

# Keep Travelin', Rider

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

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When Tack Gentry sighted the weather-beaten buildings of the G Bar, he touched spurs to the buckskin and the horse broke into a fast canter that carried the cowhand down the trail and around into the ranch yard. He swung down.

„Hey!“ he yelled happily, grinning. „Is that all the welcome I get?“

The door pushed open and a man stepped out on the worn porch. The man had a stubble of beard and a drooping mustache. His blue eyes were small and narrow.

„Who are yuh?“ he demanded. „And what do yuh want?“

„I’m Tack Gentry!“ Tack said. „Where’s Uncle John?“

„I don’t know yuh,“ the man said, „and I never heard of no Uncle John. I reckon yuh got onto the wrong spread, youngster.“

„Wrong spread?“ Tack laughed. „Quit your funnin’! I helped build that house there, and built the corrals by my lonesome, while Uncle John was sick. Where is everybody?“

The man looked at him carefully and then lifted his eyes to a point beyond Tack. A voice spoke from behind the cowhand. „Reckon yuh been gone a while, ain't yuh?“

Gentry turned. The man behind him was short, stocky, and blond. He had a wide, flat face, a small broken nose, and cruel eyes.

„Gone? I reckon yes! I've been gone most of a year! Went north with a trail herd to Ellsworth, then took me a job as segundo on a herd movin' to Wyoming.“

Tack stared around, his eyes alert and curious. There was something wrong here, something very wrong. The neatness that had been typical of Uncle John Gentry was gone. The place looked run-down, the porch was untidy, the door hung loose on its hinges, even the horses in the corral were different.

„Where's Uncle John?“ Tack demanded again. „Quit stallin'!“

The blond man smiled, his lips parting over broken teeth and a hard, cynical light coming into his eyes. „If yuh mean John Gentry, who used to live on this place, he's gone. He drawed on the wrong man and got himself killed.“

„What?“ Tack's stomach felt like he had been kicked. He stood there, staring. „He drew on somebody? Uncle John?“

Tack shook his head. „That's impossible! John Gentry was a Quaker. He never lifted a hand in violence against anybody or anything in his life! He never even wore a gun, never owned one.“

„I only know what they tell me,“ the blond man said, „but we got work to do, and I reckon yuh better slope out of here. And,“ he added grimly, „if yuh're smart yuh'll keep right on goin', clean out of the country!“

„What do yuh mean?“ Tack's thoughts were in a turmoil, trying to accustom himself to this change, wondering what could have happened, what was behind it.

„I mean yuh'll find things considerably changed around here. If yuh decide not to leave,“ he added, „yuh might ride into Sunbonnet and look up Van Hardin or Dick Olney and tell him I said to give yuh all yuh had comin'. Tell 'em Soderman sent yuh.“

„Who's Van Hardin?“ Tack asked. The name was unfamiliar.

„Yuh been away all right!“ Soderman acknowledged. „Or yuh'd know who Van Hardin is. He runs this country. He's the ramrod, Hardin is. Olney's sheriff.“

Tack Gentry rode away from his home ranch with his thoughts in confusion. Uncle John! Killed in a gunfight! Why, that was out of reason! The old man wouldn't fight. He never had and never would. And this Dick Olney was sheriff! What had become of Pete Liscomb? No election was due for another year, and Pete had been a good sheriff.

There was one way to solve the problem and get the whole story, and that was to circle around and ride by the London ranch. Bill could give him the whole story, and besides, he wanted to see Betty. It had been a long time.

The six miles to the headquarters of the London ranch went by swiftly, yet as Tack rode, he scanned the grassy levels along the Maravillas. There were cattle enough, more than he had ever seen on the old G Bar, and all of them wearing the G Bar brand.

He reined in sharply. What the...? Why, if Uncle John was dead, the ranch belonged to him! But if that was so, who was Soderman? And what were they doing on his ranch?

Three men were loafing on the wide veranda of the London ranch house when Tack rode up. All their faces were unfamiliar. He glanced warily from one to the other.

„Where’s Bill London?“ he asked.

„London?“ The man in the wide brown hat shrugged. „Reckon he’s to home, over in Sunbonnet Pass. He ain’t never over here.“

„This is his ranch, isn’t it?“ Tack demanded.

All three men seemed to tense. „His ranch?“ The man in the brown hat shook his head. „Reckon yuh’re a stranger around here. This ranch belongs to Van Hardin. London ain’t got a ranch. Nothin’ but a few acres back against the creek over to Sunbonnet Pass. He and that girl of his live there. I reckon though,“ he grinned suddenly, „she won’t be there much longer. Hear tell she’s goin’ to work in the Longhorn Dance hall.“

„Betty London? In the Longhorn?“ Tack exclaimed. „Don’t make me laugh, partner! Betty’s too nice a girl for that! She wouldn’t...”

„They got it advertised,“ the brown-hatted man said calmly.

An hour later a very thoughtful Tack Gentry rode up the dusty street of Sunbonnet. In that hour of riding he had been doing a lot of thinking, and he was remembering what Soderman had said. He was to tell Hardin or Olney that Soderman had sent him to get all that was coming to him. Suddenly, that remark took on a new significance.

Tack swung down in front of the Longhorn. Emblazoned on the front of the saloon was a huge poster announcing that Betty London was the coming attraction, that she would sing and entertain at the Longhorn. Compressing his lips, Tack walked into the saloon.

Nothing was familiar except the bar and the tables. The man behind the bar was squat and fat, and his eyes peered at Tack from folds of flesh. „What’s it for yuh?“ he demanded.

„Rye,“ Tack said. He let his eyes swing slowly around the room. Not a familiar face greeted him. Shorty Davis was gone. Nick Farmer was not around. These men were strangers, a tight-mouthed, hard-eyed crew.

Gentry glanced at the bartender. „Any ridin’ jobs around here? Driftin’ through, and thought I might like to tie in with one of the outfits around here.“

„Keep driftin’,“ the bartender said, not glancing at him. „Everybody’s got a full crew.“

One door swung open and a tall, clean-cut man walked into the room, glancing around. He wore a neat gray suit and a dark hat. Tack saw the bartender’s eyes harden and glanced thoughtfully at the newcomer. The man’s face was very thin, and when he removed his hat his ash blond hair was neatly combed.

He glanced around, and his eyes lighted on Tack. „Stranger?“ he asked pleasantly. „Then may I buy you a drink? I don’t like to drink alone, but haven’t sunk so low as to drink with these coyotes.“

Tack stiffened, expecting a reaction from some of the seated men, but there was none. Puzzled, he glanced at the blond man, and seeing the cynical good humor in the man's eyes, nodded.

„Sure, I'll drink with you.“

„My name,“ the tall man added, „is Anson Childe, by profession, a lawyer, by dint of circumstances, a gambler, and by choice, a student.

