. These were the instigators; the doers were there in the cantinas

putting a shaving edge on their kill instinct with the whetstone of whiskey.

Harry Travers estimated that there were at least a hundred and fifty men in this posse that had sworn themselves to clear Southern California of the scourge of Los Coyotes. Of this number perhaps a fourth would never get into saddles. Another fourth would drop out the minute the posse left the traveled road. But if only fifty remained on a determined search there was no doubt that they would in time come on the hiding place of Los Coyotes. And when they did there would be another fifty at least who would gladly come buying in for the kill.

Harry Travers felt contaminated by the time he reached the adobe where he found Tony Ferris and Willard McCauley feverishly changing into serviceable saddle clothes, talking unfamiliarly of lynch ropes and guns while Guy Larrimer studiously cleaned the breech of his rifle.

For a full five seconds they stared at Harry Travers when he came through the door. Then they gave a wild whoop of relief, followed by a combined “Where the hell have you been?”

He tried to stall by countering with questions about the mob that was making its lusty formation there in the street. And between that and their own prompting he gave then an answer about going to Los Angeles to check up on a few details that Pancho Garcia had dug up. In the fever of the manhunt the answer held up and was not questioned. In the glare of a more sensible moment it would have fallen flat before these three who had a way of sniffing out a falsehood.

Tony Ferris said, “As I was telling Willard here, I haven’t changed my opinion but you sure have to hand it to this Garfo for the way he’s taken over here!”

“All he’s done is feed more draught to a fire that was already burning,” said the more practical Guy Larrimer. “You won’t love him so much by the time we’re through taking the Rancho away from him. You’re going to put up the money, you know.”

“Business is business and it doesn’t mean we’ll be any easier on him,” Willard McCauley said in way of an argument. “But give the man credit where it’s due. It’s costing him plenty to pay for the supplies for this mob.”

"And I bought this bottle before I knew he was standing treat!" said Tony Ferris disgustedly.

Harry Travers walked around in a daze, battered back and forth by conjectures of what it would seem to kill a man. Pushed by answers that it would be a genuine pleasure to do away with any member of Los Coyotes.

"There's one they call White Eye," Tony Ferris said. "They say he was with Joaquin Murietta. It was him and not Three-Fingered Jack that used to tie the pigtails of Chinamen together and then cut their throats to see them kick!"

"They say that woman up there was hacked all to hell before she died."

Harry Travers was getting slowly sick. Here were men whom he had considered apart from the average two-legged animal who walked the streets with his eyes on the gutter. These were men who had ideals big enough to make them self-sufficient and untouched by the mob. These were men with attainable sets of values. Men who could be as ribald as the next but could thrill to Shelley. Men whose intrigues had added a sparkle to the cloistered lives of too many *senoritas*, yet men who would stand in humble silence before a painting of The Sistine Madonna. They had come to Calabasas seeking a world of their own where they could be as they wanted to be. And now Harry Travers the poet saw them for the first time. They were no different than the man in the street.

He saw them fired by the same primitive emotions that fed Christians to the lions or bulls to the matador. Someone had cried "blood," and they were ready to take up the scent. He had thought he would reason with them, and in time he would tell them that Paula Urbanos was alive and would soon return to Calabasas to take legal possession of the Rancho that was hers. There had even been a haunting long-range vision where with water rights from the Rancho, Paula Urbanos and the Big Four would live as neighbors and friends. He had hoped it would be more than that . . .

THERE was the long legal battle with Vincent Garfo ahead, but he knew he could win it for the girl, for with

the aid of these friends of his who had logic and reason on their side it would be a different thing for Garfo to face than when he had met old Tiburcio Urbanos, hot-headed and unsure, challenging legality with a gun there in the streets of Calabasas. But now any such sensible plan was gone. Now his allies were willing to ride stirrup to stirrup with Vincent Garfo. Hungry to chase down a wild band that was no more than a legend on which was hung every unsolved crime that happened from the Tehachapies to San Diego.

He turned and left the room, needing air, and behind him Willard McCauley yelled, "Hey, Harry! Garfo's furnishing the horses, too. Go on up to the livery stable and get one before all the good ones are taken!"

