

Desperate Men

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

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They were four desperate men, made hard by life, cruel by nature, and driven to desperation by imprisonment. Yet the walls of Yuma Prison were strong and the rifle skill of the guards unquestioned, so the prison held many desperate men besides these four. And when prison walls and rifles failed, there was the desert, and the desert never failed.

Fate, however, delivered these four a chance to test the desert. In the early dawn the land had rolled and tumbled like an ocean storm. The rocky promontory over the river had shifted and cracked in an earthquake that drove fear into the hearts of the toughest and most wicked men in Arizona. For a minute or two the ground had groaned and roared, dust rained down from cracks in the roofs of the cells, and in one place the perimeter wall had broken and slid off, down the hillside. It was as if God or the Devil had shown them a way.

Two nights later, Otteson leaned his shaven head closer to the bars. „If you're yellow, say so! I say we can make it! If Isager says we can make it through the desert, I say we go!“

„We'll need money for the boatmen.“ Rodelo's voice was low. „Without money we will die down there on the shores of the gulf.“

All were silent, three awaiting a word from the fourth. Rydberg knew where the army payroll was buried. The government did not know, the guards did not know, only Rydberg. And Otteson, Isager, and Rodelo knew he knew.

He was a thin, scrawny man with a buzzard's neck and a buzzard's beak for a nose. His bright, predatory eyes indicated his hesitation now. „How ... how much would it take?“ he asked.

„A hundred,“ Otteson suggested, „not more than two. If we had that much we could be free.“

Free... no walls, no guards, no stinking food. No sweating one's life out with backbreaking labor under the blazing sun. Free... women, whiskey, money to spend... the click of poker chips, the whir of the wheel, a gun's weight on the hip again. No beatings, no solitary, no lukewarm, brackish drinking water. Free to come and go... a horse between the knees... women...

He said it finally, words they had waited to hear. „There's the army payroll. We could get that.“

The taut minds of Otteson, Rodelo, and Isager relaxed slowly, easing the tension, and within the mind of each was a thought unshared.

Gold ... fifteen thousand in gold coins for the taking! A little money split four ways, but a lot of money for one!

Otteson leaned his bullet head nearer. „Tomorrow night“—his thick lips barely moved as he whispered—„tomorrow night we'll go out. If we wait longer they'll have the wall repaired.“

„There's been guards posted ever since the quake,“ Rodelo protested.

Otteson laughed. „We'll take care of them!“ From under the straw mattress he drew a crude, prison-made knife. „Rydberg can take care of the other with his belt.“

Cunningly fashioned of braided leather thongs, it concealed a length of piano wire. When the belt was removed and held in the hands it could be bent so the loop of the steel wire projected itself, a loop large enough to encircle a man's head ... then it could be jerked tight and the man would die.

Rodelo leaned closer. „How far to the gold?“

„Twenty miles east. We'll need horses.“

„Good!“ Otteson smashed a fist into a palm. „East is good! They'll expect us to go west into California. East after the gold, then south into the desert. They'd never dream we'd try that! It's hot as sin and dry as Hades, but I know where the water holes are!“

Their heads together, glistening with sweat in the hot, sticky confines of their cells, they plotted every move, and within the mind of three of the men was another plot: to kill the others and have the gold for himself.

„We'll need guns.“ Rydberg expressed their greatest worry. „They'll send Indians after us.“

The Indians were paid fifty dollars for each convict returned alive—but they had been paid for dead convicts, too. The Yaquis knew the water holes, and fifty dollars was twice what most of them could make in a month if they could find work at all.