„You perhaps wonder,“ he added, „why these men do not resent my reference to them as coyotes. There are three reasons, I expect. The first is that some subconscious sense of truth makes them appreciate the justice of the term. Second, they know I am gifted with considerable dexterity in expounding the gospel of Judge Colt. Third, they know that I am dying of tuberculosis and as a result have no fear of bullets.

„It is not exactly fear that keeps them from drawing on me. Let us say it is a matter of mathematics, and a problem none of them has succeeded in solving with any degree of comfort in the result. It is: how many of them would die before I did?

„You can appreciate, my friend, the quandary in which this places them, and also the disagreeable realization that bullets are no respecters of persons, nor am I. The several out there who might draw know that I know who they are. The result is that they know they would be first to die.“

Childe looked at Tack thoughtfully. „I heard you ask about a riding job as I came in. You look like an honest man, and there is no place here for such.“

Gentry hunted for the right words. Then he said, „This country looks like it was settled by honest men.“

Anson Childe studied his glass. „Yes,“ he said, „but at the right moment they lacked a leader. One was too opposed to violence, another was too law abiding, and the rest lacked resolution.“

If there was a friend in the community, this man was it. Tack finished his drink and strode to the door. The bartender met his eyes as he glanced back.

„Keep on driftin‘,“ the bartender said.

Tack Gentry smiled. „I like it here,“ he said, „and I'm stayin'!“

He swung into the saddle and turned his buckskin toward Sunbonnet Pass. He still had no idea exactly what had happened during the year of his absence, yet Childe's remark coupled with what the others had said told him a little. Apparently, some strong, resolute men had moved in and taken over, and there had been no concerted fight against them, no organization and no leadership.

Childe had said that one was opposed to violence. That would have been his Uncle John. The one who was too law abiding would be Bill London. London had always been strong for law and order and settling things in a legal way. The others had been honest men, but small ranchers and individually unable to oppose whatever was done to them. Yet whatever had happened, the incoming elements had apparently moved with speed and finesse.

Had it been one ranch, it would have been different. But the ranches and the town seemed completely subjugated.

The buckskin took the trail at an easy canter, skirting the long red cliff of Horse Thief Mesa and wading the creek at Gunsight. Sunbonnet Pass opened before him like a gate in the mountains. To the left, in a grove of trees, was a small adobe house and a corral.

Two horses were standing at the corral as he rode up. His eyes narrowed as he saw them. Button and Blackie! Two of his uncle's favorites and two horses he had raised from colts. He swung down and started toward them, when he saw the three people on the steps.

He turned to face them, and his heart jumped. Betty London had not changed.

Her eyes widened, and her face went dead white. „Tack!“ she gasped. „Tack Gentry!“

Even as she spoke, Tack saw the sudden shock with which the two men turned to stare. „That's right, Betty,“ he said quietly. „I just got home.“

„But—but—we heard you were dead!“

„I'm not.“ His eyes shifted to the two men—a thick-shouldered, deep-chested man with a square, swarthy face and a lean rawboned man wearing a star. The one with the star would be Dick Olney. The other must be Van Hardin.

Tack's eyes swung to Olney. „I heard my Uncle John Gentry was killed. Did yuh investigate his death?“

Olney's eyes were careful. „Yeah,“ he said. „He was killed in a fair fight. Gun in his hand.“

„My uncle,“ Tack replied, „was a Quaker. He never lifted a hand in violence in his life!“

„He was a might slow, I reckon,“ Olney said coolly, „but he had the gun in his hand when I found him.“

„Who shot him?“

„Hombre name of Soderman. But like I say, it was a fair fight.“

„Like blazes!“ Tack flashed. „Yuh'll never make me believe Uncle John wore a gun! That gun was planted on him!“

„Yuh're jumpin' to conclusions,“ Van Hardin said smoothly. „I saw the gun myself. There were a dozen witnesses.“

„Who saw the fight?“ Gentry demanded.

„They saw the gun in his hand. In his right hand,“ Hardin said.

Tack laughed suddenly, harshly. „That does it! Uncle John's right hand has been useless ever since Shiloh, when it was shot to pieces tryin' to get to a wounded soldier. He couldn't hold a feather in those fingers, let alone a gun!“

Hardin's face tightened, and Dick Olney's eyes shifted to Hardin's face.

„You'd be better off,“ Hardin said quietly, „to let sleepin' dogs lie. We ain't goin' to have yuh comin' in here stirrin' up a peaceful community.“

„My Uncle John was murdered,“ Gentry said quietly. „I mean to see his murderer punished. That ranch belongs to me. I intend to get it back!“

Van Hardin smiled. „Evidently, yuh aren't aware of what happened here,“ he said quietly. „Your Uncle John was in a noncombatant outfit durin' the war, was he not? Well, while he was gone, the ranch he had claimed was abandoned. Soderman and I started to run cattle on that range and the land that was claimed by Bill London. No claim to the range was asserted by anyone. We made improvements, and then durin' our temporary absence with a trail herd, John Gentry and Bill London returned and moved in. Naturally, when we returned the case was taken to court. The court ruled the ranches belonged to Soderman and myself.“

„And the cattle?“ Tack asked. „What of the cattle my uncle owned?“

Hardin shrugged. „The brand had been taken over by the new owners and registered in their name. As I understand it, yuh left with a trail herd immediately after yuh came back to Texas. My claim was originally asserted during yore uncle's absence. I could," he smiled, „lay claim to the money yuh got from that trail herd. Where is it?"

„Suppose yuh find out?" Tack replied. „I'm goin' to tell yuh one thing: I'm goin' to find who murdered my uncle, if it was Soderman or not. I'm also goin' to fight yuh in court. Now, if yuh'll excuse me," he turned his eyes to Betty who had stood wide-eyed and silent, „I'd like to talk to Bill London."

„He can't see yuh," Hardin said. „He's asleep."

Gentry's eyes hardened. „You runnin' this place, too?"

„Betty London is going to work for me," Hardin replied. „We may be married later, so in a sense, I'm speaking for her."

„Is that right?" Tack demanded, his eyes meeting Betty's.

Her face was miserable. „I'm afraid it is, Tack."

„You've forgotten your promise, then?" he demanded.

„Things—things changed, Tack," she faltered. „I—I can't talk about it."

„I reckon, Gentry," Olney interrupted, „it's time yuh rode on. There's nothin' in this neck of the woods for yuh. You've played out your hand here. Ride on, and you'll save yourself a lot of trouble. They're hirin' hands over on the Pecos."

„I'm stayin'," Gentry said flatly.

„Remember," Olney warned, „I'm the sheriff. At the first sign of trouble, I'll come lookin' for yuh."

Gentry swung into the saddle. His eyes shifted to Betty's face, and for an instant, she seemed about to speak. Then he turned and rode away. He did not look back. It was not until after he was gone that he remembered Button and Blackie.

