

West of the Tularosas

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

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The dead man had gone out fighting. Scarcely more than a boy, and a dandy in dress, he had been man enough when the showdown came. Propped against the fireplace stones, legs stretched before him, loose fingers still touching the butt of his .45 Colt, he had smoked it out to a bloody, battle-stained finish. Evidence of it lay all about him. Whoever killed him had spent time, effort, and blood to do it.

As they closed in for the payoff at least one man had died on the threshold.

The fight that ended here had begun elsewhere. From the looks of it this cabin had been long deserted, and the dead man's spurs were bloodstained. At least one of his wounds showed evidence of being much older than the others. A crude attempt had been made to stop the bleeding.

Baldy Jackson, one of the Tumbling K riders who found the body, dropped to his knees and picked up the dead man's Colt.

"Empty!" he said. "He fought 'em until his guns were empty, an' then they killed him."

"Is he still warm?" McQueen asked. "I think I can smell powder smoke."

“He ain’t been an hour dead, I’d guess. Wonder what the fuss was about?”

“Worries me,” McQueen looked around, “considering our situation.” He glanced at Bud Fox and Kim Sartain, who appeared in the doorway. “What’s out there?”

“At least one of their boys rode away still losing blood. By the look of things this lad didn’t go out alone, he took somebody with him.” Sartain was rolling a smoke. “No feed in the shed, but that horse out there carries a mighty fine saddle.”

“Isn’t this the place we’re headed for?” Fox asked. “It looks like the place described.”

Sartain’s head came up. “Somebody comin’!” he said. “Riders, an’ quite a passel of them.”

Sartain flattened against the end of the fireplace and Fox knelt behind a windowsill. Ward McQueen planted his stalwart frame in the doorway, waiting. “This isn’t so good. We’re goin’ to be found with a dead man, just killed.”

There were a half dozen riders in the approaching group, led by a stocky man on a gray horse and a tall, oldish fellow wearing a badge.

They drew up sharply on seeing the horses and McQueen. The short man stared at McQueen, visibly upset by his presence. “Who’re you? And what are you doin’ here?”

“I’ll ask the same question,” McQueen spoke casually. “This is Firebox range, isn’t it?”

“I know that.” The stocky man’s tone was testy. “I ought to. I own the Firebox.”

“Do you now?” Ward McQueen’s reply was gentle, inquiring. “Might be a question about that. Ever hear of Tom McCracken?”

“Of course! He used to own the Firebox.”

“That’s right, and he sold it to Ruth Kermitt of the Tumbling K. I’m Ward McQueen, her foreman. I’ve come to take possession.”

His reply was totally unexpected, and the stocky man was obviously astonished. His surprise held him momentarily speechless, and then he burst out angrily.

“That’s impossible! I’m holdin’ notes against young Jimmy Mc-Cracken! He was the old man’s heir, an’ Jimmy signed the place over to me to pay up.”

“As of when?” Ward asked.

His thoughts were already leaping ahead, reading sign along the trail they must follow. Obviously something was very wrong, but he was sure that Ruth’s deed, a copy of which he carried with him, would be dated earlier than whatever this man had. Moreover, he now had a hunch that the dead man lying behind him was that same Jimmy McCracken.

“That’s neither here nor there! Get off my land or be drove off!”

“Take it easy, Webb!” The sheriff spoke for the first time. “This man may have a just claim. If Tom McCracken sold out before he died, your paper isn’t worth two hoots.”

That this had occurred to Webb was obvious, and that he did not like it was apparent. Had the sheriff not been present, Ward was sure, there would have been a shooting. As yet, they did not know he was not alone, as none of the Tumbling K men had shown themselves.

“Sheriff,” McQueen said, “my outfit rode in here about fifteen minutes ago, and we found a dead man in this cabin. Looks like he lost a runnin’ fight with several men, and when his ammunition gave out, they killed him.”

“Or you shot him,” Webb said.

Ward did not move from the door. He was a big man, brown from sun and wind, lean and muscular. He wore two guns.

“I shot nobody.” His tone was level, even. “Sheriff, I’m Ward McQueen. My boss bought this place from McCracken for cash money. The deed was delivered to her, and the whole transaction was recorded in the courts. All that remained was for us to take possession, which we have done.”

He paused. “The man who is dead inside is unknown to me, but I’m making a guess he’s Jimmy McCracken. Whoever killed him wanted him dead mighty bad. There was quite a few of them, and Jimmy did some good shootin’. One thing you might look for is a couple of wounded men, or somebody else who turns up dead.”

The sheriff dismounted. “I’ll look around, McQueen. My name’s Foster, Bill Foster.” He waved a hand to the stocky cattleman. “This is Neal Webb, owner of the Runnin’ W.”

Ward McQueen stepped aside to admit the sheriff, and as he did so Kim Sartain showed up at the corner of the house, having stepped through a window to the outside. Kim Sartain was said to be as good with his guns as McQueen.

Foster squatted beside the body. “Yeah, this is young Jimmy, all right. Looks like he put up quite a scrap.”

“He was game,” McQueen said. He indicated the older wound. “He’d been shot somewhere and rode in here, ridin’ for his life. Look at the spurs. He tried to get where there was help but didn’t make it.”

Foster studied the several wounds and the empty cartridge cases. McQueen told him of the hard-ridden mustang, but the sheriff wanted to see for himself. Watching the old man, McQueen felt renewed confidence. The lawman was careful and shrewd, taking nothing for granted, accepting no man’s unsupported word. That McQueen and his men were in a bad position was obvious.

Neal Webb was obviously a cattleman of some local importance. The Tumbling K riders were not only strangers but they had been found with the body.

Webb was alert and aware. He had swiftly catalogued the Tumbling K riders as a tough lot, if pushed. McQueen he did not know, but the K foreman wore his guns with the ease of long practice. Few men carried two guns, most of them from the Texas border country. Nobody he knew of used both at once; the second gun was insurance, but it spoke of a man prepared for trouble.

Webb scowled irritably. The setup had been so perfect! The old man dead, the gambling debts, and the bill of sale. All that remained was to... and then this outfit appeared with what was apparently a legitimate claim. Who would ever dream the old man would sell out? But how had the sale been arranged? There might still be a way, short of violence.

What would Silas Hutch say? And Ren Oliver? It angered Webb to realize he had failed, after all his promises. Yet who could have foreseen this? It had all appeared so simple, but who could have believed that youngster would put up a fight like he did? He had been a laughing, friendly young man, showing no sense of responsibility, no steadiness of purpose. He had been inclined to sidestep trouble rather than face it, so the whole affair had looked simple enough.

One thing after another had gone wrong. First, the ambush failed. The kid got through it alive and then made a running fight of it. Why he headed for this place Webb could not guess, unless he had known the Tumbling K outfit was to be here.

Two of Webb's best men were dead and three wounded, and he would have to keep them out of sight until they were well again. Quickly, he decided the line cabin on Dry Legget would be the best hideout.

Foster came from the woods, his face serious.

"McQueen, you'd better ride along to town with me. I found sign that six or seven men were in this fight, and several were killed or hurt. This requires investigation."

"You mean I'm under arrest?"

"No such thing. Only you'll be asked questions. We'll check your deed an' prob'ly have to get your boss up here. We're goin' to get to the bottom of this."

"One thing, Foster, before we go. I'd like you to check our guns. Nobody among us has fired a shot for days. I'd like you to know that."

"You could have switched guns," Webb suggested.

McQueen ignored him. "Kim, why don't you fork your bronc an' ride along with us? Baldy, you an' Bud stay here and let nobody come around unless it's the sheriff or one of us. Got it?"

"You bet!" Jackson spat a stream of tobacco juice at an ant. "No-body'll come around, believe me."

Neal Webb kept his mouth shut but he watched irritably. McQueen was thinking of everything, but as Webb watched the body of young McCracken tied over the saddle he had an idea. Jimmy had been well liked around town, so if the story got around that McQueen was his killer, there might be no need for a trial or even a preliminary hearing. It was too bad Foster was so stiff-necked.

Kim Sartain did not ride with the group. With his Winchester across his saddle bows he kept off to the flank or well back in the rear where the whole group could be watched. Sheriff Foster noted this, and his frosty old eyes glinted with amused appreciation.

