

Dutchman's Flat

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

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The dust of Dutchman's Flat had settled in a gray film upon their faces, and Neill could see the streaks made by the sweat on their cheeks and brows and knew his own must be the same. No man of them was smiling and they rode with their rifles in their hands, six grim and purposeful men upon the trail of a single rider.

They were men shaped and tempered to the harsh ways of a harsh land, strong in their sense of justice, ruthless in their demand for punishment, relentless in pursuit. From the desert they had carved their homes, and from the desert they drew their courage and their code, and the desert knows no mercy.

„Where's he headin', you reckon?“

„Home, mostly likely. He'll need grub an' a rifle. He's been livin' on the old Sorenson place.“

Kimmel spat. „He's welcome to it. That place starved out four men I know of.“ He stared at the hoof tracks ahead. „He's got a good horse.“

„Big buckskin. Reckon we'll catch him, Hardin?“

„Sure. Not this side of his place, though. There ain't no shortcuts we can take to head him off, and he's pointin' for home straight as a horse can travel.“

„Ain't tryin' to cover his trail none.“

„No use tryin'.“ Hardin squinted his eyes against the glare of the sun.

„He knows we figure he'll head for his ranch.“

„He's no tenderfoot.“ Kesney expressed the thought that had been dawning upon them all in the last two hours. „He knows how to save a horse, an' he knows a trail.“

They rode on in near silence. Hardin scratched his unshaven jaw. The dust lifted from the hooves of the horses as they weaved their way through the catclaw and mesquite. It was a parched and sun-baked land, with only dancing heat waves and the blue distance of the mountains to draw them on. The trail they followed led straight as a man could ride across the country. Only at draws or nests of rocks did it swerve, where they noticed the rider always gave his horse the best of it.

No rider of the desert must see a man to know him, for it is enough to follow his trail. In these things are the ways of a man made plain, his kindness or cruelty, his ignorance or cunning, his strength and his weakness. There are indications that cannot escape a man who has followed trails, and in the two hours since they had ridden out of Freedom the six had already learned much of the man they followed. And they would learn more.

„What started it?“

The words sounded empty and alone in the vast stillness of the basin.

Hardin turned his head slightly so the words could drift back. It was the manner of a man who rides much in the wind or rain. He shifted the rifle to his left hand and wiped his sweaty right palm on his coarse pants leg.

„Some loose talk. He was in the Bon Ton buyin' grub an' such. Johnny said somethin' at which he took offense an' they had some words. Johnny was wearin' a gun, but this Lock wasn't, so he gets him a gun an' goes over to the Longhorn.

„He pushes open the door an' shoots Johnny twice through the body. In the back.“ Hardin spat. „He fired a third shot, but that missed Johnny and busted a bottle of whiskey.“

There was a moment's silence while they digested this, and then Neill looked up.

„We lynchin' him for the killin' or bustin' the whiskey?“

It was a good question, but drew no reply. The dignity of the five other riders was not to be touched by humor. They were riders on a mission. Neill let his eyes drift over the dusty copper of the desert. He had no liking for the idea of lynching any man, and he did not know the squatter from the Sorenson place. Living there should be punishment enough for any man. Besides—

„Who saw the shooting?“ he asked.

„Nobody seen it, actually. Only he never gave Johnny a fair shake. Sam was behind the bar, but he was down to the other end and it happened too fast.“

„What's his name? Somebody call him Lock?“ Neill asked. There was something incongruous in lynching a man whose name you did not know. He shifted in the saddle, squinting his eyes toward the distant lakes dancing in the mirage of heat waves.

„What's it matter? Lock, his name is. Chat Lock.“

„Funny name.“

The comment drew no response. The dust was thicker now and Neill pulled his bandanna over his nose and mouth. His eyes were drawn back to the distant blue of the lakes. They were enticingly cool and beautiful, lying across the way ahead and in the basin off to the right. This was the mirage that lured many a man from his trail to pursue the always retreating shoreline of the lake. It looked like water, it really did.

Maybe there was water in the heat waves. Maybe if a man knew how, he could extract it and drink. The thought drew his hand to his canteen, but he took it away without drinking. The slosh water in the canteen was no longer enticing, for it was warm, brackish, and unsatisfying.