To think they were in the possession of Hardin and Olney! The twin blacks he had reared and worked with, training them to do tricks, teaching them all the lore of the cow-country horses and much more.

The picture was clear now. In the year in which he had been gone these men had come in, asserted their claims, taken them to carpetbag courts, and made them stick. Backing their legal claims with guns, they had taken over the country with speed and finesse. At every turn, he was blocked. Betty had turned against him. Bill London was either a prisoner in his own house or something else was wrong. Olney was sheriff, and probably they had their own judge.

He could quit. He could pull out and go on to the Pecos. It would be the easiest way. It was even what Uncle John might have wished him to do, for John Gentry was a peace-loving man. Tack Gentry was of another breed. His father had been killed fighting Comanches, and Tack had gone to war when a mere boy. Uncle John had found a place for himself in a noncombatant outfit, but Tack had fought long and well.

His ride north with the trail herd had been rough and bloody. Twice they had fought off Indians, and once they had mixed it with rustlers. In Ellsworth, a gunman named Paris had made trouble that ended with Paris dead on the floor.

Tack had left town in a hurry, ridden to the new camp at Dodge, and then joined a trail herd headed for Wyoming. Indian fighting had been the order of the day, and once, rounding up a bunch of steers lost from the herd in a stampede, Tack had run into three rustlers after the same steers.

Tack downed two of them in the subsequent battle and then shot it out with the other in a daylong rifle battle that covered a cedar- and boulder-strewn hillside. Finally, just before sundown, they met in a hand-to-hand battle with bowie knives.

Tack remained long enough to see his old friend Major Powell, with whom he had participated in the Wagon Box Fight, and then had wandered back to Kansas. On the Platte he joined a bunch of buffalo hunters, stayed with them a couple of months, and then trailed back to Dodge.

Sunbonnet's Longhorn Saloon was ablaze with lights when he drifted into town that night. He stopped at the livery stable and put up his horse. He had taken a roundabout route, scouting the country, so he decided that Hardin and Olney were probably already in town. By now they would know of his call at the ranch and his meeting with Anson Childe.

He was laboring under no delusions about his future. Van Hardin would not hesitate to see him put out of the way if he attempted to regain his property. Hardin had brains, and Olney was no fool. There were things Gentry must know before anything could be done, and the one man in town who could and would tell him was Childe.

Leaving the livery stable, he started up the street. Turning, he glanced back to see the liveryman standing in the stable door. He dropped his hand quickly, but Gentry believed he had signaled someone across the street. Yet there was no one in sight, and the row of buildings seemed blank and empty.

Only three buildings were lighted. The Longhorn, a smaller, cheaper saloon, and the old general store. There was a light upstairs over the small saloon and several lights in the annex to the Longhorn, which passed as a hotel, the only one in Sunbonnet.

Tack walked along the street, his bootheels sounding loud in the still night air. Ahead of him was a space between the buildings, and when he drew abreast of it he did a quick sidestep off the street, flattening against the building.

He heard footsteps, hesitation, and then lightly running steps, and suddenly a man dove around the corner and grated to a stop on the gravel, staring down the alleyway between the buildings. He did not see Tack, who was flattened in the dense shadow against the building and behind a rain barrel.

The man started forward suddenly, and Tack reached out and grabbed his ankle. Caught in midstride, the fellow plunged over on his head and then lay still. For an instant, Gentry hesitated; then struck and shielded a match with his left hand. It was the brown-hatted man he had talked to on the porch of London's ranch. His head had hit a stone, and he was out cold.

Swiftly, Tack shucked the fellow's gun and emptied the shells from it and then pushed it back in his holster. A folded paper had fallen from the unconscious man's pocket, and Tack picked it up. Then, moving fast, he went down the alley until he was in back of the small saloon. By the light from a back window, he read the note.

„This,“ he muttered, „may help!“

Come to town quick. Trouble's brewing. We can't have anything happen now.  
V. H.

Van Hardin. They didn't want trouble now. Why, now? Folding the note, he slipped it into his pocket and flattened against the side of the saloon, studying the interior. Only two men sat in the dim interior, two men who played cards at a small table. The bartender leaned on the bar and read a newspaper. When the bartender turned his head, Tack recognized him.

Red Furness had worked for his father. He had soldiered with him. He might still be friendly. Tack lifted his knuckles and tapped lightly on the window.

At the second tap, Red looked up. Tack lighted a match and moved it past the window. Neither of the cardplayers seemed to have noticed. Red straightened, folded his paper, and then picking up a cup, walked back toward the window. When he got there, he dipped the cup into the water bucket with one hand and with the other, lifted the window a few inches.

„This is Tack Gentry. Where does Childe hang out?“

Red's whisper was low. „Got him an office and sleepin' room upstairs. There's a back stairway. Yuh watch yoreself.“

Tack stepped away from his window and made his way to the stairway he had already glimpsed. It might be a trap, but he believed Red was loyal. Also, he was not sure the word was out to kill him. They probably merely wanted him out of the way and hoped he could be warned to move on. The position of the Hardin group seemed secure enough.

Reaching the top of the stairs, he walked along the narrow catwalk to the door. He tapped softly. After an instant, there was a voice. „What do you want?“

„This is Tack Gentry. Yuh talked to me in the saloon!“ The door opened to darkness, and he stepped in. When it closed, he felt a pistol barrel against his spine.

„Hold still!“ Childe warned.

Behind him a match struck, and then a candle was lighted. The light still glowed in the other room, seen only by the crack under the door. Childe grinned at him. „Got to be careful,“ he said. „They have tried twice to dry-gulch me! I put flowers on their graves every Monday!“ He smiled. „And keep an extra one dug. Ever since I had that new grave dug, I've been left alone. Somehow it seems to have a very sobering influence on the local roughs.“

He sat down. „I tire quicker than I once did. So you're Gentry! Betty London told me about you. She thought you were dead. There was a rumor that you'd been killed by the Indians in Wyoming.“

„No, I came out all right. What I want to know, rememberin' yuh said yuh were a lawyer, is what kind of a claim they have on my ranch?“

„A good one, unfortunately. While you and your uncle were gone, and most of the other men in the locality, several of these men came in and began to brand cattle. After branding a good many, they left. They returned and began working around, about the time you left, and then they ordered your uncle off.

„He wouldn't go, and they took the case to court. There were no lawyers here then, and your uncle tried to handle it himself. The judge was their man, and



suddenly a half dozen witnesses appeared and were sworn in. They testified that the land had been taken and held by Soderman, Olney, and Hardin.

„They claimed their brands on the cattle asserted their claim to the land, to the home ranches of both London and Gentry. The free range was something else, but with the two big ranches in their hands and the bulk of the free range lying beyond their holdings, they were in a position to freeze out the smaller ranchers. They established a squatter's right to each of the big ranches.“

„Can they do that?“ Tack demanded. „It doesn't seem fair!“

„The usual thing is to allow no claim unless they have occupied the land for twenty years without hindrance, but with a carpetbag court, they do about as they please. Judge Weaver is completely in Van Hardin's hands, and your Uncle John was on the losing side in this war.“

„How did Uncle John get killed?“ Tack asked.