"What's he doin' back there?" Webb demanded. "Make him ride up front, Sheriff!"

Foster smiled. "He can ride where he wants. He don't make me nervous, Webb. What's eatin' you?"

The town of Pelona for which they were riding faced the wide plains from the mouth of Cottonwood Canyon, and faced them without pretensions. The settlement, dwarfed by the bulk of the mountain behind it, was a supply point for cattlemen, a stage stop, and a source of attraction for cowhands to whom Santa Fe and El Paso were faraway dream cities.

In Pelona, with its four saloons, livery stable, and five stores, Si Hutch, who owned Hutch's Emporium, was king.

He was a little old man, grizzled, with a stubble of beard and a continually cranky mood. Beneath that superficial aspect he was utterly vicious, without an iota of mercy for anything human or animal.

Gifted in squeezing the last drop of money or labor from those who owed him, he thirsted for wealth with the same lust that others reserved for whiskey or women. Moreover, although few realized it, he was cruel as an Apache and

completely depraved. One of the few who realized the depth of his depravity was his strong right hand, Ren Oliver.

Oliver was an educated man and for the first twenty-five years of his life had lived in the East. Twice, once in New York and again in Philadelphia, he had been guilty of killing. In neither case had it been proved, and in only one case had he been questioned. In both cases he had killed to cover his thieving, but finally he got in too deep and realizing his guilt could be proved, he skipped town.

In St. Louis he shot a man over a card game. Two months later he knifed a man in New Orleans, then drifted west, acquiring gun skills as he traveled. Since boyhood his career had been a combination of cruelty and dishonesty, but not until he met Si Hutch had he made it pay. Behind his cool, somewhat cynical expression few people saw the killer.

He was not liked in Pelona. Neither was he disliked. He had killed two men in gun battles since arriving in town, but both seemed to have been fair, standup matches. He was rarely seen with Si Hutch, for despite the small population they had been able to keep their cooperation a secret. Only Neal Webb, another string to Hutch's bow, understood the connection. One of the factors that aided Hutch in ruling the Pelona area was that his control was exercised without being obvious. Certain of his enemies had died by means unknown to either Ren Oliver or Neal Webb.

The instrument of these deaths was unknown, and for that reason Si Hutch was doubly feared.

When Sheriff Foster rode into town with Webb and McQueen, Si Hutch was among the first to know. His eyes tightened with vindictive fury. That damned Webb! Couldn't he do anything right? His own connection with the crimes well covered, he could afford to sit back and await developments.

Ward McQueen had been doing some serious thinking on the ride into town. The negotiations between Ruth Kermitt and old Tom Mc-Cracken had been completed almost four months ago. McCracken had stayed on at the Firebox even after the title was transferred and was to have managed it for another six months. His sudden death ended all that.

Webb had said he owned the ranch by virtue of young Jimmy signing it over to pay a gambling debt. This was unlikely, for Jimmy had surely known of the sale. Neal Webb had made an effort to obtain control of the ranch, and Jimmy McCracken had been killed to prevent his doing anything about it.

Sheriff Foster seemed like an honest man, but how independent was he? In such towns there were always factions who controlled, and elected officials were often only tools to be used.

Faced with trickery and double-dealing as well as such violence, what could he do? When Ruth arrived from the Tumbling K in Nevada there would be no doubt that she owned the Firebox and that Jimmy had known of it. That would place the killing of young Jimmy Mc-Cracken at Neal Webb's door.

Red Oliver was on the walk in front of the Bat Cave Saloon when they tied up before the sheriff's office. He had never seen either McQueen or Sartain before but knew them instantly for what they were, gunfighters, and probably good.

McQueen saw the tall man in the gray suit standing on the boardwalk. As he watched, Oliver turned in at the Emporium. Ward finished tying his roan and went into the sheriff's office.

Nothing new developed from the talk in the office of the sheriff, nor in the hearing that followed. Young Jimmy McCracken had been slain by persons unknown after a considerable chase. The evidence seemed to establish that several men had been involved in the chase, some of whom had been killed or wounded by McCracken.

Ward McQueen gave his own evidence and listened as the others told what they knew or what tracks seemed to indicate. As he listened he heard whispering behind him, and he was well aware that talk was going around. After all, he and the Tumbling K riders were strangers. What talk he could overhear was suspicion of his whole outfit.

Neal Webb had a bunch of tough men around him and he was belligerent. When telling what he knew he did all he could to throw suspicion on the Tumbling K. However, from what he could gather, all of Webb's riders were present and accounted for.

After the inquest McQueen found himself standing beside the sheriff. "What kind of a country is this, Sheriff? Do you have much trouble?"

"Less than you'd expect. Webb's outfit is the biggest, but his boys don't come in often. When they want to have a blowout they ride down to Alma. They do some drinkin' now an' again but they don't r'ar up lookin' for trouble."

"Many small outfits?"

"Dozen or so. The Firebox will be the largest if you run cows on all of it." Foster studied him. "Do you know the range limits of the Firebox?"

"We figure to run stock from the Apache to Rip-Roaring Mesa and Crosby Creek, south to Dillon Mountain and up to a line due east from there to the Apache."

"That's a big piece of country but it is all Firebox range. There are a few nesters squatted in Bear Canyon, and they look like a tough outfit, but they've given me no trouble."

"Miss Kermitt holds deeds on twelve pieces of land," Ward explained. "Those twelve pieces control most of the water on that range, and most of the easy passes. We want no trouble, but we'll run cattle on range we're entitled to."

"That's fair enough. Watch your step around Bear Canyon. Those boys are a mean lot."

Kim Sartain was somewhere around town but McQueen was not worried. The gunslinging segundo of the Tumbling K was perfectly capable of taking care of himself, and in the meanwhile Ward had business of his own to take care of. He glanced up and down the street, studying the stores. Two of them appeared better stocked than the others. One was Hutch's Emporium, a large store apparently stocked to the doors with everything a rancher could want. The other stores were smaller but were freshly painted and looked neat.

McQueen walked along to the Emporium. A small man with a graying beard looked up at him as he came to the counter. It was an old-fashioned counter, curved inward on the front to accommodate women shoppers who wore hoopskirts.

"Howdy there! Stranger in town?"

“Tumbling K. We’ve taken over the Firebox, and we’ll need supplies.”

Hutch nodded agreeably. “Glad to help! The Firebox, hey? Had a ruckus out there, I hear.”

“Nothin’ much.” Ward walked along, studying the goods on the shelves and stacked on tables. He was also curious about the man behind the counter. He seemed genial enough, but his eyes were steel bright and glassy. He was quick-moving and obviously energetic.

“Troublin’ place, the Firebox. Old McCracken seemed to make it pay but nobody else ever done it. You reckon you’ll stay?”

“We’ll stay.”

McQueen ordered swiftly and surely, but not all they would need. There were other stores in town, and he preferred to test the water before he got in too deep. The Firebox would need to spend a lot of money locally and he wanted to scatter it around. Hutch made no comment until he ordered a quantity of .44-caliber ammunition.

“That’s a lot of shootin’. You expectin’ a war?”

“War? Nothing like that, but we’re used to wars. Jimmy McCracken was killed for some reason by some right vicious folks. If they come back we wouldn’t want them to feel unwelcome.”

The door opened and Neal Webb walked in. He strode swiftly to the counter and was about to speak when he recognized McQueen. He gulped back his words, whatever they might have been.

“Howdy. Reckon you got off pretty easy.”

McQueen took his time about replying. “Webb, the Tumblin’ K is in this country to stay. You might as well get used to us and accept the situation. Then we can have peace between us and get on with raising and marketing cattle. We want no trouble, but we’re ready if it comes.

“We did business with McCracken and I couldn’t have found a finer man. His son seemed cut from the same pattern.

“They didn’t belong to my outfit, so I’m droppin’ this right here. If it had been one of my men I’d backtrail the killers until I found where they came from. Then I’d hunt their boss and I’d stay with him until he was hanged, which is what he deserves.”

Behind McQueen’s back Hutch gestured, and the hot remarks Webb might have made were stifled. Puzzled, McQueen noticed the change and the sudden shift of Webb’s eyes. Finishing his order he stepped into the street.