„You know him, Kimmel?“ Kesney asked. He was a wiry little man, hard as a whipstock, with bits of sharp steel for eyes and brown muscle-corded hands. „I wouldn't know him if I saw him.“

„Sure, I know him. Big feller, strong made, rusty-like hair an' maybe forty year old. Looks plumb salty, too, an' from what I hear he's no friendly sort of man. Squattin' on that Sorenson place looks plumb suspicious, for no man can make him a livin' on that dry-as-a-bone place. No fit place for man nor beast. Ever'body figures no honest man would squat on such a place.“

It seemed a strange thing, to be searching out a man whom none of them really knew. Of course, they had all known Johnny Webb. He was a handsome, popular young man, a daredevil and a hellion, but a very attractive one, and a top hand to boot. They had all known him and had all liked him. Then, one of the things that made them so sure that this had been a wrong killing, even aside from the shots in the back, was the fact that Johnny Webb had been the fastest man in the Spring Valley country. Fast, and a dead shot.

Johnny had worked with all these men, and they were good men—hard men, but good. Kimmel, Hardin, and Kesney had all made something of their ranches, as had the others, only somewhat less so. They had come west when the going was rough, fought Indians and rustlers, and then battled drought, dust, and hot, hard winds. It took a strong man to survive in this country, and they had survived. He, Neill, was the youngest of them all and the newest in the country. He was still looked upon with some reserve. He had been here only five years.

Neill could see the tracks of the buckskin, and it gave him a strange feeling to realize that the man who rode that horse would soon be dead, hanging from a noose in one of those ropes attached to a saddle horn of Hardin or Kimmel. Neill had never killed a man or seen one killed by another man, and the thought made him uncomfortable.

Yet Johnny was gone, and his laughter and his jokes were a thing passed. They had brightened more than one roundup, more than one bitter day of heartbreaking labor on the range. Not that he had been an angel. He had been a proper hand with a gun and could throw one. And in his time he had had his troubles.

„He's walkin' his horse,“ Kesney said, „leadin' him.“

„He's a heavy man,“ Hardin agreed, „an' he figures to give us a long chase.“

„Gone lame on him maybe,“ Kimmel suggested.

„No, that horse isn't limpin'. This Lock is a smart one.“

They had walked out of the ankle-deep dust now and were crossing a parched, dry plain of crusted earth. Hardin reined in suddenly and pointed.

„Look there.“ He indicated a couple of flecks on the face of the earth crust where something had spilled. „Water splashed.“

„Careless,“ Neill said. „He'll need that water.“

„No,“ Kesney said. „He was pourin' water in a cloth to wipe out his horse's nostrils. Bet you a dollar.“

„Sure,“ Hardin agreed, „that's it. Horse breathes a lot better. A man runnin' could kill a good horse on this Flat. He knows that.“

They rode on, and for almost a half hour no one spoke. Neill frowned at the sun. It had been on his left a few minutes ago, and now they rode straight into it.

„What's he doin'?“ Kesney said wonderingly. „This ain't the way to his place!“ The trail had turned again, and now the sun was on their right. Then it turned again and was at their backs. Hardin was in the lead, and he drew up and swore wickedly.

They ranged alongside him, and stared down into a draw that cracked the face of the desert alongside the trail they had followed. Below them was a place where a horse had stood, and across the bank something white fluttered from the parched clump of greasewood.

Kesney slid from the saddle and crossed the wash. When he had the slip of white, he stared at it, and then they heard him swear. He walked back and handed it to Hardin. They crowded near.

Neill took the slip from Hardin's fingers after he had read it. It was torn from some sort of book and the words were plain enough, scrawled with a flat rock for a rest.

That was a fair shutin anyways six aint nowhars enuf, go fetch more men. Man on the gray better titen his girth or heel have him a sore-backed hoss.

„Why that...!“ Short swore softly. „He was lyin' within fifty yards of us when we come by. Had him a rifle, too. I seen it in a saddle scabbard on that buckskin in town. He could have got one of us, anyway!“

„Two or three most likely,“ Kimmel commented. The men stared at the paper and then looked back into the wash. The sand showed a trail, but cattle had walked here, too. It would make the going a little slower.