He nodded dully and went out into the blast of sunshine. The orators were still at work, stalking down the sidewalks, stopping suddenly as a new idea hit them, waving their arms, shaking a fist in the air, always finding an audience. The saloons were beginning to spew out the fighting men. Bearded men, smooth-shaven men, rough-clad men and finely-dressed men. Sadistically cruel bone-crushing giants and calm thin-faced killers. Most dangerous of all were the professional bounty hunters who kept to themselves talking in low tones, idly coiling rope or fiddling with the bullets in their gun belts.

"And if that don't work we'll burn the damn hills!" a curbstome orator shouted nearly in Harry Traver's ears.

"Vincent Garfo jest sent in a whole wagon load of shot-guns!"

A wagon load—! Everything in superlatives! But there was a wild scramble toward the end of the street. Anything with which to blast, kill, and maim. Los Coyotes. Murdering, throat-cutting rapists who struck by night. No home was safe and no woman was free to walk upon the streets. The crimes were legion, and they grew in sticky bloodiness with the heat of day and the fumes of whiskey. With others Harry Travers selected a horse, and when others cursed he cursed. And to each, "Ain't that what you say, by God?" he nodded full agreement.

But while the blood-hungry mob settled

and twisted behind him and his own friends became deeper enmeshed in the coils, Harry Travers rode unnoticed up the Topanga road and spurred the horse paid for by Vincent Garfo into a full run. He held it that way until he was past the Ranchito of Tiburcio Urbanos. Four times during the day he had to stop to let the animal rest. But by late afternoon he had topped the ridge and was challenged by the look-out and he knew he was on the trail to The Canyon of the Red Rocks where a girl with an elfin face worried because people said there was blood on the hands of Los Coyotes.

VIII

HE KNEW THAT A DOZEN rifles covered his approach to the Canyon of the Red Rocks, but somehow it made little difference. What did matter was the fact that he felt so helplessly alone, for in the last twenty-four hours a world of paper cards had blown down and crashed around him and he had not been ready for the collapse. An impractical dreamer, the world had been made of silk and honey. Now for the first time he saw the sweat and blood.

Where the cliffs squeezed in to a narrow passage two guards came out in the open and rode behind him with rifles across their pommels. He held his hands high to show he was unarmed, and in that way he rode into the clearing and saw the cabin against the rocks and the smoke stains of the natural fireplace. He felt listlessly suspended between imagination and reality, and then Pancho Garcia and Paula Urbanos were standing there in front of him and life began to pound in his temples and he was aware of the fact that his eyes were stinging from lack of sleep. He dismounted slowly and walked forward. Pancho Garcia’s wrist turned slightly and he pressed the point of a knife against Harry Traver’s middle. But Harry Travers did not see it. He was watching the girl.

And in those few seconds of silence, touched only by the slight stir of the leaves and the faint voice of the stream, that half-dream world of the Dons ceased to exist for Harry Travers. Those halcyon days of gold in the creeks and cattle

on a thousand hills were swept away by the roar of the industrial giant that was taking hold and shaping the destiny of a new California. And in such a society each man must make his way alone, fighting for what he would possess and fighting to hold it. She was standing there before him, waiting for his voice, and he knew what he must do. She was the thing he must possess and hold, and in so doing her rights would become his to defend. He would fight for them ever against men who in that dream had been his friends, if need be, for from now on this girl must come first. This was his destiny. It was in his voice when he spoke, and the effect of it was reflected in the widening of Pancho Garcia’s eyes. The old man’s hand moved and he returned the knife to the sash around his middle.

Harry Travers moved swiftly then, and there was the sharp bite of authority in his voice. He formed his plans as he spoke, and he was amazed at how easily the decisions formed, just as if his life had molded to this moment. But every word was tempered with consideration for her, and every decision was framed to meet her approval.

There were a dozen men in all when they had gathered there in the clearing. And, looking them over, Harry Travers saw that the idealistic innocence of these men must exist mostly in the naive mind of Paula Urbanos, but instead of angering him it made him love her more because he could still remember his own dreams. Petty horse thieves and men who found the supply wagons of Vincent Garfo an easy way to eat, for the most part.

Only in Pancho Garcia and the five who stood nearest him did the fanatic power of vengeance burn. These five, Harry Travers decided rightly, were men who had worked with the belief that it was their destiny to save pastoral California from the wheels of the Yankee trader. And they were all the more dangerous because their ardor had been held in check by this girl who remained as their symbol of indignities. It was to Pancho Garcia and these five that Harry Travers spoke of the mob that was forming in Calabasas.