Childe shrugged. „They said he called Soderman a liar and Soderman went for his gun. Your uncle had a gun on him when they found him. It was probably a cold-blooded killing because Gentry planned on a trip to Austin and was going to appeal the case.“

„Have yuh seen Bill London lately?“

„Only once since the accident.“

„Accident?“

„Yes, London was headed for home, dozing along in the buckboard as he always did, when his team ran away with him. The buckboard was overturned and London's back was injured. He can't ride anymore and can't sit up very long at a time.“

„Was it really an accident?“ Tack wanted to know.

Childe shrugged. „I doubt it. We couldn't prove a thing. One of the horses had a bad cut on the hip. It looked as if someone with a steel-tipped bullwhip had hit the animal from beside the road.“

„Thorough,“ Tack said. „They don't miss a bet.“

Childe nodded. Leaning back in his chair he put his feet on the desk. He studied Tack Gentry thoughtfully. „You know, you'll be next. They won't stand for you messing around. I think you already have them worried.“

Tack explained about the man following him, and then handed the note to Childe. The lawyer's eyes narrowed. „Hmm, sounds like they had some reason to soft-pedal the whole thing for a while. Maybe it's an idea for us. Maybe somebody is coming down here to look around, or maybe somebody has grown suspicious.“

Tack looked at Childe thoughtfully. „What's your position in all this?“

The tall man shrugged, and then laughed lightly. „I've no stake in it, Gentry. I didn't know London or your Uncle John, either. But I heard rumors, and I didn't like the attitude of the local bosses, Hardin and Olney. I'm just a burr under the saddle with which they ride this community, no more. It amuses me to needle them, and they are afraid of me.“

„Got any clients?“

„Clients?“ Anson Childe chuckled. „Not a one! Not likely to have any, either! In a country so throttled by one man as this is, there isn't any litigation. Nobody can win against him, and they are too busy hating Hardin to want to have trouble with each other.“

„Well, then,“ Tack said, „yuh’ve got a client now. Go down to Austin. Demand an investigation. Lay the facts on the table for them. Maybe yuh can’t do any good, but at least yuh can stir up a lot of trouble. The main thing will be to get people talking. They evidently want quiet, so we’ll give them noise.

„Find out all you can. Get some detectives started on Hardin’s trail. Find out who they are, who they were, and where they came from.“

Childe sat up. „I’d like it,“ he said ruefully, „but I don’t have that kind of money.“ He gestured at the room. „I’m behind on my rent here. Red owns the building, so he lets me stay.“

Tack grinned and unbuttoned his shirt, drawing out a money belt. „I sold some cattle up north.“ He counted out one thousand dollars. „Take that. Spend all or any part of it, but create a smell down there. Tell everybody about the situation here.“

Childe got up, his face flushed with enthusiasm. „Man! Nothing could please me more! I’ll make it hot for them! I’ll—“ He went into a fit of coughing, and Tack watched him gravely.

Finally Childe straightened. „You’re putting your trust in a sick man, Gentry!“

„I’m putting my trust in a fighter,“ Tack said dryly. „Yuh’ll do!“ He hesitated briefly. „Also, check the title on this land.“

They shook hands silently, and Tack went to the door. Softly, he opened it and stepped out into the cool night. Well, for better or worse the battle was opened. Now for the next step. He came down off the wooden stair and then walked to the street. There was no one in sight. Tack Gentry crossed the street and pushed through the swinging doors of the Longhorn.

The saloon and dance hall was crowded. A few familiar faces, but they were sullen faces, lined and hard. The faces of bitter men, defeated, but not whipped. The others were new faces, the hard, tough faces of gunhands, the weather-beaten punchers who had come in to take the new jobs. He pushed his way to the bar.

There were three bartenders now, and it wasn’t until he ordered that the squat, fat man glanced down the bar and saw him. His jaw hardened and he spoke to the bartender who was getting a bottle to pour Gentry’s rye.

The bartender, a lean, sallow-faced man, strolled back to him. „We’re not servin’ you,“ he said. „I got my orders!“

Tack reached across the bar, his hand shooting out so fast the bartender had no chance to withdraw. Catching the man by his stiff collar, two fingers inside the collar and their knuckles jammed hard into the man’s Adam’s apple, he jerked him to the bar.

„Pour!“ he said.

The man tried to speak, but Tack gripped harder and shoved back on the knuckles. Weakly, desperately, his face turning blue, the man poured. He slopped out twice what he got in the glass, but he poured. Then Tack shoved hard and the man brought up violently against the backbar.

Tack lifted his glass with his left hand, his eyes sweeping the crowd, all of whom had drawn back slightly. „To honest ranchers!“ he said loudly and clearly and downed his drink.

A big, hard-faced man shoved through the crowd. „Maybe yuh’re meanin’ some of us ain’t honest?“ he suggested.

„That’s right!“ Tack Gentry let his voice ring out in the room, and he heard the rattle of chips cease, and the shuffling of feet died away. The crowd was listening. „That’s exactly right! There were honest men here, but they were murdered or crippled. My Uncle John Gentry was murdered. They tried to make it look like a fair and square killin’—they stuck a gun in his hand!“

„That’s right!“ A man broke in. „He had a gun! I seen it!“

Tack’s eyes shifted. „What hand was it in?“

„His right hand!“ the man stated positively, belligerently. „I seen it!“

„Thank you, pardner!“ Tack said politely. „The gun was in John Gentry’s right hand—and John Gentry’s right hand had been paralyzed ever since Shiloh!“

„Huh?“ The man who had seen the gun stepped back, his face whitening a little.

Somebody back in the crowd shouted out, „That’s right! You’re durn tootin’ that’s right! Never could use a rope, ‘count of it!“

Tack looked around at the crowd, and his eyes halted on the big man. He was going to break the power of Hardin, Olney, and Soderman, and he was going to start right here.

„There’s goin’ to be an investigation,“ he said loudly, „and it’ll begin down in Austin. Any of you fellers bought property from Hardin or Olney better get your money back.“

„Yuh’re talkin’ a lot!“ The big man thrust toward him, his wide, heavy shoulders looking broad enough for two men. „Yuh said some of us were thieves!“

„Thieves and murderers,“ Tack added. „If yuh’re one of the worms that crawl in Hardin’s tracks, that goes for you!“

The big man lunged. „Get him, Starr!“ somebody shouted loudly.

Tack Gentry suddenly felt a fierce surge of pure animal joy. He stepped back and then stepped in suddenly, and his right swung low and hard. It caught Starr as he was coming in, caught him in the pit of the stomach. He grunted and stopped dead in his tracks, but Tack set himself and swung wickedly with both hands. His left smashed into Starr’s mouth, and his right split a cut over his cheekbone. Starr staggered and fell back into the crowd. He came out of the crowd, shook his head, and charged like a bull.