Neill, his face flushed and his ears red, was tightening his saddle girth. The others avoided his eyes. The insult to him, even if the advice was good, was an insult to them all. Their jaws tightened. The squatter was playing Indian with them, and none of them liked it.

„Fair shootin', yeah!“ Sutter exploded. „Right in the back!“

The trail led down the wash now, and it was slower going. The occasional puffs of wind they had left on the desert above were gone and the heat in the bottom of the wash was ovenlike. They rode into it, almost seeming to push their way through flames that seared. Sweat dripped into their eyes until they smarted, and trickled in tiny rivulets through their dust-caked beards, making their faces itch maddeningly.

The wash spilled out into a wide, flat bed of sand left by the rains of bygone years, and the tracks were plainer now. Neill tightened his bandanna and rode on, sodden with heat and weariness. The trail seemed deliberately to lead them into the worst regions, for now he was riding straight toward an alkali lake that loomed ahead.

At the edge of the water, the trail vanished. Lock had ridden right into the lake. They drew up and stared at it, unbelieving.

„He can't cross," Hardin stated flatly. „That's deep out to the middle. Durned treacherous, too. A horse could get bogged down mighty easy."

They skirted the lake, taking it carefully, three going one way, and three the other. Finally, glancing back, Neill caught sight of Kesney's uplifted arm.

„They found it," he said. „Let's go back." Yet as he rode he was thinking what they all knew. This was a delay, for Lock knew they would have to scout the shores both ways to find his trail, and there would be a delay while the last three rejoined the first. A small thing, but in such a chase it was important.

„Why not ride right on to the ranch?" Short suggested.

„We might," Hardin speculated. „On the other hand he might fool us an' never go nigh it. Then we could lose him."

The trail became easier, for now Lock was heading straight into the mountains.

„Where's he goin'?" Kesney demanded irritably. „This don't make sense, nohow!"

There was no reply, the horsemen stretching out in single file, riding up the draw into the mountains. Suddenly Kimmel, who was now in the lead, drew up. Before him a thread of water trickled from the rock and spilled into a basin of stones.

„Huh!" Hardin stared. „I never knowed about this spring afore. Might's well have a drink." He swung down.

They all got down and Neill rolled a smoke.

„Somebody sure fixed her up nice," he said. „That wall of stone makin' that basin ain't so old."

„No, it ain't."

Short watched them drink and grinned.

„He's a fox, right enough. He's an old ladino, this one. A reg'lar mossy horn. It don't take no time for one man to drink, an' one hoss. But here we got six men an' six horses to drink an' we lose more time."

„You really think he planned it that way?" Neill was skeptical.

Hardin looked around at him. „Sure. This Lock knows his way around."

When they were riding on, Neill thought about that. Lock was shrewd. He was desert-wise. And he was leading them a chase. If not even Hardin knew of this spring, and he had been twenty years in the Spring Valley country, then Lock must know a good deal about the country. Of course, this range of mountains was singularly desolate, and there was nothing in them to draw a man.

So they knew this about their quarry. He was a man wise in the ways of desert and trail, and one who knew the country. Also, Neill reflected, it was probable he had built that basin himself. Nobody lived over this way but Lock, for now it was not far to the Sorenson place.

Now they climbed a single horse trail across the starkly eroded foothills, sprinkled with clumps of Joshua and Spanish bayonet. It was a weird and broken land, where long fingers of black lava stretched down the hills and out into the desert as though clawing toward the alkali lake they had left behind. The trail mounted steadily and a little breeze touched their cheeks. Neill lifted his hand and wiped dust from his brow and it came away in flakes, plastered by sweat.

The trail doubled and changed, now across the rock face of the burnt red sandstone, then into the lava itself, skirting hills where the exposed ledges mounted in layers like a vast cake of many colors. Then the way dipped down, and they wound among huge boulders, smooth as so many waterworn pebbles. Neill sagged in the saddle, for the hours were growing long, and the trail showed no sign of ending.

„Lucky he ain't waitin' to shoot,“ Kimmel commented, voicing the first remark in over an hour. „He could pick us off like flies.“

As if in reply to his comment, there was an angry whine above them and then the crack of a rifle.