“We haven’t got a chance if we stay here,” Harry Travers said, leaving no doubt now that he was casting his fate

with theirs. "They'll hunt us down like so many rats, and if they can't drive us out in any other way they'll fire the hills. So this is the end of Los Coyotes and the thing for us to do is scatter in a dozen directions. No one positively put blame on you as individuals. Those who think it best can circle back and join in the hunt; some can cut on across the hills to the beach and ride down the ocean front to Santa Monica. Others can take the trails north to Buenaventura."

"And the little lizard?" said Pancho Garcia softly.

"Is my responsibility," said Harry Travers. "I'll see that the necessary papers are filed and when things quiet down she can come back and say she's been in Mexico. The Rancho will be hers."

"Not as long as Vincent Garfo lives," said Pancho Garcia.

IT was a moment of decision. Harry Travers could see it in the eyes of the five men who seemed to physically weld themselves closer to Pancho Garcia at this moment. "I tell you the law will take care of Vincent Garfo," Harry Travers snapped, his voice raw.

"My little lizard is not safe as long as he lives," Pancho Garcia said doggedly.

Paula Urbanos, aware of the plan that was forming in the old man's mind, stepped forward quickly and took one of his hands in both of hers. "You must listen to what he says, Pancho. He is trying to help us."

Pancho Garcia smiled down at her and shook his head slowly, "Always your heart is too big for your head, little lizard. How many times have I told you this?" He spoke rapidly in Spanish, and the five fanatically loyal men moved quickly. Harry Travers took Pancho Garcia roughly by the shoulder and spun him around.

"I told you there's a hundred and fifty men in that posse," Harry snapped angrily.

"Si, I heard you," said Pancho Garcia. "But there is only one Vincent Garfo."

"You're crazy, you fool!" Harry Travers shouted. "Gather your men and get out of these hills while you've got a chance!"

Pancho Garcia's cheeks seemed to sag. Deep furrows appeared from the sides of his flat nose and ran diagonally to the cor-

ners of his mouth. He spoke with his teeth clamped tightly together. "You talk with the tongue of a parrot, Harry Travers," he said softly. "Suddenly you open your eyes and because the stars are shining in them you say you are in love. You do not know what it means, Harry Travers. For two years I have seen my little lizard hiding here in the rocks like an animal, and for two years I have watched Vincent Garfo spit on the floors in the Casa and sleep with his dirty boots in the bed that was made for my little girl. For two years I have watched his too many herders go across the valley and when they come back they had much gold and blood on their clothes. And then Vincent Garfo would walk up and down and say, 'It is Los Coyotes that do these things!'" The old man stopped. His dull brown eyes seemed to be completely filmed over and his face was a pasty grey. His shoulders moved softly in rhythm with his breathing. His voice was still soft when he continued. "When you have seen things like this you know what you must do, Harry Travers. As long as Vincent Garfo lives there can be nothing. Today I give the orders to Los Coyotes and I know the orders that must be given!"

The girl ran forward, calling the old man's name, but Harry Travers knew that it would be as senseless to try and stop him now as had been Vincent Garfo's effort to stop the Big Four Land and Water Company on their search for Utopia. He took the girl and held her in his arms and she sobbed against his chest. He read the worry and the pleading in her tear-streaked face, and he kissed her, reassuring her. But when Pancho Garcia and his twelve men rode out of the Canyon of the Red Rocks Harry Travers rode with them. It was what she expected of her man.

And as they rode along the floor of a twisting canyon Harry Travers had a chance to see the face of each man that rode in that band and he wondered how many would be in the saddle tonight. Of those twelve men at least seven would not stop to consider whether or not they would die when they thought of the future of Paula Urbanos. Pancho Garcia, the five who had been the vaqueros of Tiburcio Urbanos, and Harry Travers, who had

once been a poet who dealt in dreams.

He reached across now and took the rifle that Pancho Garcia offered him and the cold of its metal was not the stuff of which dreams are built. He dropped it into the scabbard that hung from his saddle horn and his right hand settled to the butt of the Walker Colt the girl had returned to him. That too, was a solid thing.