As he left a gray-haired, impatient-seeming man brushed by him. “Neal,” he burst out, “where’s that no-account Bemis? He was due over to my place with that horse he borried. I need that paint the worst way!”

“Forget it,” Webb said. “I’ll see he gets back to you.”

“But I want to see Bemis! He owes me money!”

Ward McQueen let the door close behind him and glanced across the street. A girl with red-gold hair was sweeping the boardwalk there. She made a pretty picture and he crossed the street.

As he stepped onto the walk, she glanced up. Her expression changed as she saw him. Her glance was the swiftly measuring one of a pretty girl who sees a stranger, attractive and possibly unmarried. She smiled.

"You must be one of that new outfit the town's talking about. The Tumbling K, isn't it?"

"It is." He shoved his hat back on his head. Kim should see this girl, he thought. She's lovely. "I'm the foreman."

She glanced across the street toward Hutch's store. "Started buying from Hutch?"

"I'm new here so I thought I'd scatter my business until I find out where I get the best service." He smiled. "I'll want to order a few things."

A big man was coming up the walk, a very big man, and Ward McQueen sensed trouble in the man's purposeful stride. His worn boots were run down at the heels and his faded shirt was open halfway down his chest for lack of buttons. His ponderous fists swung at the ends of powerfully muscled arms, and his eyes darkened savagely as he saw Ward McQueen.

"Watch yourself!" the girl warned. "That's Flagg Warneke!"

The big man towered above McQueen. When he came to a stop in front of Ward his chin was on a level with Ward's eyebrows and he seemed as wide as a barn door.

"Are you McQueen? Well, I'm Flagg Warneke, from Bear Canyon! I hear you aim to run us nesters off your range! Is that right?"

"I haven't made up my mind yet," Ward replied. "When I do I'll come to see you."

"Oh! You haven't made up your mind yet? Well, see that you don't! And stay away from Bear Canyon! That place belongs to us, an' if you come huntin' trouble, you'll get it!"

Coolly, Ward McQueen turned his back on the giant. "Why not show me what stock you have?" he suggested to the girl. "I—"

A huge hand clamped on his shoulder and spun him around. "When I talk to you, *face me!*" Warneke roared.

As the big hand spun him around Ward McQueen threw a roundhouse right to the chin that knocked the big man floundering against the post of the overhang. Instantly, Ward moved in, driving a wicked right to the body and then swinging both hands to the head.

The man went to his knees and McQueen stepped back. Then, as if realizing for the first time that he had been struck, Warneke came off the walk with a lunge. He swung his right but Ward went inside, punching with both hands. The big man soaked up punishment like a sponge takes water, and he came back, punching with remarkable speed for such a big man.

A blow caught McQueen on the jaw and he crashed against the side of the store, his head ringing. Warneke followed up on the punch, but he was too eager for the kill and missed.

A crowd had gathered and the air was filled with shouted encouragement to one or the other. Ward's shirt was torn and when he stepped back to let Warneke get up again his breath was coming in great gasps. The sheer power and strength of the big man was amazing. He had never hit a man so hard and had him still coming.

McQueen, no stranger to rough-and-tumble fighting, moved in, circling a little. Warneke, cautious now, was aware he was in a fight. Before, his battles had always ended quickly; this was different. McQueen stabbed a left to the mouth,

feinted, and did it again. He feinted again, but this time he whipped a looping uppercut to the body that made Warneke's mouth fall open. The big man swung a ponderous blow that fell short and McQueen circled him warily. The speed was gone from the Bear Canyon man now, and McQueen only sought a quick way to end it.

McQueen, oblivious to the crowd, moved in warily. Warneke, hurt though he was, was as dangerous as a cornered grizzly. McQueen's greatest advantage had been that Warneke had been used to quick victories and had not expected anything like what had happened. Also, McQueen had landed the first blow and followed it up before the bigger man could get set. He stalked him now, and then feinted suddenly and threw a high hard one to the chin. Warneke was coming in when the blow landed. For an instant he stiffened, and then fell forward to the walk and lay still.

McQueen stepped back to the wall and let his eyes sweep the faces of the crowd. For the first time he saw Sartain standing in front of the store, his thumbs hooked in his belt, watching the people gathered about.

Nearest the porch was a tall man in a gray suit, a man he had observed before when he first rode into town.

"That was quite a scrap," said the man in gray. "My congratulations. If there is ever anything I can do, just come to me. My name is Ren Oliver."

"Thanks."

Ward McQueen picked up his fallen hat and then tentatively he worked his fingers. Nothing was broken but his hands were stiff and sore from the pounding. He gave Sartain a half smile. "Looks like we've picked a tough job. That was a Bear Canyon nester!"

"Yeah." Kim gave him a wry look. "Wonder who put him up to it?"

"You think it was planned?"

"Think about it. You've made no decision on Bear Canyon. You ain't even seen the place or its people, but he had the idea you were going to run them off. And how did he know where you were and who you were? I think somebody pointed you out."

"That's only if somebody has it in for him, or for us."

Sartain's smile was cynical. "You don't think they have? You should have seen how green Webb turned when you said you had title to the Firebox. If the sheriff hadn't been there he'd have tried to kill you.

"And why was the sheriff there? That's another thing we'd better find out."

McQueen nodded. "You're right, Kim. While you're around, keep your eyes and ears open for a man named Bemis. You won't see him, I think, but find out what you can about him."

"Bemis? What do you know about him?"

"Darned little." McQueen touched his cheek with gentle fingers where a large red, raw spot had resulted from Warneke's fist. "Only he ain't around, and he should be."

Sartain walked off down the street and the crowd drifted slowly away, reluctant to leave the scene. McQueen hitched his guns into place and straightened his clothes. He glanced around and saw a sign, Clarity's Store.

The girl had come back into her doorway, and he glanced at her. "Are you Clarity?"

"I am. The first name is Sharon. Did they call you McQueen?"

"They did. And the first name is Ward."

He stepped into the store, anxious to get away from the curious eyes. The store was more sparsely stocked than Hutch's much larger store, but the stock gave evidence of careful selection and a discriminating taste. There were many things a western store did not normally stock.

"I have a washbasin," she suggested. "I think you'd better take a look at yourself in a mirror."

"I will," he said, grinning a little, "but I'd rather not." He glanced around again. "Do you stock shirts by any chance? Man-size shirts?"

She looked at him critically. "I do, and I believe I have one that would fit you."

She indicated the door to the washbasin and then went among the stacks of goods on the shelves behind the counter.

A glance in the mirror and he saw what she meant. His face was battered and bloody, his hair mussed. He could do little about the battered but the blood he could wash away, and he did so. The back door opened on a small area surrounded by a high fence. It was shaded by several old elms and a cottonwood or two, and in the less shaded part there were flowers. He washed his face, holding compresses on his swollen cheekbones and lip. Then he combed his hair.

Sharon Clarity came with a shirt. It was a dark blue shirt with two pockets. He stripped off the rags of his other shirt and donned the new one and dusted off his hat.

She gave him a quick look and a smile when he emerged, saying, "It's an improvement, anyway." She folded some other shirts and returned them to the shelves.

He paid for the shirt she had provided, and she said, "You know what you've done, don't you? You've whipped the toughest man in Bear Canyon. Whipped him in a standup fight. Nobody has ever done that, and nobody has even come close. Nobody has even tried for a long time."

She paused, frowning a little. "It puzzles me a little. Warneke isn't usually quarrelsome. That's the first time I ever saw him start a fight."

"Somebody may have given him an idea. I hadn't had time to even think about Bear Canyon. I haven't even ridden over the ranch, and yet he had the idea we were about to run them off."

She looked at him appraisingly, having grown up with four brawling brothers she knew something about men. This one had fought coolly, skillfully. "You've started something you know. That Bear Canyon outfit is tough. Even Neal Webb's boys fight shy of them."

"Webb has a tough outfit?"

"You've seen some of them. There are two or three known killers in the bunch. Why he keeps them, I couldn't say."

"Like Bemis, for example?"

"You know Harve Bemis? He's one of them, but not the worst by a long shot. The worst ones are Overlin and Bine."

These were names he knew. Bine he had never seen, but he knew a good deal about him, as did any cattleman along the border country of Texas. An occasional outlaw and suspected rustler, he had run with the Youngers in Missouri before riding south to Texas.