As one man they scattered for shelter, whipping rifles from their scabbards, for all but two had replaced them when they reached the lake. Hardin swore, and Kimmel wormed his way to a better view of the country ahead.

Short had left the saddle in his scramble for shelter, and his horse stood in the open, the canteen making a large lump behind the saddle. Suddenly the horse leaped to the solid thud of a striking bullet, and then followed the crack of the rifle, echoing over the mountainside.

Short swore viciously. „If he killed that horse...!“ But the horse, while shifting nervously, seemed uninjured.

„Hey!“ Kesney yelled. „He shot your canteen!“

It was true enough. Water was pouring onto the ground, and swearing, Short started to get up. Sutter grabbed his arm.

„Hold it! If he could get that canteen, he could get you!“

They waited, and the trickle of water slowed, then faded to a drip. All of them stared angrily at the unrewarding rocks ahead of them. One canteen the less. Still they had all filled up at the spring and should have enough. Uncomfortably, however, they realized that the object of their chase, the man called Chat Lock, knew where he was taking them, and he had not emptied that canteen by chance. Now they understood the nature of the man they followed. He did nothing without object.

Lying on the sand or rocks they waited, peering ahead.

„He's probably ridin' off now!“ Sutter barked.

Nobody showed any disposition to move. The idea appealed to none of them, for the shot into the canteen showed plainly enough the man they followed was no child with a rifle. Kimmel finally put his hat on a rifle muzzle and lifted it. There was no response. Then he tried sticking it around a corner.

Nothing happened, and he withdrew it. Almost at once, a shot hit the trail not far from where the hat had been. The indication was plain. Lock was warning them not only that he was still there, but that he was not to be fooled by so obvious a trick.

They waited, and Hardin suddenly slid over a rock and began a flanking movement. He crawled, and they waited, watching his progress. The cover he had was good, and he could crawl almost to where the hidden marksman must be. Finally, he disappeared from their sight and they waited. Neill tasted the water in his canteen and dozed.

At last they heard a long yell, and looking up, they saw Hardin standing on a rock far up the trail, waving them on. Mounting, they led Hardin's horse and rode on up the trail. He met them at the trail side, and his eyes were angry.

„Gone!“ he said, thrusting out a hard palm. In it lay three brass cartridge shells. „Found ‘em standing up in a line on a rock. An‘ look here.“ He pointed, and they stared down at the trail where he indicated. A neat arrow made of stones pointed down the trail ahead of them, and scratched on the face of the sandstone above it were the words: FOLLER THE SIGNS.

Kesney jerked his hat from his head and hurled it to the ground.

„Why, that dirty...!“ He stopped, beside himself with anger. The contempt of the man they pursued was obvious. He was making fools of them, deliberately teasing them, indicating his trail as to a child or a tenderfoot.

„That ratty back-shootin‘ killer!“ Short said. „I’ll take pleasure in usin‘ a rope on him! Thinks he’s smart!“

They started on, and the horse ahead of them left a plain trail, but a quarter of a mile farther along, three dried pieces of mesquite had been laid in the trail to form another arrow.

Neill stared at it. This was becoming a personal matter now. He was deliberately playing with them, and he must know how that would set with men such as Kimmel and Hardin. It was a deliberate challenge; more, it was a sign of the utmost contempt.

The vast emptiness of the basin they skirted now was becoming lost in the misty purple light of late afternoon. On the right, the wall of the mountain grew steeper and turned a deeper red. The burnt red of the earlier hours was now a bright rust red, and here and there long fingers of quartz shot their white arrows down into the face of the cliff.

They all saw the next message, but all read and averted their eyes. It was written on a blank face of the cliff. First, there was an arrow, pointing ahead, and then the words: SHADE, SO‘S YOU DON‘T GIT SUNSTROK.

They rode on, and for several miles as the shadows drew down, they followed the markers their quarry left at intervals along the trail. All six of the men were tired and beaten. Their horses moved slowly, and the desert air was growing chill. It had been a long chase.

Suddenly, Kimmel and Kesney, who rode side by side, reined in. A small wall of rock was across the trail, and an arrow pointed downward into a deep cleft.