Tack weaved inside of the swinging fists and impaled the bigger man on a straight, hard left hand. Then he crossed a wicked right to the cut cheek, and gore cascaded down the man’s face. Tack stepped in, smashing both hands to the man’s body, and then as Starr stabbed a thumb at his eye, Tack jerked his head aside and butted Starr in the face.

His nose broken, his cheek laid open to the bone, Starr staggered back, and Tack Gentry walked in, swinging with both hands. This was the beginning. This man worked for Hardin and he was going to be an example. When he left this room Starr’s face was going to be a sample of the crashing of Van Hardin’s power. With left and right he cut and slashed at the big man’s face, and Starr, overwhelmed by the attack, helpless after that first wicked body blow, crumpled under those smashing fists. He hit the floor suddenly and lay there, moaning softly.

A man shoved through the crowd, and then stopped. It was Van Hardin. He looked down at the man on the floor; then his eyes, dark with hate, lifted to meet Tack Gentry's eyes.

„Lookin' for trouble, are yuh?“ he said.

„Only catchin' up with some that started while I was gone, Van!“ Tack said. He felt good. He was on the balls of his feet and ready. He had liked the jarring of blows, liked the feeling of combat. He was ready. „Yuh should have made sure I was dead, Hardin, before yuh tried to steal property from a kindly old man!“

„Nothing was stolen,“ Van Hardin said evenly, calmly. „We took only what was ours, and in a strictly legal manner.“

„There will be an investigation,“ Gentry replied bluntly, „from Austin. Then we'll thrash the whole thing out.“

Hardin's eyes sharpened and he was suddenly wary. „An investigation? What makes you think so?“

Tack was aware that Hardin was worried. „Because I'm startin' it. I'm askin' for it, and I'll get it. There was a lot you didn't know about that land yuh stole, Hardin. Yuh were like most crooks. Yuh could only see yore side of the question and it looked very simple and easy, but there's always the thing yuh overlook, and you overlooked somethin'!“

The doors swung wide and Olney pushed into the room. He stopped, glancing from Hardin to Gentry. „What goes on here?“ he demanded.

„Gentry is accusin' us of bein' thieves,“ Hardin said carelessly.

Olney turned and faced Tack. „He's in no position to accuse anybody of anything!“ he said. „I'm arrestin' him for murder!“

There was a stir in the room, and Tack Gentry felt the sudden sickness of fear. „Murder? Are yuh crazy?“ he demanded.

„I'm not, but you may be,“ the sheriff said. „I've just come from the office of Anson Childe. He's been murdered. Yuh were his last visitor. Yuh were observed sneaking into his place by the back stairs. Yuh were observed sneaking out of it. I'm arresting yuh for murder.“

The room was suddenly still, and Tack Gentry felt the rise of hostility toward him. Many men had admired the courage of Anson Childe; many men had been helped by him. Frightened themselves, they had enjoyed his flouting of Hardin and Olney. Now he was dead, murdered.

„Childe was my friend!“ Tack protested. „He was goin' to Austin for me!“

Hardin laughed sarcastically. „Yuh mean he knew yuh had no case and refused to go, and in a fit of rage, yuh killed him. Yuh shot him.“

„Yuh'll have to come with me,“ Olney said grimly. „Yuh'll get a fair trial.“

Silently, Tack looked at him. Swiftly, thoughts raced through his mind. There was no chance for escape. The crowd was too thick, and he had no idea if there was a horse out front, although there no doubt was, and his own horse was in the livery stable. Olney relieved him of his gun belt and they started toward the door. Starr, leaning against the doorpost, his face raw as chewed beef, glared at him evilly.

„I'll be seein' yuh!“ he said softly. „Soon!“

Soderman and Hardin had fallen in around him, and behind them were two of Hardin's roughs.

The jail was small, just four cells and an outer office. The door of one of the cells was opened and he was shoved inside. Hardin grinned at him. „This should settle the matter for Austin,“ he said. „Childe had friends down there!“

Anson Childe murdered! Tack Gentry, numbed by the blow, stared at the stone wall. He had counted on Childe, counted on his stirring up an investigation. Once an investigation was started, he possessed two aces in the hole he could use to defeat Hardin in court, but it demanded a court uncontrolled by Hardin.

With Childe's death he had no friends on the outside. Betty had barely spoken to him when they met, and if she was going to work for Hardin in his dance hall, she must have changed much. Bill London was a cripple and unable to get around. Red Furness, for all his friendship, wouldn't come out in the open. Tack had no illusions about the murder. By the time the case came to trial, they would have found ample evidence. They had his guns and they could fire two or three shots from them, whatever had been used on Childe. It would be a simple thing to frame him. Hardin would have no trouble in finding witnesses.

He was standing, staring out the small window, its lower sill just on the level of his eyes, when he heard a distant rumble of thunder and a jagged streak of lightning brightened the sky, followed by more thunder. The rains came slowly, softly, and then in steadily increasing volume. The jail was still and empty. Sounds of music and occasional shouts sounded from the Longhorn; then the roar of rain drowned them out. He threw himself down on the cot in the corner of the room, and lulled by the falling rain, was soon asleep.

A long time later, he awakened. The rain was still falling, but above it was another sound. Listening, he suddenly realized what it was. The dry wash behind the town was running, probably bank full. Lying there in the darkness, he became aware of still another sound, of the nearer rushing of water. Lifting his head, he listened. Then he got to his feet and crossed the small cell.

Water was running under the corner of the jail. There had been a good deal of rain lately, and he had noted that the barrel at the corner of the jail had been full. It was overflowing, and the water had evidently washed under the corner of the building.

He walked back and sat down on the bed, and as he listened to the water, an idea came to him suddenly. Tack got up and went to the corner of the cell. Striking a match, he studied the wall and floor. Both were damp. He stamped on the stone flags of the floor, but they were solid. He kicked at the wall. It was also solid.

How thick were those walls? Judging by what he remembered of the door, the walls were all of eight inches thick, but how about the floor? Kneeling on the floor, he struck another match, studying the mortar around the corner flagstone.

Then he felt in his pockets. There was nothing there he could use to dig that mortar. His pocket knife, his bowie knife, his keys—all were gone. Suddenly, he had an inspiration. Slipping off his wide leather belt, he began to dig at the mortar with the edge of his heavy brass belt buckle.

The mortar was damp, but he worked steadily. His hands slipped on the sweaty buckle and he skinned his fingers and knuckles on the rough stone floor, yet he

persevered, scraping, scratching, digging out tiny fragments of mortar. From time to time he straightened up and stamped on the stone. It was solid as Gibraltar.