IX

AT THE TOP OF THE RIDGE they paused and looked down at the long line of horsemen who rode in the shadow of the stringy dust cloud that laid in the air. A mile from Rancho Urbanos, Harry Travers figured, and he saw the strategy of wily old Pancho.

In spite of the grimness of their mission a half-holiday mood would hang over that gigantic posse until such a time as blood stained their play. They’d turn in at the Rancho, and Vincent Garfo would again hide his own misdeeds with the plentiful covering of public approval by opening the wine cellars. This was the time to strike, while the mob still talked of big things and tangled itself in its own arms and legs. A swift slicing blow with every gun aimed for Vincent Garfo alone, then a quick break back into the brush that these men knew so well. Some would escape, some would not. It was the chance they would take if they were to put an end to this Vincent Garfo.

Pancho Garcia called a council of war, and he gave orders rapidly for the band to split, half to go with Harry Travers and half with himself. This trust was compensation enough for the decision Harry Travers had made. They dismounted then, watered the horses and laid their plans carefully and as they did Harry Travers wormed out the full story of Vincent Garfo.

It had been nearly a year, Pancho Garcia said, before he was sure that it was Vincent Garfo and his men who were responsible for the many robberies that took place in the Ventura road and on the stages in the canyon of Little St. Francis. But by that time, the legend of Los Coyotes had grown to where there was no stopping it, and by that time Vincent Garfo had bought his way firmly into the con-

fidence of the good people of Calabasas.

And like Tiburcio Urbanos who had held no time for the law that was a vague thing in far off Los Angeles and did not reach here in the Santa Monica mountains, Pancho Garcia knew he must make his own law with Vincent Garfo. He had pleaded with Paula Urbanos, but for many months after the death of her father the little lizard had not been well and Pancho Garcia was more concerned with catering to her wishes than he was with letting more blood. Some day the right time would come and Pancho Garcia and Vincent Garfo would be alone . . .

But where once Paula Urbanos had planned on going back and taking the land that was hers now came the realization that she had gone too far. Sometimes she awoke at night, remembering that she had held the head of her dead father, there in the dust of the Calabasas street. Sometimes, Pancho Garcia said, she would cry and say there was blood on her skirt. Pancho Garcia’s eyes became heavy. “But never,” he said, “did the little lizard give orders to rob or kill. It was tried once by a hot-headed one who would win her favors. Valermo, we called his name . . .”

These things Pancho Garcia managed to tell as he drew a rude map of the Rancho and said how they would ride in by the two canyons and meet there by the main house.

He told them in much the same way a father might mention his daughter’s lovable shortcomings while giving his consent to a bashful swain. And then they shook hands, Harry Travers and Pancho Garcia, and they knew that after the death of Vincent Garfo one of them must go back to the Canyon of the Red Rocks—.

TIMING. That was the thing now. Harry Travers held his men back, for it would be worse to get there too soon than not to get there at all. At the exact moment Pancho Garcia and his men came out of the north canyon, then Harry Travers must come from the south. There would be light in the sky, for the moon would come full and early tonight. But it would be the big fires that would show where the men gathered. They were to leave their horses close by, then walk in and mingle with the crowd. Vincent Gar-

fo and a handful of leaders would be in the main house. Of this they were nearly certain.

With the evening the fog came slowly in from the ocean and it rested in the dark bottoms of the canyons. Here, from a higher level, it could be seen winding solidly like a phantom river and the full moon came up and laid heavily on it and touched it with puffs and shadows. Above the fog the night was clear and one by one the brightest of the inquisitive stars came to peer from the tops of the highest ridges. The day's heat, smouldering up from the floor of the valley, met the coolness of the fog and Harry Travers felt the shiver run through his body.

The glare of the fires, now. The grotesque shapes of the men with their hulking shadows shifting into the deeper darkness. In the satisfying fragrance of the dry grass a million crickets sawed out a senseless symphony and played a two-measure rest when Harry Travers and his men moved down the creek canyon toward the sheep camp of Vincent Garfo where city-bred men talked of blood and killing.

They dismounted silently, Harry Travers and his five men. They separated without a word, for they knew their parts well, and in time he saw them mingle unnoticed into the crowd. Harry himself went toward the main house, the muscles across his back aching with tenseness, praying at every step that he would not meet Willard McCauley nor Guy Larrimer nor Tony Ferris—.