Overlin was a Montana gunhand known around Bannock and Alder Gulch, but he had ridden the cattle trails from Texas several times and was a skilled cowhand, as well. McQueen had seen him in Abilene and at Doan's Crossing. On that occasion he himself had killed an outlaw who was trying to cut the herd with which McQueen was riding. The fact that such men rode with Webb made the situation serious.

He purchased several items and then hired a man with a wagon to freight the stuff to the Firebox. Kim Sartain was loitering in front of the saloon when McQueen came down to get his horse.

"Bemis ain't around," he confided, "an' it's got folks wonderin' because he usually plays poker at the Bat Cave Saloon. Nobody's seen him around for several days." He paused. "I didn't ask. I just listened."

For three days the Firebox was unmolested, and in those three days much was accomplished. The shake roof needed fixing, and some fences had to be repaired. Baldy had that job and when he finished he stood back and looked it over with satisfaction. "Bud, that there's an elephant-proof fence."

"Elephant proof? You mean an elephant couldn't get past that fence? You're off your trail!"

"Of course it's elephant proof. You don't see any elephants in there, do you?"

Bud Fox just looked at him and rode away.

All hands were in the saddle from ten to twelve hours a day. The cattle were more numerous than expected, especially the younger stuff. Several times McQueen cut trails made by groups of riders, most of them several days old. Late on the afternoon of the third day he rode down the steep slope to the bottom of a small canyon near the eastern end of the Dillons and found blood on the grass.

The stain was old and dark but unmistakably blood. He walked his horse around, looking for sign. He found a leaf with blood on it, then another. The blood had come from someone riding a horse, a horse that toed in slightly. Following the trail he came to where several other horsemen had joined the wounded man. One of the other horses was obviously a led horse.

Men had been wounded in the fight with McCracken. Could these be the same? If so, where were they going? He rode on over the Dillons and off what was accepted as Firebox range. He had crossed a saddle to get into this narrow canyon, but further along it seemed to open into a wider one. He pushed on, his Winchester in his hands.

The buckskin he rode was a mountain horse accustomed to rough travel. Moreover, it was fast and had stamina, the sort of horse a man needed when riding into trouble. The country into which he now ventured was unknown to him, wild and rough. The canyon down which he rode opened into a wider valley that tightened up into another deep, narrow canyon.

Before him was a small stream. The riders had turned down canyon.

It was dusk and shadows gathered in the canyons, only a faint red glow from the setting sun crested the rim of the canyon. Towering black walls lifted about him, and on the rocky edge across the way a dead, lightning-blasted pine pointed a warning finger from the cliff. The narrow valley was deep, and the only sound other than from the stream was a faint rustling. Then wind sighed in the junipers and the buckskin stopped, head up, ears pricked.

"Ssh!" he whispered, putting a warning hand on the buckskin's neck. "Take it easy, boy. Take it easy now."

The horse stepped forward, seeming almost to walk on tiptoe. This was the Box, one of the deepest canyons in the area. McCracken had spoken of it during their discussions that led to his sale of the ranch.

Suddenly he glimpsed a faint light on the rock wall. Speaking softly to the buckskin he slid from the saddle, leaving his rifle in the scabbard.

Careful to allow no jingle of spurs he felt his way along the sandy bottom. Rounding a shoulder of rock he saw a small campfire and the moving shadow of a man in a wide hat. Crouching near a bush he saw that shadow replaced by another, a man with a bald head.

In the silence of the canyon, where sounds were magnified, he heard a voice. "Feelin' better, Bemis? We'll make it to Dry Leggett tomorrow."

The reply was huskier, the tone complaining. "What's the boss keepin' us so far away for? Why didn't he have us to the Runnin' W? This hole I got in me is no joke."

"You got to stay under cover. We're not even suspected, an' we won't be if we play it smart."

His eyes picked out three men lying near the fire, one with a bandaged head. One of those who was on his feet was preparing a meal. From the distance he could just make out their faces, the shape of their shoulders, and of the two on their feet, the way they moved. Soon he might be fighting these men, and he wanted to know them on sight. The man in the wide hat turned suddenly toward him.

Hansen Bine!

Never before had he seen the man but the grapevine of the trails carried accurate descriptions of such men and of places as well. Gunfighters were much discussed, more than prizefighters or baseball players, even more than racehorses or buckers.

Bine was known for his lean, wiry body, the white scar on his chin, and his unnaturally long, thin fingers.

"What's the matter, Bine?" Bemis asked.

"Somethin' around. I can feel it."

"Cat, maybe. Lots of big ones in these canyons. I saw one fightin' a bear, one time. A black bear. No lion in his right mind would tackle a grizzly."

Bine looked again into the night and then crossed to the fire and seated himself. "Who d'you reckon those riders were who went to the cabin after we left? I saw them headed right for it."

"The boss, maybe. He was supposed to show up with the sheriff."

There was silence except for the crackling of the fire, only barely discernible at the distance. The flames played shadow games on the rock wall. Then Bemis

spoke, "I don't like it, Hans. I don't like it at all. I been shot before, but this one's bad. I need some care. I need a doctor."

"Take it easy, Bemis. You'll get there, all in good time."

"I don't like it. Sure, he doesn't want nobody to know, but I don't want to die, either."

Talk died down as the men sat up to eat, and Ward drew carefully back and walked across the sand to his horse. He swung into the saddle and turned the animal, but as the buckskin lined out to go back along the canyon its hoof clicked on stone!

He had believed himself far enough away not to be heard, but from behind him he heard a startled exclamation, and Ward put the horse into a lope in the darkness. From behind him there was a challenge and then a rifle shot, but he was not worried. The shot would have been fired on chance, as Ward knew he could not be seen and there was no straight shot possible in the canyon.

He rode swiftly, so swiftly that he realized he had missed his turn and was following a route up a canyon strange to him. The bulk of the Dillons arose on his right instead of ahead or on his left as they should be. By the stars he could see that the canyon up which he now rode was running east and west and he was headed west. Behind him he heard sounds of pursuit but doubted they would follow far.

The riding was dangerous, as the canyon was a litter of boulders and the trunks of dead trees. A branch canyon opened and he rode into it, his face into a light wind. He heard no further sounds of pursuit and was pleased, wanting no gun battle in these narrow, rock-filled canyons where a ricochet could so easily kill or wound a man. He saw the vague gleam of water and rode his horse into a small mountain stream. Following the stream for what he guessed was close to a mile, he found his way out of the stream to a rocky shelf. A long time later he came upon a trail and the shape of some mountains he recognized.

As he rode he considered what he had heard. Harve Bemis, as he suspected, had been one of those who attacked Jimmy McCracken. More than likely Bine had been there as well. That, even without what else he knew of Neal Webb, placed the attack squarely on Webb's shoulders.

With Jimmy McCracken slain and a forged bill of sale, Webb would have been sure nothing could block his claim to the Firebox range.

So what would he do now? Relinquish his attempt to seize the Firebox and let the killing go for nothing? All McQueen's experience told him otherwise. Webb would seek some other way to advance his claim, and he would seek every opportunity to blacken the reputation of the Tumbling K riders.

The men he had seen in the canyon were headed for Dry Leggett. Where was that? What was it? That he must find out, also he must have a talk with Sheriff Bill Foster.

Ruth Kermitt would not like this. She did not like trouble, and yet those who worked for her always seemed to be fighting to protect her interests. Of late she had refused to admit there might be occasions when fighting could not be avoided. She had yet to learn that in order to have peace both sides must want it equally. One side cannot make peace; they can only surrender.

He had been in love with Ruth since their first meeting, and they had talked of marriage. Several times they had been on the verge of it but something always intervened. Was it altogether accident? Or was one or both of them hesitating?

He shook such thoughts from his head. This was no time for personal considerations. He was a ranch foreman with a job to do, a job that might prove both difficult and dangerous. He must put the Firebox on a paying basis.