„What do you think, Hardin? He could pick us off man by man.“

Hardin studied the situation with misgivings and hesitated, lighting a smoke.

„He ain‘t done it yet.“

Neill's remark fell into the still air like a rock into a calm pool of water. As the rings of ripples spread wider into the thoughts of the other five, he waited.

Lock could have killed one or two of them, perhaps all of them by now. Why had he not? Was he waiting for darkness and an easy getaway? Or was he leading them into a trap?

„The devil with it!“ Hardin exclaimed impatiently. He wheeled his horse and, pistol in hand, started down into the narrow rift in the dark. One by one, they followed. The darkness closed around them, and the air was damp and chill. They rode on, and then the trail mounted steeply toward a grayness ahead of them, and they came out in a small basin. Ahead of them they heard a trickle of running water and saw the darkness of trees.

Cautiously they approached. Suddenly, they saw the light of a fire. Hardin drew up sharply and slid from his horse. The others followed. In a widening circle, they crept toward the fire. Kesney was the first to reach it, and the sound of his swearing rent the stillness and shattered it like thin glass. They swarmed in around him.

The fire was built close beside a small running stream, and nearby was a neat pile of dry sticks. On a paper, laid out carefully on a rock, was a small mound of coffee, and another of sugar. Nobody said anything for a minute, staring at the fire and the coffee. The taunt was obvious, and they were bitter men. It was bad enough to have a stranger make such fools of them on a trail, to treat them like tenderfeet, but to prepare a camp for them...

„I’ll be cussed if I will!“ Short said violently. „I’ll go sleep on the desert first!“

„Well—“ Hardin was philosophical. „Might’s well make the most of it. We can’t trail him at night, no way.“

Kimmel had dug a coffeepot out of his pack and was getting water from the stream which flowed from a basin just above their camp. Several of the others began to dig out grub, and Kesney sat down glumly, staring into the fire. He started to pick a stick off the pile left for them and then jerked his hand as though he had seen a snake. Getting up, he stalked back into the trees, and after a minute, he returned.

Sutter was looking around, and suddenly he spoke. „Boys, I know this place! Only I never knew about that crack in the wall. This here’s the Mormon Well!“

Hardin sat up and looked around. „Durned if it ain’t,“ he said. „I ain’t been in here for six or seven years.“

Sutter squatted on his haunches. „Look!“ He was excited and eager, sketching with a stick in the sand. „Here’s Mormon Well, where we are. Right over here to the northwest there’s an old sawmill an’ a tank just above it. I’ll bet a side of beef that durned killer is holed up for the night in that sawmill!“

Kesney, who had taken most to heart the taunting of the man they pursued, was on his knees staring at the diagram drawn in the damp sand. He was nodding thoughtfully.

„He’s right! He sure is. I remember that old mill! I holed up there one time in a bad storm. Spent two days in it. If that sidewinder stays there tonight, we can get him!“

As they ate, they talked over their plan. Traveling over the rugged mountains ahead of them was almost impossible in the darkness, and besides, even if Lock could go the night without stopping, his horse could not. The buckskin must have a rest. Moreover, with all the time Lock had been losing along the trail, he could

not be far ahead. It stood to reason that he must have planned just this, for them to stop here, and to hole up in the sawmill himself.

„We'd better surprise him,“ Hardin suggested. „That sawmill is heavy timber, an' a man in there with a rifle an' plenty of ammunition could stand us off for a week.“

„Has he got plenty?“

„Sure he has,“ Neill told them. „I was in the Bon Ton when he bought his stuff. He's got grub and he's got plenty of forty-fours. They do for either his Colt or his Winchester.“

Unspoken as yet, but present in the mind of each man, was a growing respect for their quarry, a respect and an element of doubt. Would such a man as this shoot another in the back? The evidence against him was plain enough, or seemed plain enough.

Yet beyond the respect there was something else, for it was no longer simply a matter of justice to be done, but a personal thing. Each of them felt in some measure that his reputation was at stake. It had not been enough for Lock to leave an obvious trail, but he must leave markers, the sort to be used for any tenderfoot. There were men in this group who could trail a woodtick through a pine forest.