„We'll have the guns of the two guards. When we get to Rocky Bay, we'll hire a fisherman to carry us south to Guaymas.“

The following day their work seemed easy. The sun was broiling and the guards unusually brutal. Rydberg was knocked down by a hulking giant named Johnson. Rydberg just brushed himself off and smiled. It worried Johnson more than a threat. „What's got into him?“ he demanded of the other guards. „Has he gone crazy?“

Perryman shrugged. „Why worry about it? He's poison mean, an' those others are a bad lot, too. Otteson's worst of all.“

„He's the one I aim to get,“ Johnson said grimly, „but did you ever watch the way he lifts those rocks? Rocks two of us couldn't budge he lifts like they were so many sacks of spuds!“

It was sullen dark that night; no stars. There was thunder in the north and they could hear the river. The heat lingered and the guards were restless from the impending storm. At the gap where the quake had wrecked the wall were Perryman and Johnson. They would be relieved in two hours by other guards.

They had been an hour on the job and only now had seated themselves. Perryman lit a cigarette and leaned back. As he straightened to say something to Johnson he was startled to see kicking feet and clawing hands, but before he could rise, a powerful arm came over his shoulder, closing off his breath. Then four men armed with rifles and pistols went down the side of Prison Hill and walked eastward toward the town.

One hour before discovery. That was the most they could expect, yet in half that time they had stolen horses and headed east. Otteson had been shrewd. He had grabbed Perryman's hat from the ground. Both Isager and Rodelo had hats of a sort. Rydberg was without any covering for his shaven head.

Two hours after their escape they reached the adobe. Rydberg led the way inside the ruin, and they dug up the gold from a far corner. Each man took a sack, and then they turned their horses to the south and the desert.

„Each year,“ Otteson said, „the fishermen come to Rocky Bay. They live there while they fish, and then return to their homes down the gulf. Pablo told me, and he said to keep Pinacate on my left and head for the coast at Flat Hill. The bay is on a direct line between the hill and the coast.“

Pablo had been killed by a blow on the head from a guard's gun, but he had been planning escape with Otteson. Dawn came at last and the clouds slid away leaving the sun behind ... and the sun was hot.

From the Gila River to the Mexican border there was nothing. Only desert, cacti, rocks, and the sun, always the sun. There was not even water until one almost reached the border. Water was found only in tinajas, basins that captured rain and retained it until finally evaporated by the sun. Some of the tinajas were shaded and held the water for a long time, and in others there was just sand. Sometimes water impregnated the sand at the bottom. These things a man must know to survive on that devil's trail.

Their route from the Gila to the border was approximately fifty miles as the buzzard flies, but a man does not ride as the buzzard flies, not even in a lonely and empty land. There are clusters of rock, broken lava, upthrust ledges, and clumps of cacti. And there are always, inevitably, arroyos. Seventy miles would be closer to the truth, seventy miles of desert in midsummer.

The border was a vague line which in theory left them free of pursuit, but in 1878 officers of the law often ignored lines of demarcation—and the Indians did not notice them at all. Actually, the border was their halfway point, for they had a rough distance of one hundred and forty miles to traverse.

Behind them two guards lay dead, and the hostler only lived because Rodelo was not, by nature, a killer. Rodelo had the sleeping man's hands and feet tied before he got his eyes open. Then he gagged and left him. They stole four horses and three canteens and filled the canteens at the pump. Otteson, Rydberg, and Isager took it for granted the hostler had been killed.

They rode hard for twenty miles, and then they had the added weight of the gold. Otteson knew the way from Pablo and he pointed it out occasionally as they rode. But he did not offer his back to his companions.

Four battered and desperate men headed south under the glaring sun. Dust lifted, they sweated, and their lips grew dry. They pushed their horses, for distance was important. Otteson called a halt, finally. He was a heavy man and the hard riding sapped the strength of his horse.

„Where is it we're gonna find water?“ Isager noted the hesitation before Otteson replied. Isager knew the desert, but not this area. Otteson only had the knowledge Pablo had given him and he didn't want to tell too much.

„Near Coyote Peak there's water. Maybe ten miles yet.“

Isager tested the weight of his canteen. Rodelo drank several good gulps and returned his canteen to its place behind his saddle. Rydberg, who had brought the guard's water bottle, drank also. Otteson made a motion of drinking, but Isager watched his Adam's apple. It did not move.