Their Nevada ranch was still the home ranch, but Ruth had bought land in other states, in Arizona and New Mexico as well as Utah, and she had traded profitably in cattle. One of the reasons for his hesitation, if he was hesitating, was because Ruth Kermitt was so wealthy. He himself had done much to create that wealth and to keep what she had gained. From the time when he had saved her herd in Nevada he had worked untiringly. He knew cattle, horses, and men. He also knew range conditions. The Tumbling K range fattened hundreds of white-faced cattle. The Firebox, further south and subject to different weather conditions, could provide a cushion against disaster on the northern range she had bought, on his advice, for a bargain price. Old Tom and young Jimmy had planned to return to a property they owned in Wyoming. As Tom had known Ruth's father, he offered her a first chance.

On Ward's advice she had purchased land around water holes, ensuring her of water so they would control much more land than they owned.

It was almost daybreak when McQueen rolled into his bunk in the Firebox bunkhouse. Sartain opened an eye and glanced at him curiously. Then he went back to sleep. Kim asked no questions and offered no comments but missed little.

Baldy Jackson was putting breakfast together when McQueen awakened. He sat up on his bunk and called out to Baldy in the next room. "Better get busy and muck this place out," Ward suggested. "Ruth—Miss Kermitt—may be down before long."

"Ain't I got enough to do? Cookin' for you hungry coyotes, buildin' fence, an' mixin' 'dobe? This place is good enough for a bunch of thistle-chinned cowhands."

"You heard me," McQueen said cheerfully. "And while you're at it, pick out a cabin site for the boss. One with a view. She will want a place of her own."

"Better set up an' eat. You missed your supper."

"Where's the boys? Aren't they eating?"

"They et an' cleared out hours ago." Baldy glanced at him. "What happened last night? Run into somethin'?"

"Yes, I did." He splashed water on his face and hands. "I came upon a camp of five men, three of them wounded. They were headed for a place called Dry Leggett."

"Canyon west of the Plaza."

"Plaza?"

"Kind of settlement, mostly Mexicans. Good people. A few 'dobes, a couple of stores, and a saloon or two."

"How well do you know this country, Baldy?"

Jackson gave him a wry look. "Pretty well. I punched cows for the S U south of here, and rode into the Plaza more times than I can recall. Been over around

Socorro. Back in the old days I used to hole up back in the hills from time to time.”

Baldy was a good cowhand and a good cook, but in his younger years he had ridden the outlaw trail until time brought wisdom. Too many of his old pals had wound up at the end of a rope.

“Maybe you can tell me where I was last night. I think I was over around what they used to call the Box.” He described the country and Baldy listened, sipping coffee. “Uh-huh,” he said finally, “that canyon you hit after crossing the Dillons must have been Devil. You probably found them holed up in the Box or right below it. Leavin’, you must have missed Devil Canyon and wound up on the south fork of the ’Frisco. Then you come up the trail along the Centerfire and home.”

Racing hoofs interrupted. McQueen put down his cup as Bud Fox came through the door.

“Ward, that herd we gathered in Turkey Park is gone! Sartain trailed ’em toward Apache Mountain!”

“Wait’ll I get my horse.” Baldy jerked off his apron.

“You stay here!” McQueen told him. “Get down that Sharps an’ be ready. Somebody may have done this just to get us away from the cabin. Anyway, I’ve a good idea who is responsible.”

Riding swiftly, Fox led him to the tracks. Kim Sartain had followed after the herd. The trail skirted a deep canyon, following an intermittent stream into the bed of the Apache, and then crossed the creek into the rough country beyond.

Suddenly McQueen drew up, listening. Ahead of them they heard cattle lowing. Kim came down from the rocks.

“Right up ahead. Four of the wildest, roughest-lookin’ hands I’ve seen in years.”

“Let’s go,” McQueen said. Touching spurs to his horse as he plunged through the brush and hit the flat land at a dead run with the other two riders spreading wide behind him. The movements of the cattle killed the sound of their charge until they were almost up to the herd. Then one of the rustlers turned and slapped a hand for his six-shooter. McQueen’s gun leaped to his hand and he chopped it down, firing as it came level. The rush of his horse was too fast for accurate shooting and his bullet clipped the outlaw’s horse across the back of the neck. It dropped in its tracks, spilling its rider. Ward charged into him, knocking him sprawling, almost under the hoofs of the buckskin.

Swinging wide McQueen saw that Sartain had downed his man, but the other two were converging on Bud Fox. Both swung away when they saw Kim and McQueen closing in. One of them swung a gun on Kim and Kim’s gun roared. The man toppled from the saddle and the last man quickly lifted his hands.

He was a thin, hard-featured man with narrow, cruel eyes. His hair was uncut, his jaws unshaved. His clothing was ragged. There was nothing wrong with his gun, it was new and well kept.

Now his face, despite its hardness, wore a look of shock. His eyes went from McQueen to Sartain to Fox. “You boys shoot mighty straight but you’ll wish you never seen the day!”

Fox took his rope from the saddle tree. “He’s a rustler, Ward, caught in the act, an’ there’s plenty of good trees.”

“Now, look!” The man protested, suddenly frightened.

“What gave you the idea you could run off our stock?” Ward asked.

“Nothin’. The stock was in good shape.” He looked suddenly at McQueen, who still wore the marks of battle. “You’re the gent who whipped Flagg! He’ll kill you for that, if not for this. You won’t live a week.”

“Bud, tie this man to his saddle an’ tie him tight. We’ll take him into town for the law to handle. Then we’ll visit Bear Canyon.”

“You’ll do *what?*” their prisoner sneered. “Why, you fool! Flagg will kill you! The whole bunch will!”

“No,” Ward assured him, “they will not. If they’d left my stock alone they could have stayed. Now they will get out or be burned out. That’s the message I’m taking to them.”

“Wait a minute.” The man’s eyes were restless. Suddenly his arrogance was gone and he was almost pleading. “Lay off Bear Canyon! This was none o’ their doin’, anyway.”

“You’re talking,” Ward said, and waited.

“Neal Webb put us up to it. Promised us fifteen bucks a head for every bit of your stock we threw into the Sand Flats beyond Apache.”

“Will you say that to a judge?”

His face paled. “If you’ll protect me. That Webb outfit, they kill too easy to suit me.”

When they rode down the street of Pelona to the sheriff’s office the town sprawled lazy in the sunshine. By the time they reached the sheriff’s office nearly fifty men had crowded around. Foster met them at the door, his shrewd old eyes going from McQueen to the rustler.

“Well, Chalk Warneke,” he spat, “looks like you run into the wrong crowd.” His eyes shifted to McQueen. “What’s he done?”

“Rustled a herd of Firebox stock. He related to Flagg?”

The sheriff nodded. “Brother. Was it him alone?”

“There were four of them. The other three were in no shape to bring back. They won’t be talkin’. This one will.”

A man at the edge of the crowd turned swiftly and hurried away. McQueen’s eyes followed him. He went up the walk to the Emporium. A moment later Ren Oliver emerged and started toward them.

“Who were the others, Chalk? Were they from Bear Canyon?”

“Only me.” Chalk’s eyes were haunted. “Let’s get inside!”

“Hang him!” somebody yelled. “Hang the rustler!”

The voice was loud. Another took it up, then still another. McQueen turned to see who was shouting. Somebody else shouted, “Why waste time? *Shoot him!*”

The shot came simultaneously with the words, and Ward McQueen saw the prisoner fall, a hole between his eyes.

“Who did that?” Ward’s contempt and anger were obvious. “Anybody who would shoot an unarmed man with his hands tied is too low-down to live.”

The crowd stirred but nobody even looked around. Those who might know were too frightened to speak. On the edge of the crowd Ren Oliver stood with several others who had drawn together. “I didn’t see anybody fire, McQueen, but wasn’t the man a rustler? Hasn’t the state been saved a trial?”

“He was also a witness who was ready to testify that Neal Webb put him up to the rustlin’ and was payin’ for the cattle!”

Startled, people in the crowd began to back away, and from the fringes of the crowd they began to disappear into stores or up and down the street. There seemed to be no Webb riders present, but Kim Sartain, sitting his horse back from the crowd, a hand on his gun butt, was watching. He had come up too late to see the shooting.

“Webb won’t like that, McQueen,” Ren Oliver said. “I speak only from friendship.”

“Webb knows where to find me. And tell him this time it won’t be a kid he’s killing!”

Sheriff Foster chewed on the stub of his cigar. His blue eyes had been watchful. “That’s some charge you’ve made, McQueen. Can you back it up?”