From one fire a dozen voices failed to blend as they beat away at a song. From another the discord of a loud argument and from a third a self-appointed orator still stirred the devil-brew with his blood talk.

At the east end of the porch he waited for two minutes. Three men passed him, and as they did one of them changed the angle of his straw sombrero. Only three. Already two had deserted. He wondered how many Pancho Garcia had left. A faint call of an owl— He crossed the black shadows of the porch and the door latch lifted easily in his hand. The door opened noiselessly on its leather hinges.

He knew the long corridor like a map, for Pancho Garcia had not missed a de-

tail. There to the left was the living room with the big fireplace. Split-second timing. He paused only long enough to take a half-dozen breaths and Pancho Garcia was standing there beside him, having come in from the opposite end of the through corridor. They drew pistols, cocked them, and took a final deep breath. Whoever was in that room must die now; they pushed open the door. There by the fireplace stood Vincent Garfo, the bandit chief who posed as a sheep man. He was pouring red wine for Tony Ferris, Willard McCauley and Guy Larrimer.

IT would have been over then in a few seconds. This was not the time for a conscience. Pancho Garcia had schooled him well, and there with Paula Urbanos in his arms he had known that if he were to take her it must be this way. But now he could see only the startled eyes of three men who were still his friends, regardless of their decisions or their human failings. He lurched sideways then and his shoulder caught Pancho Garcia in the ribs just as the Mexican's gun spit flame.

He saw Willard McCauley spill over a table and drop behind it for protection. Tony Ferris moved swiftly out of the line of fire. Guy Larrimer tugged a six-shooter from his belt. Two more shots from Pancho Garcia— Surprise, coupled with protection outside the corridor, that is the way it had been planned. But now Vincent Garfo was still alive and the surprise element was gone. A thud of running feet and cries of alarm. Then Vincent Garfo had snatched a shotgun from the corner of the room and emptied both barrels. Some of the shot stung Harry Travers in the thigh. He was stumbling along blindly, following Pancho Garcia down the corridor to where their men waited to cover their escape.

The deep-throated roar of men scenting the first blood seemed to choke the night. Wild firing and yells broke out at different spots. There was the scream of a man wounded. Then steady high-pitched cursing. Harry recognized one of Los Coyotes, running. *One of my own men, he kept thinking. One of my own men.* There was the deep growl of a shotgun and the man went end over end and slid on his face. A wild triumphant yell—

They reached the screen of brush, but the panicked horses had pulled loose from their pickets and there was no time to catch them up. They ran on, stumbling. He and Pancho Garcia, Harry cursing himself for his softness, Pancho cursing him with his silence. More shots. Then, distinctly, came the orders: "Get your horses! Fan out! Hell, they haven't got a chance!"

An hour of lying on the ground with his heart thudding against the dry leaves until he reached under with his hand and scraped them aside, fearful that his pursuers might hear the sound. The snapping of a twig, the pushing aside of the brush. A half-animal cry, then full realization. There, not three feet away, Vincent Garfo stood, the shotgun in his hand.

Harry Travers bunched his muscles and lunged, his arms closing around Vincent Garfo's ankles. The shotgun exploded harmlessly. They hit the ground and rolled, sprang apart and they were both on their feet. He knew Garfo's hand was going toward his belt. He felt his own fingers curl around the butt of that Walker Colt.

Once. Twice. The thud of the gun butt against the palm of his hand was a powerful thing that flowed through him like liquid fire. Every bloody tale he had heard today. Every exaggerated moment of suffering. It was all in his finger as he squeezed the trigger and saw Vincent Garfo stagger back under the impact of the lead, half turn, and fall heavily. Blood. Harry Travers, the poet, was no different than any other man.

But it was only a second that he stood there, then animal instinct took hold. There would be a dozen men run this way to investigate the shots. It would mean a break in the line that had been circling around them. He waited until he heard the first calls, then the cracking of brush, then he calculated where the opening would be and ran that way. As he did he called Pancho, over and over, knowing that the name was common enough that no one would suspect it was a fugitive calling to his friend, for now at least a dozen voices were calling back and forth.

He found the old man lying in the water of the creek. He helped him to his feet and Harry kept saying, "He's dead,

Pancho. He's dead!" Then they were gliding out into the brush shadows of the night, pausing only once when they found the horses left by the possemen who had broken the line.