Isager was a lean man, not tall, and narrow of jaw and cheekbone. He weighed one hundred and fifty pounds and carried no ounce of fat. He had been sent to Yuma after killing a marshal, which would have been his sixth notch if he had been a man for carving notches. It was noteworthy that in selecting a weapon he had taken a pistol. Isager was nothing if not practical. The pistol was his favorite weapon, and the four would be close together. By the time they had spread out to where a rifle might be useful, he would have a rifle. Of that he was positive.

Rodelo knew nothing of the desert but much of men. When younger he had sailed to the West Coast of Africa and had seen men die of the sun. He had replaced the bandanna that covered his head when working in the prison yard with a hat stolen from the livery, knowing the sun would be vicious on their shaven skulls. They depended upon Otteson, and he was not to be trusted. Isager alone he respected: he liked none of them. Rydberg did not guess what the others knew—that they would soon be minus a man.

They walked their horses now. Behind them was no dust, but pursuit was certain. It was the Indians who worried them, for fifty dollars was a lot of money to an Indian. Two hundred dollars for them all.

The air wavered and changed before them, seeming to flow and billow with heat waves. On their right was the Gila Range, and the desert grew more rugged. Otteson watched when Rydberg drank, when he passed his hand over his bare skull, saw him put water on his head. Otteson was complacent, confident.

Isager's mouth was dry, but he did not touch the canteen. A mere swallow at dusk could do more good than a bucket now. He watched the others with cat eyes. Rydberg took another pull. The heat baked the desert and reflected in their faces like heat from a hot stove. Twice they stopped for rest, and each time it was Otteson and Isager who stopped in what little shade there was. Rydberg swayed as he dismounted.

„Hot!“ he gasped. „How much farther to water?“

„Not far.“ Otteson looked at Rydberg's horse. It was the best.

Isager took water from his canteen and wiped out his horse's mouth and nostrils. Rodelo thought this was a good idea and did likewise.

„Let's wait until dark,“ Rydberg suggested. „I'm hot. My head aches. That sun is killing me.“

„You want to get caught by them Injuns? Or them laws from Yuma?“

They moved on, and Rydberg's skull was pocked with sun blisters. The dust grew thicker, the air was dead, the desert a pink and red reflector for the sun. Rydberg swayed drunkenly, and Rodelo swore mentally and reflected that it must be 120 degrees or more.

Rydberg began to mutter. He pulled at his dry canteen. He tried again, shook it, and there was no sound. Otteson looked straight before him. Isager said nothing, and only Rodelo looked around as the man swayed drunkenly in his saddle.

„I'm out of water,“ Rydberg said. „How about a drink?“

„On the desert,“ Otteson said, „each man drinks his own water. You'll have to wait.“

The dust and sun and thirst turned their world into a red hell of heat waves and blurred blue mountains. The hooves of their horses dragged. Rydberg muttered, and once he croaked a snatch of song. He mumbled through thin, cracked lips, and the weird face above the scraggly neck became even more buzzardlike. His skull was fiery red now, and it bobbed strangely as he weakened. Suddenly he shouted hoarsely and pointed off across the desert.

„Water!“ he gabbled. „Water, over there!“

„Mirage,“ Rodelo said, and the others were silent, riding.

„Gimme a drink.“ Rydberg rode at Otteson and grabbed at his canteen.

The big man moved his horse away, striking at the skinny hand. „Go to hell,“ he said coldly.

Rydberg grabbed at him, lost balance, and fell heavily into the sand. He struggled to get up, then fell again.

Rodelo looked at him. His own canteen was empty. „The damn fool,“ Isager said, „why didn't he get him a hat?“

Nobody else spoke. Then Otteson reached for the canteen on Rydberg's horse, but Isager was closer and unhurriedly appropriated it. He also took the rifle. „Take the horse if you like,“ he said, „you're a heavy man.“

Otteson glared at Isager, and Rodelo moved in and took the gold. „Are you going to leave him here like that?“ he demanded.