„Well,“ Kimmel said reluctantly and somewhat grimly, „he left us good coffee, anyway!“

They tried the coffee and agreed. Few things in this world are so comforting and so warming to the heart as hot coffee on a chilly night over a campfire when the day has been long and weary. They drank, and they relaxed. And as they relaxed the seeds of doubt began to sprout and put forth branches of speculation.

„He could have got more'n one of us today,“ Sutter hazarded. „This one is brush wise.“

„I'll pull that rope on him!“ Short stated positively. „No man makes a fool out of me!“ But in his voice there was something lacking.

„You know,“ Kesney suggested, „if he knows these hills like he seems to, an' if he really wanted to lose us, we'd have to burn the stump and sift the ashes before we found him!“

There was no reply. Hardin drew back and eased the leg of his pants away from the skin, for the cloth had grown too hot for comfort.

Short tossed a stick from the neat pile into the fire.

„That mill ain't so far away,“ he suggested, „shall we give her a try?“

„Later.“ Hardin leaned back against a log and yawned. „She's been a hard day.“

„Both them bullets go in Johnny's back?“

The question moved among them like a ghost. Short stirred uneasily, and Kesney looked up and glared around. „Sure they did! Didn't they, Hardin?“

„Sure.“ He paused thoughtfully. „Well, no. One of them was under his left arm. Right between the ribs. Looked like a heart shot to me. The other one went through near his spine.“

„The heck with it!“ Kesney declared. „No slick, rustlin' squatter can come into this country and shoot one of our boys! He was shot in the back, an' I seen both holes. Johnny got that one nigh the spine, an' he must have turned and tried to draw, then got that bullet through the heart!“

Nobody had seen it. Neill remembered that, and the thought rankled. Were they doing an injustice? He felt like a traitor at the thought, but secretly he had acquired a strong tinge of respect for the man they followed.

The fire flickered and the shadows danced a slow, rhythmic quadrille against the dark background of trees. He peeled bark from the log beside him and fed it into the fire. It caught, sparked brightly, and popped once or twice. Hardin leaned over and pushed the coffeepot nearer the coals. Kesney checked the loads in his Winchester.

„How far to that sawmill, Hardin?“

„About six miles, the way we go.“

„Let's get started.“ Short got to his feet and brushed off the sand. „I want to get home. Got my boys buildin' fence. You either keep a close watch or they are off gal hootin' over the hills.“

They tightened their saddle girths, doused the fire, and mounted up. With Hardin in the lead once more, they moved off into the darkness.

Neill brought up the rear. It was damp and chill among the cliffs and felt like the inside of a cavern. Overhead the stars were very bright. Mary was going to be worried, for he was never home so late. Nor did he like leaving her alone. He wanted to be home, eating a warm supper and going to bed in the old four-poster with the patchwork quilt Mary's grandmother made, pulled over him. What enthusiasm he had had for the chase was gone. The warm fire, the coffee, his own weariness, and the growing respect for Lock had changed him.

Now they all knew he was not the manner of man they had supposed. Justice can be a harsh taskmaster, but Western men know their kind, and the lines were strongly drawn. When you have slept beside a man on the trail, worked with him and with others like him, you come to know your kind. In the trail of the man Chat Lock, each rider of the posse was seeing the sort of man he knew, the sort he could respect. The thought was nagging and unsubstantial, but each of them felt a growing doubt, even Short and Kesney, who were most obdurate and resentful.

They knew how a backshooter lived and worked. He had his brand on everything he did. The mark of this man was the mark of a man who did things, who stood upon his own two feet, and who if he died, died facing his enemy. To the unknowing, such conclusions might seem doubtful, but the men of the desert knew their kind.

The mill was dark and silent, a great looming bulk beside the stream and the still pool of the millpond. They dismounted and eased close. Then according to a prearranged plan, they scattered and surrounded it. From behind a lodgepole pine, Hardin called out.

„We're comin' in, Lock! We want you!“

The challenge was harsh and ringing. Now that the moment had come, something of the old suspense returned. They listened to the water babbling as it trickled over the old dam, and then they moved. At their first step, they heard Lock's voice.