They went on, swiftly. Stars were less bright, though the moon had gone, and there was a rim of light across the hills when they went down the slope toward the Canyon of the Red Rocks.

X

SO HE HAD KILLED A MAN, AND even when he held her in his arms and covered her face with kisses he felt the difference within him. Thoughts now came and went swiftly, unclouded by sentimentality. Decisions were quick and crystal clear.

Pancho Garcia seemed suddenly years old, a thing out of the past that was dead. He sat there dully, holding Paula's hand in the way a child clings to its mother. He kept mumbling under his breath, saying nothing.

"They couldn't have gotten them all," Harry Travers said, pacing back and forth across the room of the cabin. "Some of them must have gotten away, and if they did they'll come back here!"

"Pepe. Ramon. Alberto. Gomez. Alvarado." Pancho Garcia tolled the names off slowly. "If one of these is alive he will come back to see that the little lizard is all right. The others?" He shook his head. "I cannot tell."

But only two came back. Alvarado and Alberto, though Alvarado lived only long enough to be taken from his horse. "They start to ride in another hour," said Alberto in Spanish. "They say they will take no chances. They will kill every man they find in these hills, for every man here is a thief of some kind and even if he is not he has given shelter and help to Los Coyotes. Even if he is not one of us he deserves to be killed. This is what they say, and they say that this way they will miss none. They talk of burning the hills!"

There was no mark of emotion in the voice of Paula Urbanos when she spoke. She said, "Don't they know that men live here with their wives and children? Are they to be condemned because they do

not build a house on the main highway? The turkey raisers have more luck with their birds here in the hills——”

“Some argued this way,” said Alberto. “I could hear their words. The others say it is best to kill every man. Those who spoke this way had the most voices.”

SHE came to Harry Travers then and he took her in his arms and held her. She had come to him for protection and comfort and he knew that from now on it must always be like this. Fugitives, perhaps, forever, but together always, clinging to each other. Her eyes asked him to tell her that the words of Alberto meant nothing, but he could not force himself to tell her the lie. He said, “I’ve seen them, Paula. After last night they will stop at nothing.”

“But why?” She said it so softly it seemed she talked to herself. “The men are all gone. Dead or scattered. There is no more Los Coyotes. What do they want?”

“A mob must kill a figurehead. A leader.” He said it bitterly, speaking his thoughts aloud without meaning to. Then he felt the cold spur of horror that went through him when he realized what he had said and saw the slow wave of understanding come into her eyes. He took her face between the palms of his hands, pressed until he knew he was hurting her, but he could not stop. His throat was dry and his voice raspy when he said, “No, Paula. I would kill you myself first.”

“It is my fault,” she said dully. “It is my fault these men are dead. They are right when they seek the leader of Los Coyotes.”

For the first time in over an hour Pancho Garcia bestirred himself. He said, “Paula! You speak like a crazy little fool! Your brain is sick again like it was the night your father died!”

She said, “It was my fault that you and the others came away with me.”

“You made *bandidos* of no one!” the old man shouted fiercely. “Myself—the others—we have wanted it this way, stealing the supplies from Vincent Garfo. It made little difference. These things are not of your doing! Listen to Pancho! You must not talk this nonsense, for this is the time to say goodbye, Alberto and

myself we will go toward Ventura. You and Senor Travers must ride for Santa Monica.”

“That’s right, Paula,” Harry Travers said eagerly. “We’ve got time if we start now.”

“And the men of the hills who raise the turkeys? They are to pay for my mistakes?” She smiled now and shook her head. “Always, men will search for the real leader of Los Coyotes!”

“I’ll prove in court that it was Vincent Garfo,” Harry said, his voice rising.

“You forget Vincent Garfo and I have met before. He would say it is only a personal fight. No, Harry, but thank you for your love.” She turned and started toward the corral.

He had never felt such desperation. He felt like slapping her face, hard. Instead he grasped her shoulders and shook her, but even as he did he knew it was useless. Here was more than the decision of a fanatic, for it was tempered with hysteria.

“Pancho, you and Alberto go, and *vaya con Dios*.”

“Paula! Damn you! You’re being an idiotic little fool!” He slapped her across the face. He saw her recoil from the blow, but the hard dry eyes told him he had not shaken her from her hysterical decision.