Five hours he scraped and scratched, digging until his belt buckle was no longer of use. He had scraped out almost two inches of mortar. Sweeping up the scattered grains of mortar, and digging some of the mud off his boots, he filled in the cracks as best he could. Then he walked to his bunk and sprawled out and was instantly asleep.

Early in the morning, he heard someone stirring around outside. Then Olney walked back to his cell and looked in at him. Starr followed in a few minutes, carrying a plate of food and a pot of coffee. His face was badly bruised and swollen, and his eyes were hot with hate. He put the food down, and then walked away. Olney loitered.

„Gentry,“ he said suddenly, „I hate to see a good hand in this spot.“

Tack looked up. „I’ll bet yuh do!“ he said sarcastically.

„No use takin’ that attitude,“ Olney protested, „after all, yuh made trouble for us. Why couldn’t yuh leave well enough alone? Yuh were in the clear, yuh had a few dollars apparently, and yuh could do all right. Hardin took possession of those ranches legally. He can hold ‘em, too.“

„We’ll see.“

„No, I mean it. He can. Why don’t yuh drop the whole thing?“

„Drop it?“ Tack laughed. „How can I drop it? I’m in jail for murder now, and yuh know as well as I do I never killed Anson Childe. This trial will smoke the whole story out of its hole. I mean to see that it does.“

Olney winced, and Tack could see he had touched a tender spot. That was what they were afraid of. They had him now, but they didn’t want him. They wanted nothing so much as to be completely rid of him.

„Only make trouble for folks,“ Olney protested. „Yuh won’t get nowhere. Yuh can bet that if yuh go to trial we’ll have all the evidence we need.“

„Sure. I know I’ll be framed.“

„What can yuh expect?“ Olney shrugged. „Yuh’re askin’ for it. Why don’t yuh play smart? If yuh’d leave the country we could sort of arrange maybe to turn yuh loose.“

Tack looked up at him. „Yuh mean that?“ Like blazes, he told himself. I can see yuh turnin’ me loose! And when I walked out yuh’d have somebody there to smoke me down, shot escaping jail. Yeah, I know. „If I thought yuh’d let me go—“ he hesitated, angling to get Olney’s reaction.

The sheriff put his head close to the bars. „Yuh know me, Tack,“ he whispered. „I don’t want to see you stick yore head in a noose! Sure, yuh spoke out of turn, and yuh tried to scare up trouble for us, but if yuh’d leave, I think I could arrange it.“

„Just give me the chance,“ Tack assured him. „Once I get out of here I’ll really start movin’!“ And that’s no lie, he added to himself.

Olney went away, and the morning dragged slowly. They would let him go. He was praying now they would wait until the next day. Yet even if they did permit him to escape, even if they did not have him shot as he was leaving, what could he

do? Childe, his best means of assistance, was dead. At every turn he was stopped. They had the law, and they had the guns.

His talk the night before would have implanted doubts. His whipping of Starr would have pleased many, and some of them would realize that his arrest for the murder of Childe was a frame. Yet none of these people would do anything about it without leadership. None of them wanted his neck in a noose.

Olney dropped in later and leaned close to the bars. „I'll have something arranged by tomorrow,“ he said.

Tack lay back on the bunk and fell asleep. All day the rain had continued without interruption except for a few minutes at a time. The hills would be soggy now, the trails bad. He could hear the wash running strongly, running like a river not thirty yards behind the jail.

Darkness fell, and he ate again and then returned to his bunk. With a good lawyer and a fair judge he could beat them in court. He had an ace in the hole that would help, and another that might do the job.

He waited until the jail was silent and he could hear the usual sounds from the Longhorn. Then he got up and walked over to the corner. All day water had been running under the corner of the jail and must have excavated a fair-sized hole by now. Tack knelt down and took from his pocket the fork he had secreted after his meal.

Olney, preoccupied with plans to allow Tack Gentry to escape and sure that Tack was accepting the plan, had paid little attention to the returned plate.

On his knees, Tack dug out the loosely filled in dust and dirt and then began digging frantically at the hole. He worked steadily for an hour and then crossed to the bucket for a drink of water and to stretch, and then he returned to work.

Another hour passed. He got up and stamped on the stone. It seemed to sink under his feet. He bent his knees and jumped, coming down hard on his heels. The stone gave way so suddenly he almost went through. He caught himself, withdrew his feet from the hole, and bent over, striking a match. It was no more than six inches to the surface of the water, and even a glance told him it must be much deeper than he had believed.

He took another look, waited an instant, and then lowered his feet into the water. The current jerked at them, and then he lowered his body through the hole and let go. Instantly, he was jerked away and literally thrown downstream. He caught a quick glimpse of a light from a window, and then he was whirling over and over. He grabbed frantically, hoping to get his hands on something, but they clutched only empty air. Frantically, he fought toward where there must be a bank, realizing he was in a roaring stream all of six feet deep. He struck nothing and was thrown, almost hurtled, downstream with what seemed to be overwhelming speed. Something black loomed near him, and at the same instant the water caught at him, rushing with even greater power. He grabbed again at the blob of blackness, and his hand caught a root.

Yet it was nothing secure, merely a huge cottonwood log rushing downstream. Working his way along it, he managed to get a leg over and crawled atop it. Fortunately, the log did not roll over.

Lying there in the blackness, he realized what must have happened. Behind the row of buildings that fronted on the street, of which the jail was one, was a

shallow, sandy ditch. At one end of it the bluff reared up. The dry wash skirted one side of the triangle formed by the bluff, and the ditch formed the other. Water flowing off the bluff and off the roofs of the buildings and from the street of the town and the rise beyond it had flooded into the ditch, washing it deeper. Yet now he knew he was in the current of the wash itself, now running bank full, a raging torrent.

A brief flash of lightning revealed the stream down which he was shooting like a chip in a millrace. Below, he knew, was Cathedral Gorge, a narrow boulder-strewn gash in the mountain down which this wash would thunder like an express train. Tack had seen such logs go down it, smashing into boulders, hurled against the rocky walls, and then shooting at last out into the open flat below the gorge. And he knew instantly that no living thing could hope to ride a charging log through the black, roaring depths of the gorge and come out anything but a mangled, lifeless pulp.

The log he was bestriding hit a wave, and water drenched him. Then the log whirled dizzily around a bend in the wash. Before him and around another bend he could hear the roar of the gorge. The log swung, and then the driving roots ripped into a heap of debris at the bend of the wash, and the log swung wickedly across the current. Scrambling like a madman, Tack fought his way toward the roots, and then even as the log ripped loose, he hurled himself at the heap of debris.

He landed in a heap of broken boughs, and felt something gouge him, and then scrambling, he made the rocks and clambered up into their shelter, lying there on a flat rock, gasping for breath.

A long time later he got up. Something was wrong with his right leg. It felt numb and sore. He crawled over the rocks and stumbled over the muddy earth toward the partial shelter of a clump of trees.