„Don't you come in here, boys! I don't want to kill none of you, but you come an' I will! That was a fair shootin'! You've got no call to come after me!“

Hardin hesitated, chewing his mustache. „You shot him in the back!“ he yelled.

„No such thing! He was a-facin' the bar when I come in. He seen I was heeled, an' he drew as he turned. I beat him to it. My first shot took him in the side an' he was knocked back against the bar. My second hit him in the back an' the third missed as he was a-fallin'. You hombres didn't see that right.“

The sound of his voice trailed off, and the water chuckled over the stones and then sighed to a murmur among the trees. The logic of Lock's statement struck them all. It could have been that way.

A long moment passed, and then Hardin spoke up again.

„You come in and we'll give you a trial. Fair an' square!“

„How?“ Lock's voice was a challenge. „You ain't got no witness. Neither have I. Ain't nobody to say what happened there but me, as Johnny ain't alive.“

„Johnny was a mighty good man, an' he was our friend!“ Short shouted.

„No murderin' squatter is goin' to move into this country an' start shootin' folks up!“

There was no reply to that, and they waited, hesitating a little. Neill leaned disconsolately against the tree where he stood. After all, Lock might be telling the truth. How did they know? There was no use hanging a man unless you were sure.

„Gab!“ Short's comment was explosive. „Let's move in, Hardin! Let's get him! He's lyin'! Nobody could beat Johnny, we know that!“

„Webb was a good man in his own country!“ Lock shouted in reply. The momentary silence that followed held them, and then, almost as a man they began moving in. Neill did not know exactly when or why he started. Inside he felt sick and empty. He was fed up on the whole business, and every instinct told him this man was no backshooter.

Carefully, they moved, for they knew this man was handy with a gun. Suddenly, Hardin's voice rang out.

„Hold it, men! Stay where you are until daybreak! Keep your eyes open an' your ears. If he gets out of here he'll be lucky, an' in the daylight we can get him, or fire the mill!“

Neill sank to a sitting position behind a log. Relief was a great warmth that swept over him. There wouldn't be any killing tonight. Not tonight, at least.

Yet as the hours passed, his ears grew more and more attuned to the darkness. A rabbit rustled, a pinecone dropped from a tree, the wind stirred high in the pine tops, and the few stars winked through, lonesomely peering down upon the silent men.

With daylight they moved in and they went through the doors and up to the windows of the old mill, and it was empty and still. They stared at each other, and Short swore viciously, the sound booming in the echoing, empty room.

„Let's go down to the Sorenson place,“ Kimmel said. „He'll be there.“

And somehow they were all very sure he would be. They knew he would be because they knew him for their kind of man. He would retreat no farther than his own ranch, his own hearth. There, if they were to have him and hang him, they would have to burn him out, and men would die in the process. Yet with these men there was no fear. They felt the drive of duty, the need for maintaining some law in this lonely desert and mountain land. There was only doubt which had grown until each man was shaken with it. Even Short, whom the markers by the

trail had angered, and Kesney, who was the best tracker among them, even better than Hardin, had been irritated by it, too.

The sun was up and warming them when they rode over the brow of the hill and looked down into the parched basin where the Sorenson place lay.

But it was no parched basin. Hardin drew up so suddenly his startled horse almost reared. It was no longer the Sorenson place.

The house had been patched and rebuilt. The roof had spots of new lumber upon it, and the old pole barn had been made watertight and strong. A new corral had been built, and to the right of the house was a fenced-in garden of vegetables, green and pretty after the desert of the day before.

Thoughtfully, and in a tight cavalcade, they rode down the hill. The stock they saw was fat and healthy, and the corral was filled with horses.

„Been a lot of work done here,“ Kimmel said. And he knew how much work it took to make such a place attractive.

„Don't look like no killer's place!“ Neill burst out. Then he flushed and drew back, embarrassed by his statement. He was the youngest of these men and the newest in the country.

No response was forthcoming. He had but stated what they all believed. There was something stable and lasting and something real and genuine, in this place.

„I been waitin' for you.“

The remark from behind them stiffened every spine. Chat Lock was here, behind them. And he would have a gun on them, and if one of them moved, he could die.