Again the deep furrows appeared in the cheeks of Pancho Garcia and his eyes took on their filmed hardness. Harry Travers did not see the blow start. He only knew that again Pancho Garcia’s pistol barrel had cracked against his skull. And like that night in Calabasas he felt the earth come up and hit him and explode in stars around his head.

There were sounds. A million of them. Paula’s scream, he thought, or was that only the rush of blood in his head? A thunder of hooves . . . a thousand horses . . . He kept fighting against the blackness—fighting—until at last he won and raised himself to hands and knees, pausing a moment, shaking his head. And then it all came back. A fool decision Paula Urbanos had made to give herself up as the leader of Los Coyotes.

He got to his feet, swaying drunkenly, yet savagely sure that he must overtake her and stop her. He tried to get his

bearings to find the horse corral, and then he saw her there in the dirt in front of the cabin. Her hands and feet were tied and a handkerchief had been knotted and stuffed in her mouth. He untied her hurriedly and she said one word, “Pancho!” And then he knew.

THEY rode hurriedly, but it was little use. Twice, far ahead, they saw the dust puff that marked the passage of old Pancho Garcia and loyal Alberto on some exposed switch-back there ahead. But still Harry Travers and Paula Urbanos goaded their horses forward, hoping that some freak of fate might give them time. Then, below, they saw the twin columns of the posse coming up the dual ruts of the road that ended there in the lower reaches of Topanga. And on the little knoll, a few hundred yards from the end of the road, they saw Pancho Garcia and Alberto ride out of the thicket and pause, waiting for that advancing column. Paula and Harry beat futilely upon their jaded animals, but by the time they had reached the top of the knoll the twin column was at the end of the road and Pancho Garcia and Alberto were riding down like two plumed knights.

The breeze shifted slightly, and the sweet scent of the dry grass was gone and in its place came the stench of man-sweat and animal-sweat mixed with the burden of wine breaths and tobacco. A grumbled of words, the slap of rifles being pulled from saddle boots. The constant squeaking of leather.

Pancho Garcia was standing up in his stirrups now, leaning slightly forward, both hands on the broad Spanish horn of his saddle. They heard him laugh, then his voice came clearly. “I hear you seek the leader of Los Coyotes! Well, my friends, I am here! Pancho Garcia!”

A hundred and fifty men. A hundred and fifty sets of nerves unstrung. A hundred and fifty fingers unconsciously wanting to pull a trigger. There was no way of telling who fired the first shot and there was no way of telling how many shots there were in all. Two bodies jerked, first one way, then the other. They fell. A foot caught in a stirrup and a plunging horse dragged a dead body until a bullet

stopped the horse. A thundering wave of gunsmoke, clouded with blood. Then it was over and a hundred and fifty men were left with a hundred and fifty sicknesses in the pits of as many stomachs.

And then they saw them there on the knoll—Harry Travers holding Paula Urbanos close while she sobbed brokenly and would not stop. He faced them defiantly, ready to meet anything they had to offer, ready to accept any challenge. It was Willard McCauley, the political rebel, who stepped out of the mass of “the people.” He was strangely pale as he stood there alone, facing Harry Travers. Guy Larrimer and Tony Ferris came to stand beside him.

THE mob stood silently, glad now to take no responsibility, willing to claim anyone as the leader, ready to spend the rest of their lives saying they had done their duty. And with his arm tight around Paula Urbanos Harry Travers raised his eyes and met the level gaze of his three *compadres*. He said, “This is Paula Urbanos, the legal owner of the Rancho. Since she has been found there can be no further dispute about the land.”

At the mention of her name the crowd pushed closer. There was the quick mumble of those who recognized her and the sharper voice of those who had to be convinced. Tony Ferris and Guy Larrimer turned quickly, and something in their eyes brought silence again.

And after awhile Willard McCauley offered his hand. As he gripped that of Harry Travers he said loud enough for those nearest to hear, “I’m glad you found her, Harry. We had about given up hope.” His voice rose some and then he added, “There’s been hell in Calabasas the last few days and it’s just as well you and the girl were nowhere near to be part of it.”

It was strange that at this moment Harry Travers should again think of poetry. But now it was an epic poem metered by the heart beats of men like Guy Larrimer and Tony Ferris and Willard McCauley.

The breeze shifted again, and it took away the smell of men and horses and brought back the perfume of the grass and lingering scent of last night’s fog.