Ward indicated the dead man. “There’s my witness. He told me Webb put him up to it, and that Bear Canyon wasn’t involved. As for the rest of it—”

He repeated the story of the tracks he had followed, of the men holed up in the Box.

“You think they went on to Dry Leggett?” Foster asked.

“That was what I heard them say, but they might have changed their minds. Bemis was among the wounded and he was worried. He had a bad wound and wanted care.” Then he added, “Bine did most of the talking.”

Ward McQueen tied his horse in front of Sharon Clarity’s store, where there was shade. With Sartain at his side he crossed to the Bat Cave.

The saloon was a long, rather narrow room with a potbellied stove at either end and a bar that extended two-thirds the room’s length. There were a roulette table and several card tables.

A hard-eyed, baldheaded bartender leaned thick forearms on the bar, and three men loafed there, each with a drink. At the tables several men played cards. They glanced up as the Tumbling K men entered, then resumed their game.

McQueen ordered two beers and glanced at Ren Oliver, who sat in one of the card games. Had Oliver been only a bystander? Or had he fired the shot that killed Chalk?

Oliver glanced up and smiled. “Care to join our game?”

McQueen shook his head. He would have enjoyed playing cards with Oliver, for there are few better ways to study a man than to play cards with him. Yet he was in no mood for cards, and he hadn’t the time. He had started something with his comments about Webb. Now he had to prove his case.

He finished his beer and then, followed by Sartain, he returned to the street. Ren Oliver watched them go, then cashed in and left the game. When he entered the Emporium, Hutch glared at him.

“Get rid of him!” Hutch said. “Get rid of him now!”

Oliver nodded. “Got any ideas?”

Hutch’s eyes were mean. “You’d botch the job. Leave it to me!”

“You?” Oliver was incredulous.

Hutch looked at him over his steel-rimmed glasses. Ren Oliver, who had known many hard men, remembered only one such pair of eyes. They were the eyes of a

big swamp rattler he had killed as a boy. He remembered how those eyes had stared into his. He felt a chill.

"To me," Hutch repeated.

It was dark when Ward McQueen, trailed by Kim and Bud Fox, reached the scattered, makeshift cabins in Bear Canyon. It was a small settlement, and he had heard much about it in the short time he had been around. The few women were hard-eyed slatterns as tough as their men. Rumor had it they lived by rustling and horse thieving or worse.

"Bud," McQueen said, "stay with the horses. When we leave we may have to leave fast. Be ready, and when you hear me yell, come arunnin'!"

Followed by Kim he walked toward the long bunkhouse that housed most of the men. Peering through a window he saw but two men, one playing solitaire, the other mending a belt. The room was lighted by lanterns. Nearby was another house, and peering in they saw a short bar and a half dozen men sitting around. One of them was Flagg Warneke.

Ward McQueen stepped to the door and opened it. He stepped in, Kim following, moving quickly left against the log wall.

Flagg saw them first. He was tipped back in his chair and he let the legs down carefully, poised for trouble.

"What d' you want?" he demanded. "What're you doin' here?"

All eyes were on them. Two men, four guns, against six men and eight guns. There were others around town.

"This mornin' Chalk and some other riders ran off some of our cows. We had trouble and three men got killed. I told Chalk if he told me who was involved I'd not ride down here. He didn't much want me to come to Bear Canyon, and to tell you the truth, I hadn't been plannin' on coming down here.

"Chalk started to talk, and somebody killed him."

"Killed him? Killed Chalk? Who did it?"

"You make your own guess. Who was afraid of what he might say? Who stood to lose if he did talk?"

They absorbed this in silence and then a fat-faced man at the end of the table spoke. "Those fellers with Chalk? You say you killed them?"

"They chose to fight."

"How many did you lose?"

"We lost nobody. There were three of us, four of them. They just didn't make out so good."

"What're you here for?" Flagg demanded.

"Two things. To see if you have any idea about who killed Chalk and to give you some advice. *Stay away from Firebox cattle!*"

Silence hung heavy in the room. Flagg's face was still swollen from the beating he had taken and the cuts had only begun to heal. His eyes were hard as he stared at McQueen.

"We'll figure out our own answers to the first question. As to the second, we've no use for Firebox cows. As for you and that feller with you—*get out!*"

McQueen made no move. "Remember, friend, Bear Canyon is on Firebox range. What you may not know is that Firebox *owns* that land, every inch of it. You stay if the Firebox lets you, and right now the Firebox is me! Behave yourselves and

you'll not be bothered, but next time there will be no warning. We'll come with guns and fire!"

He reached for the latch with his left hand, and as the door opened, Flagg said, "I put my mark on you, anyway!"

McQueen laughed. "And you're wearing some of mine. Regardless of how things work out, Flagg, it was a good fight and you're a tough man to whip!"

He opened the door and Kim Sartain stepped out and quickly away. He followed.

Yet they had taken no more than three steps when the door burst open and the fat-faced man lunged out, holding a shotgun in both hands. He threw the shotgun to his shoulder. As one man, Ward and Kim drew and fired. The fat-faced man's shotgun sagged in his hands and he backed up slowly and sat down.

Men rushed from the bunkhouse and Kim shot a man with a buffalo gun. Ward shot through the open door at the hanging lantern. It fell, spewing oil and flame. In an instant the room was afire.

Men and women rushed from the other buildings and the two backed to their horses, where Bud awaited them on the rim of the firelight.

Several men grabbed a heavy wagon by the tongue and wheeled it away from the fire. Others got behind to shove. Of Flagg, McQueen saw nothing.

As the three rode away, they glanced back at the mounting flames. The saloon was on fire, as well as the bunkhouse. "Think this will move them out?" Kim asked.

"I've no idea. I'm no hand for this sort of thing. Not burning folks out. They'd no right there, and that's deeded land, as I told him. They may have believed it to be government land. If they'd acted half decent I'd have paid them no mind."

"There's no good in that crowd," Kim said.

"Maybe not, but Flagg fought a good fight. He had me worried there, for a spell."

"He didn't get into this fight."

"No, and I think he'd have acted all right. I think he has judgment, which I can't say for that fat-faced gent. He just went hog-wild."

Baldy Jackson was pacing the yard and muttering when they rode in. "Durn it all! You fellers ride away with your shootin' irons on. Then we hear nothin' of you! Where've you been?"

"What do you mean 'we'?" Kim said. "Since when have you become more than one?"

"He was including me, I think." Sharon Clarity got up from the chair where she had been sitting, "But I've only been here a few minutes. I came to warn you."

"To warn us?"

"To warn you, Mr. McQueen. Sheriff Foster is coming for you. He will arrest you for killing Neal Webb."

"For *what?*" Ward swung down from his horse and trailed the reins. "What happened to Webb?"

"He was found dead on the trail not fifteen minutes after you left town. He had been shot in the back."

Neal Webb killed! Ward McQueen sat down in one of the porch chairs. By whom, and for what?

Ward McQueen knew what western men thought of a back shooter. That was a hanging offense before any jury one could get, but more often a lynch mob would handle such cases before the law got around to it.

Kim Sartain had been with him, but he would be considered a prejudiced witness.

"Pour me some coffee, Baldy," he suggested. He glanced over at Sharon Clarity. "And thanks." He hesitated. "I hope your riding to warn me won't make enemies for you."

"Nobody knew," she replied cheerfully. "Anyway, I think you and the Tumbling K are good for this country. Things were getting kind of one-sided around here."

"Neal Webb killed?" Ward mused. "I wonder what that means? I'd sort of thought he was behind all the trouble, but this makes me wonder."

"It does, doesn't it?" Sharon said. "Almost as if he was killed purely to implicate you."

He glanced at her. "That's a shrewd observation. Any idea who would want to do a thing like that? After all, my trouble was with Webb."

She did not reply. She got to her feet. "My father used to box," she said. "Back in the old country he was considered quite good. They had a rule in boxing. I've heard him quote it. It was 'protect yourself at all times.'

"I am going back to town, but I think you should be very, very careful. And you'd better go. Foster will have about thirty riders in that posse. You'd better start moving."

"I've done nothing. I shall wait for them to come."

She went to her horse. "When you get thirty men together," Sharon said, "you get all kinds. You have to consider their motives, Mr. McQueen."