Otteson shrugged. „He asked for it.“

„He wouldn't live until night,“ Isager said. „Stay if you want.“

Rodelo drew Rydberg into the shade of an ironwood tree. Then he mounted and followed. Why had they grabbed the empty canteen and the rifle when they could have gotten their hands on Rydberg's share of the gold?

A thin shadow of doubt touched him. Then the answer was plain and he cursed himself for a fool. Nearly two hundred gold coins he now carried, and it was considerable weight. They preferred that he carry the extra gold until ... His jaw set hard, but within him there was a cold shock of fear.

They thought he was going to die! They thought—He'd show them. From deep within him came a hard burning defiance. He'd show them.

It had been midafternoon when they left Rydberg. It was two hours later when they came up to Coyote Peak. Otteson was studying the rocks around and suddenly he turned sharply left and rode into an arroyo. Twenty minutes later they stood beside the tinaja.

Despair mounted within Rodelo. It was only a hollow of rock with a few gallons of water in the bottom. They filled their canteens, then watered the horses. When the horses had finished the water was gone.

„We'll rest a few hours,“ Isager suggested, „then go on after dark.“

Isager ignored the shade and lay down on his side with his face toward the two men and his weapons and water close behind him.

Rodelo found a spot in soft sand, well back in the shadow of the rocks. He stared at the others and thought exhaustion had made them stupid. Both had relaxed upon hard, rocky ground. The least move would awaken them. They would get no rest that way. While this was soft sand.... He relaxed luxuriously.

He awakened with a start. It was cold, dark, and silent. With sudden panic, he sprang to his feet. „Isager!“ he shouted. „Ott!“ And the desert gave back only echoes. He felt for his canteen, and it was gone. He ran to where his horse had been picketed, and it, too, was gone.

He had slept and they had left him. They had taken the gold, the horse, the canteen ... only his pistol remained. He had that only because they had feared to awaken him.

He rushed to a rise of ground, scrambled, slipped on the rocks, and skinned his knees. Then he got to the top and stared off to the southeast. All he could see was the soft, velvety darkness, the cool of the desert night, and the unspeaking stars.

He was alone.

For the first time he was frightened. He was horribly, unspeakably frightened. Rodelo hated being alone, he feared loneliness, and he knew the power of the desert to kill.

Then his fear left him, his thoughts smoothed out and the panic ended. They could not move fast without knowing the country better than they did. They would travel at a walk, and if they did, he might overtake them. He was younger than either, and he was strong. He had never found a trial that could test his endurance.

A glance at the stars told him they could have no more than an hour's start. How much would that mean at night in unfamiliar desert? Three miles? Five miles?

Doubt came. Could he make up the distance? They would never suspect pursuit. Suppose the day came and he was still without water? But what would waiting gain? This was not a spring, and the tinaja was empty.

He could wait for death, or for capture on the verge of death, or he could fight. He returned to the tinaja and found perhaps a cup of water in the bottom. He thrust his head into the basin and sucked it up. Then he straightened, glanced at the stars for direction, and struck out for the southeast, walking steadily.

Otteson and Isager rode side by side. Each man led a horse, and on those horses were the gold sacks. The issue between them was clear now. Isager knew he was faster with a gun, and Otteson knew it also. Therefore, the big man would wait for a moment when the killing was a sure thing.

Neither man mentioned Rydberg nor Rodelo. It was like Otteson to ignore what was past. Isager thought of Rodelo with regret—he had liked the younger man, but this was a matter of survival. They walked their horses, careful not to tire them. Once, encountering a nest of boulders, they circled some distance to get past them. Over the next two hours this allowed Rodelo to gain considerable ground.