He needed shelter, and he needed a gun. Tack Gentry knew that now that he was free they would scour the country for him. They might believe him dead, but they would want to be certain. What he needed now was shelter, rest, and food. He needed to examine himself to see how badly he was injured, yet where could he turn?

Betty? She was too far away and he had no horse. Red Furness? Possibly, but how much the man would or could help he did not know. Yet thinking of Red made him think of Childe. There was a place for him. If he could only get to Childe's quarters over the saloon!

Luckily, he had landed on the same side of the wash as the town. He was stiff and sore, and his leg was paining him grievously. Yet there was no time to be lost. What the hour was he had no idea, but he knew his progress would be slow, and he must be careful. The rain was pounding down, but he was so wet now that it made no difference.

How long it took him he never knew. He could have been no more than a mile from town, perhaps less, and he walked, crawled, and pulled himself to the edge of town and then behind the buildings until he reached the dark back stairway to Anson Childe's room. Step by step he crawled up. Luckily, the door was unlocked.



Once inside, he stood there in the darkness, listening. There was no sound. This room was windowless but for one very small and tightly curtained window at the top of the wall. Tack felt for the candle, found it, and fumbled for a match. When he had the candle alight, he started pulling off his clothes.

Naked, he dried himself with a towel, avoiding the injured leg. Then he found a bottle and poured himself a drink. He tossed it off and then sat down on the edge of the bed and looked at his leg.

It almost made him sick to look at it. Hurling against a root or something in the dark, he had torn a great, mangled wound in the calf of his leg. No artery appeared to have been injured, but in places his shinbone was visible through the ripped flesh. The wound in the calf was deeper. Cleansing it as best he could, he found a white shirt belonging to Childe and bandaged his leg.

Exhausted, he fell asleep—when, he never recalled. Only hours later he awakened suddenly to find sunlight streaming through the door into the front room. His leg was stiff and sore, and when he moved, it throbbed with pain. Using a cane he found hanging in the room, he pulled himself up and staggered to the door.

The curtains in the front room were up and sunlight streamed in. The rain seemed to be gone. From where he stood he could see into the street, and almost the first person he saw was Van Hardin. He was standing in front of the Longhorn talking to Soderman and the mustached man Tack had first seen at his own ranch.

The sight reminded him, and Tack hunted around for a gun. He found a pair of beautifully matched Colts, silver plated and ivory handled. He strapped them on with their ornate belt and holsters. Then, standing in a corner, he found a riot gun and a Henry rifle. He checked the loads in all the guns, found several boxes of ammunition for each of them, and emptied a box of .45s into the pockets of a pair of Childe's pants he pulled on. Then he put a double handful of shotgun shells into the pockets of a leather jacket he found.

He sat down then, for he was weak and trembling.

His time was short. Sooner or later someone would come to this room. Either someone would think of it, or someone would come to claim the room for himself. Red Furness had no idea he was there, so would probably not hesitate to let anyone come up.

He locked the door, and then dug around and found a stale loaf of bread and some cheese. Then he lay down to rest. His leg was throbbing with pain, and he knew it needed care, and badly.

When he awakened, he studied the street from a vantage point well inside the room and to one side of the window. Several knots of men were standing around talking, more men than should have been in town at that hour. He recognized one or two of them as being old-timers around. Twice he saw Olney ride by, and the sheriff was carrying a riot gun.

Starr and the mustached man were loafing in front of the Longhorn, and two other men Tack recognized as coming from the old London ranch were there.

He ate some more bread and cheese. He was just finishing his sandwich when a buckboard turned into the street, and his heart jumped when he saw Betty

London was driving. Beside her in the seat was her father, Bill, worn and old, his hair white now, but he was wearing a gun!

Something was stirring down below. It began to look as if the lid was about to blow off. Yet Tack had no idea of his own status. He was an escaped prisoner and as such could be shot on sight legally by Olney or Starr, who seemed to be a deputy. From the wary attitude of the Van Hardin men he knew that they were disturbed by their lack of knowledge of him.

Yet the day passed without incident, and finally he returned to the bunk and lay down after checking his guns once more. The time for the payoff was near, he knew. It could come at any moment. He was lying there thinking about that and looking up at the rough plank ceiling when he heard steps on the stairs.

He arose so suddenly that a twinge of pain shot through the weight that had become his leg. The steps were on the front stairs, not the back. A quick glance from the window told him it was Betty London.

What did she want here?

Her hand fell on the knob and it turned. He eased off the bed and turned the key in the lock. She hesitated just an instant and then stepped in. When their eyes met, hers went wide, and her face went white to the lips.

„You!“ she gasped. „Oh, Tack! What have you been doing! Where have you been!“

She started toward him, but he backed up and sat down on the bed. „Wait. Do they know I’m up here?“ he demanded harshly.

„No, Tack. I came up to see if some papers were here, some papers I gave to Anson Childe before he was—murdered.“

„Yuh think I did that?“ he demanded.

„No, of course not!“ Her eyes held a question. „Tack, what’s the matter? Don’t you like me anymore?“

„Don’t I like yuh?“ His lips twisted with bitterness. „Lady, yuh’ve got a nerve to ask that! I come back and find my girl about to go dancin’ in a cheap saloon dance hall, and—“

„I needed money, Tack,“ Betty said quietly. „Dad needed care. We didn’t have any money. Everything we had was lost when we lost the ranch. Hardin offered me the job. He said he wouldn’t let anybody molest me.“

„What about him?“

„I could take care of him.“ She looked at him, puzzled. „Tack, what’s the matter? Why are you sitting down? Are you hurt?“

„My leg.“ He shook his head as she started forward. „Don’t bother about it. There’s no time. What are they saying down there? What’s all the crowd in town? Give it to me, quick!“

„Some of them think you were drowned in escaping from jail. I don’t think Van Hardin thinks that, nor Olney. They seem very disturbed. The crowd is in town for Childe’s funeral and because some of them think you were murdered once Olney got you in jail. Some of our old friends.“

„Betty!“ The call came from the street below. It was Van Hardin’s voice.

„Don’t answer!“ Tack Gentry got up. His dark green eyes were hard. „I want him to come up.“

Betty waited, her eyes wide, listening. Footsteps sounded on the stairway, and then the door shoved open. „Bet—“ Van Hardin's voice died out and he stood there, one hand on the doorknob, staring at Tack.

„Howdy, Hardin,“ Tack said, „I was hopin' yuh'd come.“

Van Hardin said nothing. His powerful shoulders filled the open door, his eyes were set, and the shock was fading from them now.