"Kim, ride along with Miss Clarity, will you? See that she gets safely home."

"Yes, *sir!*" Kim had been tired. Suddenly he was no longer so. "But what about that posse?"

"There'll be no trouble. Take good care of Miss Clarity. She is a very bright young woman."

In Pelona, Oliver went to the Bat Cave and seated himself at the card table. The saloon was empty save for himself and the bartender, a man with whom he was not particularly friendly, but the cards were there and he gathered them up and began to shuffle. He always thought better with cards in his hands. He carefully laid out a game of solitaire, but his mind was not on the cards.

He was both puzzled and worried. For some years now he had considered himself both an astute and a wise young man. He made his living with his adept fingers and his skill at outguessing men with cards. He knew all the methods of cheating and was a skilled card mechanic, but he rarely used such methods. He had a great memory for cards and the odds against filling any hand. He won consistently without resorting to questionable methods. He rarely won big. The show-off sort of thing that attracted attention he did not want. He played every day, and when he lost it was only small amounts. The sums he won were slightly larger. Sometimes he merely broke even, but over the months he was a clear and distinct winner. At a time when a cowhand was pulling down thirty to forty dollars a month, and a clerk in a store might work for as little as half that, Ren Oliver

could pull down two hundred to two hundred and fifty dollars without attracting undue attention. When a professional gambler starts winning big pots he becomes suspect.

Even Hutch did not realize how well he was doing, and Hutch was providing him with a small income for rendering various services not to be discussed. Over the past year Ren Oliver had built up a nice road stake, something to take with him when he left, for he was well aware that few things last, and many difficulties could be avoided by forming no lasting attachments and keeping a fast horse.

Now Ren Oliver was disturbed. Neal Webb had been killed. By whom was a question, but an even larger question was why.

It disturbed him that he did not know. The obvious answer was that he had been killed by Ward McQueen, but Oliver did not buy that, not for a minute. McQueen might kill Webb in a gun battle but he would not shoot him in the back.

Moreover, there had been no confrontation between them. The other answer was that Neal had outlived his usefulness and was killed to implicate McQueen.

But who had actually killed him?

It disturbed Oliver that he did not know. Obviously, Hutch was behind it. Had he done the killing? One by one he considered the various men available and could place none of them in the right position. This worried him for another reason. He had considered himself close to Hutch, yet he now realized that, like Webb when he ceased to be useful, he might be killed. He was merely a pawn in another man's game.

For a man of Oliver's disposition and inclinations it was not a pleasant thought. He did not mind others believing he was a pawn, but he wished to be in control so he could use those who believed they were using him. Now he had the uncomfortable sensation that too much was happening of which he was not aware and that any moment he might be sacrificed.

He had no illusions about himself. He was without scruples. It was his attitude that human life was cheap, and like most men engaged in crime he regarded people as sheep to be sheared. He was cold and callous and had always been so.

Outwardly he was friendly and ingratiating. He went out of his way to do favors for people even while holding them in contempt. You never knew when such people might appear on a jury. For the same reason he had allied himself with Hutch.

It was unsettling to realize there was someone more cunning than he himself. He knew Hutch was hunching over his community like a huge spider of insatiable appetite. Within that community he was considered to be something of a skinflint but nothing more. Men came and went from his store because, after all, it was the town's leading emporium, as its name implied. That all those people might not be buying was not considered. Oliver believed Hutch hired his killing done, but whom did he hire?

Bine, of course, but who else? When Oliver looked over his shoulder he wanted to know who he was looking for. The fact that there was an unsuspected actor in the play worried him.

He had the uncomfortable feeling that Neal Webb had been killed not only to implicate McQueen but to serve as a warning to him and perhaps to others. A warning that nobody was indispensable.

Oliver shuffled the cards again, ran up a couple of hands with swiftness and skill, then dealt them, taking several off the bottom with smoothness and ease, yet his mind was roving and alert.

Would Hutch manage it? He had never yet, so far as Oliver knew, encountered such a man as McQueen. Not that Oliver had any great opinion of McQueen. He was typically a cowman, honest, tough, and hardworking. That he was good with a gun was obvious, and that *segundo* of his, Kim Sartain, was probably almost as good.

Did McQueen have brains? How would he fare against Hutch, particularly when, as Oliver believed, McQueen did not know who his enemy was?

Hutch had planted the Webb killing squarely on McQueen. The timing had been good and there would be witnesses, Oliver was sure. Trust the old man for that.

He watched Sheriff Foster leave town with his posse and knew that several of the men in that posse were owned by Hutch. If the slightest excuse was offered they were to shoot to kill. He knew their instructions as if he had heard them himself.

The door opened and a squat, powerful man entered, his hair shaggy and untrimmed. His square, granitelike face was clean shaved. He had gimlet eyes that flickered with a steely glint. He wore two guns, one in a holster, the other thrust into his waistband. This was Overlin, the Montana gunman.

“Where’s Foster goin’?”

“After McQueen, for the Webb killing.”

“Webb? Is he dead?”

Oliver nodded. “Out on the trail.” Overlin could have done it. So could Hansen Bine, but so far as anyone knew Bine was with the wounded men at Dry Leggett. “There’s a witness to swear he did it.”

“He might have,” Overlin commented, “only I don’t believe it. I’ve heard of McQueen. Made quite a reputation along the cattle trails and in the mining camps. He’s no bargam.”

“He’s only one man. Maybe he’ll be your dish one day.”

“Or yours,” Overlin agreed. “Only I’d like him, myself.”

Ren Oliver remembered McQueen and said, “You can have him.” He could not understand such men as Overlin. The man was good with a gun, but why would he go out of his way to match skills with a man he believed might be just as good? Overlin had to be the best. He had to know he was best, had to have others know he was the best.

Oliver believed he was faster with a gun than either Bine or Overlin but he was a sure-thing man. He had pride in his skill but preferred to take no chances. He would enjoy killing Ward McQueen if he could do so at no risk to himself.

A horse loped into the street, the rider waving at someone out of sight. It was Sharon Clarity. Now where had *she* been?

“See you around,” he said to Overlin, and went into the night.

He dug a cigar from his pocket and lighted it. Sharon Clarity’s horse had been hard ridden.

Ward McQueen was working beside Baldy Jackson, building a pole corral, when the sheriff and the posse rode into the ranch yard. McQueen continued to

place a pole in position and lash it there with rawhide. Then he glanced around at the posse.

“Howdy, Foster. Looks like you’re here on business.”

“I’ve come for you, McQueen. There’s witnesses says you shot Neal Webb, shot him in the back.”

McQueen kept his hands in sight, moving carefully so as not to give any false impressions. His eyes caught the slight lift to the muzzle of a Winchester and he eyed the man behind it, staring at him until the man’s eyes shifted and he swallowed.

“All you had to do was send for me, Sheriff. I’d have come right in. No need for all this crowd.” He paused. “And you know, Sheriff, I’d never shoot any man in the back. What would be the point? Webb was never supposed to be good with a gun, and if I wanted him killed that bad all I’d have to do would be to pick a fight with him in town. Webb’s temper had a short fuse, and killin’ him would have been no trick.”

“That may be so, but you’ve got to come in with me and answer charges. There will have to be a trial.”

“We’ll see. Maybe I can prove I was elsewhere.”

“By one of your own men?” The man who spoke had a sallow face and buck teeth. “We’d not be likely to believe *them!*”

“By others, then? Kim Sartain was with me, however, and if you believe he’s a liar why don’t you tell him so?”

“We want no trouble, McQueen. Saddle a horse and come along.” Foster’s eyes went to the cabin. Was there somebody inside the window?

“I’ll come on one condition. That I keep my guns. If I can’t keep ’em you’ll have to take me and you’ll have some empty saddles on your way back to town.”

Foster was angry. “Don’t give me any trouble, McQueen! I said, saddle your horse!”

“Sheriff, I’ve no quarrel with you. You’re just doing your duty and I want to cooperate, but you’ve some men riding with you who would like to make a target of my back. Let me keep my guns and I’ll go quiet. In case you’d like to know, there are two men behind you with Winchesters. They will be riding along behind us.”