The first day netted them sixty miles of distance but twenty of it had been up the Gila for the gold, and the next forty angling toward the border. Daylight found them near the border and Otteson looked back. Nothing but heat waves. „They’ll be coming,” Isager said. „They’ll find Rydberg by the buzzards. Then they’ll find Rodelo. That gives them a line on us even if they don’t find our trail.“

Ahead of them on their right was a cluster of mesas, on their left ahead high and blue on the horizon, the bulk of Pinacate, a fifteen-mile-long ridge that towered nearly five thousand feet into the brassy sky.

The coolness left the desert as the sun lifted. Both men knew the folly of haste. Moreover they had each other to watch. Neither wanted to go ahead, and this slowed their pace. Isager wished it had been Otteson back there rather than Rodelo. He had seen the big man get to his feet and had done likewise. Both had chosen stony ground, as a sound sleep might be their last sleep. Otteson had saddled up, glanced at the sleeping man, and then with a shrug had gathered up Rodelo’s gear and horse. To stop him would mean a shoot-out, and neither knew which side Rodelo would join if awakened by gunfire. He had mounted up and taken Rydberg’s horse. Neither had planned on abandoning the young man when they stopped, but this was a case of survival of the fittest and Rodelo had given them an opportunity to decrease their number by one more.

„You sure the fishermen come there at this time of the year?“

„Pablo said so. He planned to go this way himself. Rocky Bay, they call it. From Flat Hill we go right down to the water. How could a man mistake a bay? And if the fishermen aren’t there, we’ll wait.“

Not long after that they came up to Tinajas Altas where they watered the horses and refilled their canteens. Isager looked over the back trail from beside the tanks. He saw no dust, no movement. Once he believed he saw something stir down there, but it could have been nothing more than a coyote or a mountain sheep. A horse would make dust.

They rested, drank water again, and ate a little of the hardtack and jerky they had smuggled from the prison, food hoarded against this effort. An hour passed,

then a second hour. The rest meant much to them and to their horses. Otteson got up carefully, facing Isager. „Reckon we'd better move on. I won't feel safe until we're on that fishin' boat headed south.“

Up on the mesa's side among the talus, something moved. Isager's quick eye saw it and recognized it in the same instant with a start of inward surprise. Otteson's back was to the talus, but he saw a flicker of something in Isager's eyes. „What's the matter?“ he exclaimed, starting to turn.

He caught himself, his eyes turning ugly. „Figured I'd turn an' you'd shoot me? Don't try nothin' like that.“

Rodelo was on the slope behind and slightly above Otteson and about thirty yards back from him. His face was ghastly and red, his prison jeans were torn from cacti and rocks, but he clutched a businesslike .44 in his fist. He lifted it and took careful sight, shifting his feet as he did so. A rock rolled under his foot.

Otteson whipped around, quick as a cat. His rifle blasted from the hip and he missed. He never fired again. He went down, clawing at the rocks and gravel on which he had fallen, blood staining their pink to deep crimson. Isager held his smoking Colt and looked up the slope at Rodelo.

The younger man had recovered his balance and they stared at each other over their guns.

„You might miss,“ Isager said. „I never do.“

„Why don't you shoot, then?“

„I want company. Two can make it easier than one. Much easier than three.“

„Then why didn't you let him kill me?“

„Because he wanted to kill me himself. You need me. I know the desert and you don't.“

Rodelo came over the rocks, stepping carefully. „All right,“ he said. „Gimme water.“

Isager holstered his gun. „There's the tinaja. Drink an' we'll push on.“ He looked at Rodelo with curious respect. „How'd you catch up so fast?“

„You rode around things. I walked straight to your dust. You rested. I couldn't afford to.“

„Good man.“ Isager mounted up. Nothing was said about what happened. „If we play it smart now, we'll leave each other alone. Together we can make it through.“

One thing they had not forgotten. The knowledge of the tinajas lay dead in the skull of Otteson.