„Got a few things to tell yuh, Hardin,“ Tack continued gently. „Before yuh go out of this feet first I want yuh to know what a sucker yuh've been.“

„A sucker I've been?“ Hardin laughed. „What chance have yuh got? The street down there is full of my men. Yuh've friends there, too, but they lack leadership. They don't know what to do. My men have their orders. And then I won't have any trouble with yuh, Gentry. Yore old friends around here told me all about yuh. Soft, like that uncle of yores.“

„Ever hear of Black Jack Paris, Hardin?“

„The gunman? Of course, but what's he got to do with yuh?“

„Nothin', now. He did once, up in Ellsworth, Kansas. They dug a bed for him next mornin', Hardin. He was too slow. Yuh said I was soft? Well, maybe I was once. Maybe in spots I still am, but yuh see, since the folks around here have seen me I've been over the cattle trails, been doin' some Injun fightin' and rustler killin'. It makes a sight of change in a man, Hardin.“

„That ain't what I wanted yuh to know. I wanted yuh to know what a fool yuh were, tryin' to steal this ranch. Yuh see, the land in our home ranch wasn't like the rest of this land, Hardin.“

„What do yuh mean?“ Hardin demanded suspiciously.

„Why, yuh're the smart boy,“ Tack drawled easily. „Yuh should have checked before takin' so much for granted. Yuh see, the Gentry ranch was a land grant. My grandmother, she was a Basque, see? The land came to us through her family, and the will she left was that it would belong to us as long as any of us lived, that it couldn't be sold or traded, and in case we all died, it was to go to the state of Texas!“

Van Hardin stared. „What?“ he gasped. „What kind of fool deal is this yuh're givin' me?“

„Fool deal is right.“ Tack said quietly. „Yuh see, the state of Texas knows no Gentry would sell or trade, knowin' we couldn't, so if somebody else showed up with the land, they were bound to ask a sight of questions. Sooner or later they'd have got around to askin' yuh how come.“

Hardin seemed stunned. From the street below, there was a sound of horses' hooves.

Then a voice said from Tack's left, „Yuh better get out, Van. There's talkin' to be done in the street. I want Tack Gentry!“

Tack's head jerked around. It was Soderman. The short, squinty-eyed man was staring at him, gun in hand. He heard Hardin turn and bolt out of the room, saw resolution in Soderman's eyes. Hurling himself toward the wall, Gentry's hand flashed for his pistol.

A gun blasted in the room with a roar like a cannon, and Gentry felt the angry whip of the bullet, and then he fired twice, low down.

Soderman fell back against the doorjamb, both hands grabbing at his stomach, just below his belt buckle, „Yuh shot me!“ he gasped, round eyed. „Yuh shot—me!“

„Like you did my uncle,“ Tack said coolly. „Only yuh had better than an even break, and he had no break at all!“

Gentry could feel blood from the opened wound trickling down his leg. He glanced at Betty. „I’ve got to get down there,“ he said. „He’s a slick talker.“

Van Hardin was standing down in the street. Beside him was Olney and nearby was Starr. Other men, a half dozen of them, loitered nearby.

Slowly, Tack Gentry began stumping down the stair. All eyes looked up. Red Furness saw him and spoke out, „Tack, these three men are Rangers come down from Austin to make some inquiries.“

Hardin pointed at Gentry. „He’s wanted for murdering Anson Childe! Also for jailbreaking, and unless I’m much mistaken he has killed another man up there in Childe’s office!“

The Rangers looked at him curiously, and then one of them glanced at Hardin. „Yuh all the hombre what lays claim to the Gentry place?“

Hardin swallowed up quickly, and then his eyes shifted. „No, that was Soderman. The man who was upstairs.“

Hardin looked at Tack Gentry. With the Rangers here he knew his game was played out. He smiled suddenly. „Yuh’ve nothin’ on me at all, gents,“ he said coolly. „Soderman killed John Gentry and laid claim to his ranch. I don’t know nothin’ about it.“

„Yuh engineered it!“ Bill London burst out. „Same as yuh did the stealin’ of my ranch!“

„Yuh’ve no proof,“ Hardin sneered. „Not a particle. My name is on no papers, and yuh have no evidence.“

Coolly, he strode across to his black horse and swung into the saddle. He was smiling gently, but there was sneering triumph behind the smile. „You’ve nothin’ on me, not a thing!“

„Don’t let him get away!“ Bill London shouted. „He’s the wust one of the whole kit and kaboodle of ‘em!“

„But he’s right!“ the Ranger protested. „In all the papers we’ve found, there’s not a single item to tie him up. If he’s in it, he’s been almighty smart.“

„Then arrest him for horse stealin’!“ Tack Gentry said. „That’s my black horse he’s on!“

Hardin’s face went cold, and then he smiled. „Why, that’s crazy! That’s foolish,“ he said. „This is my horse. I reared him from a colt. Anybody could be mistaken, cause one black horse is like another. My brand’s on him, and yuh can all see it’s an old brand.“

Tack Gentry stepped out in front of the black horse. „Button!“ he said sharply. „Button!“

At the familiar voice, the black horse’s head jerked up. „Button!“ Tack called. „Hut! Hut!“

As the name and the sharp command rolled out, Button reacted like an explosion of dynamite. He jumped straight up in the air and came down hard. Then he sunfished wildly, and Van Hardin hit the dirt in a heap.

„Button!“ Tack commanded. „Go get Blackie!“

Instantly, the horse wheeled and trotted to the hitching rail where Blackie stood ground hitched as Olney had left him. Button caught the reins in his teeth and led the other black horse back.

The Rangers grinned. „Reckon, mister,“ one said, „yuh done proved yore case. The man’s a horse thief.“

Hardin climbed to his feet, his face dark with fury. „Yuh think yuh’ll get away with that?“ His hand flashed for his gun.

Tack Gentry had been watching him, and now his own hand moved down and then up. The two guns barked as one. A chip flew from the stair post beside Tack, but Van Hardin turned slowly and went to his knees in the dust.

At almost the same instant, a sharp voice rang out. „Olney! Starr!“

Olney’s face went white and he wheeled, hand flashing for his gun. „Anson Childe!“ he gasped.

Childe stood on the platform in front of his room and fired once, twice, three times. Sheriff Olney went down, coughing and muttering. Starr backed through the swinging doors of the saloon and sat down hard in the sawdust.

Tack stared at him. „What the—“

The tall young lawyer came down the steps. „Fooled them, didn’t I? They tried to get me once too often. I got their man with a shotgun in the face. Then I changed clothes with him and lit out for Austin. I came in with the Rangers and then left them on the edge of town. They told me they’d let us have it our way unless they were needed.“

„Saves the state of Texas a sight of money,“ one of the Rangers drawled. „Anyway, we been checkin’ on this here Hardin. On Olney, too. That’s why they wanted to keep things quiet around here. They knowed we was checkin’ on ‘em.“

The Rangers moved in and with the help of a few of the townspeople rounded up Hardin’s other followers.

Tack grinned at the lawyer. „Lived up to your name, pardner,“ he said. „Yuh sure did! All yore sheep in the fold, now!“

„What do you mean? Lived up to my name?“ Anson Childe looked around.

Gentry grinned. „And a little Childe shall lead them!“ he said.