„My wife's down there fixin' breakfast. I told her I had some friends comin' in. A posse huntin' a killer. I've told her nothin' about this trouble. You ride down there now, you keep your guns. You eat your breakfast and then if you feel bound and determined to get somebody for a fair shootin', I'll come out with any one of you or all of you, but I ain't goin' to hang.

„I ain't namin' no one man because I don't want to force no fight on anybody. You ride down there now.“

They rode, and in the dooryard, they dismounted. Neill turned then, and for the first time he saw Chat Lock.

He was a big man, compact and strong. His rusty brown hair topped a brown, sun-hardened face, but with the warmth in his eyes it was a friendly sort of face. Not at all what he expected.

Hardin looked at him. „You made some changes here.“

„I reckon.“ Lock gestured toward the well. „Dug by hand. My wife worked the windlass.“ He looked around at them, taking them in with one sweep of his eyes. „I've got the grandest woman in the world.“

Neill felt hot tears in his eyes suddenly and busied himself loosening his saddle girth to keep the others from seeing. That was the way he felt about Mary.

The door opened suddenly, and they turned. The sight of a woman in this desert country was enough to make any man turn. What they saw was not what they expected. She was young, perhaps in her middle twenties, and she was pretty, with brown wavy hair and gray eyes and a few freckles on her nose. „Won't you

come in? Chat told me he had some friends coming for breakfast, and it isn't often we have anybody in."

Heavy-footed and shamefaced they walked up on the porch. Kesney saw the care and neatness with which the hard hewn planks had been fitted. Here, too, was the same evidence of lasting, of permanence, of strength. This was the sort of man a country needed. He thought the thought before he fixed his attention on it, and then he flushed.

Inside, the room was as neat as the girl herself. How did she get the floors so clean? Before he thought, he phrased the question. She smiled.

"Oh, that was Chat's idea! He made a frame and fastened a piece of pumice stone to a stick. It cuts into all the cracks and keeps them very clean."

The food smelled good, and when Hardin looked at his hands, Chat motioned to the door.

"There's water an' towels if you want to wash up."

Neill rolled up his sleeves and dipped his hands in the basin. The water was soft, and that was rare in this country, and the soap felt good on his hands. When he had dried his hands, he walked in. Hardin and Kesney had already seated themselves, and Lock's wife was pouring coffee.

"Men," Lock said, "this is Mary. You'll have to tell her your names. I reckon I missed them."

Mary. Neill looked up. She was Mary, too. He looked down at his plate again and ate a few bites. When he looked up, she was smiling at him.

"My wife's name is Mary," he said. "She's a fine girl!"

"She would be! But why don't you bring her over? I haven't talked with a woman in so long I wouldn't know how it seemed! Chat, why haven't you invited them over?"

Chat mumbled something, and Neill stared at his coffee. The men ate in uncomfortable silence. Hardin's eyes kept shifting around the room. That pumice stone. He'd have to fix up a deal like that for Jane. She was always fussing about the work of keeping a board floor clean. That washstand inside, too, with pipes made of hollow logs to carry the water out so she wouldn't have to be running back and forth. That was an idea, too.

They finished their meal reluctantly. One by one they trooped outside, avoiding each other's eyes. Chat Lock did not keep them waiting. He walked down among them.

"If there's to be shootin'," he said quietly, "let's get away from the house."

Hardin looked up. "Lock, was that right, what you said in the mill? Was it a fair shootin'?"

Lock nodded. "It was. Johnny Webb prodded me. I didn't want trouble, nor did I want to hide behind the fact I wasn't packin' an iron. I walked over to the saloon not aimin' for trouble. I aimed to give him a chance if he wanted it. He drew an' I beat him. It was a fair shootin'."

"All right." Hardin nodded. "That's good enough for me. I reckon you're a different sort of man than any of us figured."

"Let's mount up," Short said. "I got fence to build."

Chat Lock put his hand on Hardin's saddle. "You folks come over sometime. She gets right lonesome. I don't mind it so much, but you know how womenfolks are."

„Sure,“ Hardin said, „sure thing.“

„An‘ you bring your Mary over,“ he told Neill.

Neill nodded, his throat full. As they mounted the hill, he glanced back. Mary Lock was standing in the doorway, waving to them, and the sunlight was very bright in the clean-swept dooryard.