„We'll have to make our water last. It won't be far now. That's Pinacate.“

The mountain bulked before them now, and by the time the stars were out it loomed huge on the horizon. They slept that night and when they awakened, Rodelo looked around at Isager. His cheekbones were slashes of red from the sun, his eyes deep sunken. Stubble of beard covered his cheeks and his shirt was stiff with sweat and dust. „I smell the sea,“ he said, low-voiced. „I can smell the sea.“

When they started on once more, they kept the mountain between them and the sun, saving themselves from the heat. Once they found a water hole but the mud was cracked and dry in the bottom. Isager's brown face was shadowed with red, Otteson's hat pulled low over his cold eyes.

The horses were gaunt and beaten. Several times the men dismounted and led the horses to spare them. Their hunger was a gnawing, living thing within them,

and their spare canteens were dry, their own very low. The eyes of the men were never still, searching for water. Yet it was not enough to look. One had to know. In the desert water may be within a few feet and give no indication of its presence. And then, from the top of a rise, they saw the gulf!

„There it is.“ Rodelo stared, hollow-eyed. „Now for that bay.“

A squarish flat hill was before them. They circled and saw the gulf due west of it. „S'pose that's it?“ Isager asked doubtfully.

„You can see for yourself that it's a big bay.“ The tension between them was back: they were watching each other out of the corners of their eyes again.

Isager stood in his stirrups and looked south. Land stretched away until it ended in a point. There was a hint of sea in that direction but he was not sure. „All right,“ he said, „but I don't see any boats.“

The plain sloping down to the bay was white with soda and salt. Long sand spits extended into the milky blue water. Here and there patches showed above the surface. „Looks mighty shallow,“ Rodelo said doubtfully. „Don't seem likely a boat would come in here.“

Isager hefted his canteen, feeling its lightness with fear. „We'd better hunt for water.“

South of them, the rocky bluff shouldered against the sky, dark and rugged. North the beach lay flat and empty ... frightening in its emptiness. The horses stood, heads down and unmoving. The rocky bluff looked promising, but the salt on his lips frightened Isager. Behind them they heard a deep, gasping sigh and they turned. The paint packhorse was down.

It had sunk to the sand and now it lay stretched out, the hide on its flanks hanging like loose cloth in the hollows of its ribs.

Isager removed the gold from the horse, and with the gold off, it struggled to rise. Isager glanced at Rodelo, hesitant to use both hands to help the horse. „Go ahead,“ Rodelo said, „help him.“

Together they got the horse up, and then they turned south. The salty crust crunched and broke beneath their feet. Sometimes they sank to their ankles; the horses broke through at every step. They often stopped to rest and Isager glanced at Rodelo. „We better have a truce,“ he said, his eyes shifting away, then back. „You couldn't make it without me.“

Rodelo's lips thinned over his white teeth. „Don't need you. You knew the desert. I know the sea.“

„The desert's still with us,“ Isager said. Suddenly the water in Rodelo's canteen was more precious than gold. He was waiting for a chance to go for his gun.

The white glare around them forced their eyes to thin slits, while soda dust settled over them in a thin cloak. They stared at each other, as wild and thin as the gaunt, skeletonlike horses, white and shadowy things that seemed to waver with unreality in the heat. The milky water, undrinkable, and taunting them, whispered secret obscenities along the blue-white beach. „There'll be a fishing boat,“ Isager said. „No reason to kill each other. Maybe there's water beyond that bluff.“

„There'll be no boat.“ Rodelo stated it flatly. „This is the wrong bay.“

Isager stared, blinking slowly. „Wrong bay?“ he said stupidly.

„Look!“ Rodelo shouted harshly. „It’s too shallow! We’ve come to the wrong place!“

Isager’s dry tongue fought for his lips. There was no hope then.

„Give me your gun,“ Rodelo said, „and I’ll take you there.“

„So you can kill me?“ Isager drew back, his eyes cold and calculating.

„I know where the bay is,“ Rodelo said. „Give me your gun.“

Isager stared. Was it a trick? How could he actually know?

Suddenly, Rodelo shrugged. „Come on, then! I’ll take my chances on you!“ He pointed toward the dark bluff. „Look! That’s a water sky. There’s water beyond that point. Another bay!“

He took a step and a bullet kicked dust at his feet. He grabbed for his gun and whirled on Isager, but the gunfighter had already faced the hillside. Four Indians were coming down the hill, riding hard. As Rodelo turned, Isager stepped his feet apart and fired. An Indian’s horse stumbled and went down, throwing the rider head over heels.

Rodelo dropped to one knee and shot under the belly of his horse. He saw an Indian drop and he fired again and missed. A bullet hit Isager and turned him half around. He staggered, and the half-dead horse lunged clumsily away. A hoof went through the crust and the horse fell heavily and lay panting, one white sliver of bone showing through the hide of the broken leg.

Isager fell, pulled off balance by the fall of the horse, and Rodelo fired again and again. His gun muzzle wavered and the shots kicked up dust. Isager rolled over behind the downed horse. He knew from harsh experience that accuracy was more essential than speed. He steadied his gun barrel. The Indian who had been thrown was rushing him. The brown body loomed large and he could see sweat streaks on the man’s chest. He squeezed off his shot and saw the Indian stumble in midstride and then pitch over on his face.

Isager pushed himself to his knees, then got up. The beach weaved slowly, sickeningly beneath him. He turned his head stiffly and looked toward Rodelo. The fallen man looked like a bundle of old clothes, but as Isager looked, the bundle moved. Rodelo uncoiled himself and got up. Blood covered his face from a cut on his cheek. He stared at his empty gun, then clumsily began feeding shells into the chambers.

Across the wavering sand the two men stared at each other, then Rodelo laughed hoarsely. „You look like hell!“ he said, grinning from his heat-blasted face.

Isager’s brain seemed to spin queerly and he blinked. What was the matter with him? A pain bit suddenly at his side, and he clasped the pain with his hand. His fingers felt damp and he drew them away, staring stupidly at the blood dripping from his fingers.

„You copped one,“ Rodelo said. „You’re hit.“

Isager swayed. Suddenly he knew this was it, right here on this dead-white beach washed by an ugly weedy sea. It was no way for a cowhand to cash in his chips. „Beat it,“ he said hoarsely. „There’s more coming.“

„How do you know that?“

„That’s why they rushed. To get us an’ claim the reward. If they’d been alone they would have taken their time.“ His knees felt buttery and queer. „There’s one good horse. Take the gold an’ beat it. I’m done in, so I’ll hold them off.“

He went to his knees. „Only...“ His voice trailed off and he waited, his eyes begging Rodelo to wait a minute longer, then he managed the words, „get some of that money to Tom Hopkins’s wife. He ... he was that marshal. Funny thing, funny ... Never meant to kill him. He came at me an’ it was just reflex ... jus’ ... just drew an’ shot.“

„All right,“ Rodelo said, and he meant it. He turned and disappeared into the blinding light.

Isager lay down behind the fallen horse. He slid the rifle from its scabbard and waited.

Sheriff Bill Garden and two Apache trackers found Isager a few hours later. Gunfire from the advance party of six Yaquis had led them to this desolate beach. The convict was curled up behind a dying horse, surrounded by bright brass shells ejected from his rifle. Two of the Apache horses were gone and only one of the horses ridden by the convicts was alive. He was standing head down on the hillside not far away.

Horse tracks trailed away from the body of Isager, a faint trail toward the bluff to the south. Bill Garden glanced after them. The remaining scouts were still after the last man. He turned and looked down at Isager. „Lord a-mighty,“ he said. „What a place to die!“

Far off across the water there was a flash of white, a jib shaken out to catch the wind ... a boat had left the fishing beds at Rocky Bay and was beating its way southward toward Guaymas.