Sheriff Foster studied McQueen. Inwardly, he was pleased. This McQueen was a hard case but a good man. Shoot a man in the back? It was preposterous! Especially Neal Webb.

“All right,” he said, “saddle up.”

“My horse is ready, Foster. A little bird told me you were coming, and my horse has been ready.”

It was a black he was riding this day, a good mountain horse with bottom and speed. As he mounted and settled into the saddle he glanced at the man who had lifted his rifle.

“Just so everybody will understand. Two of my boys are going to follow us into town. Either one of them could empty a Winchester into the palm of your hand at three hundred yards.”

He sat solidly and well in the saddle, his black Frisco jeans tight over his thighs, his broad chest and shoulders filling the dark gray shirt. His gun belts were

studded with silver, the walnut grips worn from use. "All right, Sheriff, let's go to town!"

He rode alongside of Foster, but his thoughts were riding ahead, trying to foresee what would happen in town, and asking himself the question again: Why kill Neal Webb? Who wanted him dead?

He had believed Webb the ringleader, the cause of his troubles. Most ranchers wanted more range, most of them wanted water, so the attempt to seize the Firebox came as no surprise. In fact, he would have been surprised had it not been claimed. Good grass was precious, and whenever anybody moved or died there was always someone ready to move in. The difference here was that McCracken had been a shrewd man and he had purchased the land around the various water holes, as well as the trails into and out of the range he used. The claim on Firebox range by McCracken was well established.

Webb, he was beginning to suspect, had been a mere pawn in the game, and had been disposed of when his usefulness ceased to be. But Webb's dying had implicated Ward McQueen and apparently somebody had decided to have him killed, either in capturing him or in the ride to town. A posse member could shoot him, claiming McQueen had made a move to escape.

Behind this there had to be a shrewd and careful brain. If there were witnesses to something that had not happened, his supposed murder of Neal Webb, then somebody had provided them.

Who? Why?

The Firebox was valuable range. The only other large ranch was Webb's Running W, and who was Webb's heir? Or did he himself own that ranch?

The Bear Canyon crowd? It wasn't their sort of thing. They might dry-gulch him, steal his horses or cattle, or even burn him out, but the Webb killing was more involved. Anyway, Webb had left the Bear Canyon crowd alone.

Would Sharon Clarity know? She was a handsome, self-reliant girl, yet something about her disturbed him. Why had she ridden out to warn him the sheriff was coming? Had she believed he would run?

Who now owned the Running W? This he must discover. If that unknown owner also owned the Firebox he would control all the range around Pelona and the town as well. It made a neat, compact package and a base from which one might move in any direction.

Ruth Kermitt owned the Firebox now, and Ruth had no heirs. Ward McQueen was suddenly glad his boss was not among those present.

Pelona's main street was crowded with rigs and saddle horses when they rode in. Word had spread swiftly, and the people of the range country—the few scattered small ranchers, farmers, and gardeners—had come in, eager for any kind of a show. All had known Neal Webb, at least by sight. Many had not liked him, but he was one of their own. This Ward McQueen was a stranger and, some said, a killer. The general attitude was that he was a bad man.

A few, as always, had misgivings. Their doubts increased when they saw him ride into town sitting his horse beside the sheriff. He was not in irons. He still wore his guns. Evidently Foster trusted him. Western people, accustomed to sizing up a man by his looks, decided he didn't look like somebody who needed to dry-gulch anybody. It was more likely Webb would try to dry-gulch *him!*

Some of those who came to see drifted up between the buildings into the street. Among these was Bud Fox, with his narrow-brimmed gray hat and his long, lean body, looking like an overgrown schoolboy. The pistol on his belt was man-sized, however, and so was the Winchester he carried.

Kim Sartain, young, handsome, and full of deviltry, they recognized at once. They had seen his sort before. There was something about him that always drew a smile, not of amusement but of liking. They knew the guns on his belt were not there for show, but the West had many a young man like him, good cowhands, great riders, always filled with humor. They knew his type. The guns added another dimension, but they understood those, too.

The pattern was quickly made plain. The preliminary hearing was already set and the court was waiting. McQueen glanced at the sheriff. "Looks like a railroading, Foster. Are you in this?"

"No, but I've nothing against the law movin' fast. It usually does around here."

"When who is to get the brunt of it? *Who's* the boss around town, Foster? Especially when they move so fast I have no time to find witnesses."

"You know as much as I do!" Foster was testy. "Move ahead!"

"If I'd been around as long as you have, I'd know plenty!"

The judge was a sour-faced old man whom McQueen had seen about town. Legal procedures on the frontier were inclined to be haphazard, although often they moved not only swiftly but efficiently as well. The old Spanish courts had often functioned very well indeed, but the Anglos were inclined to follow their own procedures. McQueen was surprised to find that the prosecuting attorney, or the man acting as such, was Ren Oliver, said to have practiced law back in Missouri.

Sartain sat down beside McQueen. "They've got you cornered, Ward. Want me to take us out of here?"

"It's a kangaroo court, but let's see what happens. I don't want to appeal to Judge Colt unless we have to."

The first witness was a cowhand Ward had seen riding with Webb's men. He swore he had dropped behind Webb to shoot a wild turkey. He lost the turkey in the brush and was riding to catch up when he heard a shot and saw McQueen duck into the brush. He declared McQueen had fired from behind Webb.

McQueen asked, "You sure it was me?"

"I was sworn in, wasn't I?"

"What time was it?"

"About five o'clock of the evenin'."

"Webb comes from over east of town when he comes to Pelona, doesn't he? From the Runnin' W? And you say you saw me between you an' Webb?"

"I sure did!" The cowboy was emphatic, but he glanced at Oliver, uncertainly.

"Then," McQueen was smiling, "you were lookin' right into the settin' sun when you saw somebody take a shot at Webb? And you were able to recognize me?" As the crowd in the courtroom stirred, McQueen turned to the judge. "Your Honor, I doubt if this man could recognize his own sister under those circumstances. I think he should be given a chance to do it this evenin'. It's nice an' clear like it was the other night and the sun will be settin' before long. I think his evidence should be accepted if he can distinguish four out of five men he knows under the conditions he's talkin' about."

The judge hesitated and Oliver objected.

"Seems fair enough!" A voice spoke from the crowd, and there was a murmured assent.

The judge rapped for silence. "Motion denied! Proceed!"

Behind him McQueen was aware of changing sentiment. Western courtrooms, with some exceptions, were notoriously lax in their procedure, and there were those who had an interest in keeping them so. Crowds, however, were partisan and resentful of authority. The frontier bred freedom, but with it a strong sense of fair play and an impatience with formalities. Most western men wanted to get the matter settled and get back to their work. Most of the men and women present had ridden over that road at that time of the evening, and they saw immediately the point of his argument.

There was a stir behind them, and turning they saw Flagg Werneke shoving his way through the crowd and then down the aisle.

"Judge, I'm a witness! I want to be sworn in!"

The judge's eyes flickered to Oliver, who nodded quickly. Warneke still bore the marks of McQueen's fists, and his evidence could only be damning.

Warneke was sworn in and took the stand. Kim muttered irritably but Ward waited, watching the big man.

"You have evidence to offer?" the judge asked.

"You bet I have!" Warneke stated violently. "I don't know who killed Neal Webb but I know Ward McQueen didn't do it!"

Ren Oliver's face tightened with anger. He glanced swiftly toward a far corner of the room, a glance that held appeal and something more. McQueen caught the glance and sat a little straighter. The room behind him was seething, and the judge was rapping for order.

"What do you mean by that statement?" Oliver demanded. He advanced threateningly toward Warneke. "Be careful what you say, and remember, *you are under oath!*"

"I remember. McQueen whipped me that evenin', like you all know. He whipped me good but he whipped me fair. Nobody else ever done it or could do it. I was mad as a steer with a busted horn. I figured, all right, he whipped me with his hands but I'd be durned if he could do it with a six-shooter, so I follered him, watchin' my chance. I was goin' to face him, right there in the trail, an' kill him.

"Bout the head of Squirrel Springs Canyon I was closin' in on him when a turkey flew up. That there McQueen, he slaps leather and downs that turkey with one shot! You heah me? One shot on the wing, an' he drawed so fast I never seen his hand move!"

Flagg Warneke wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. "My ma, she never raised any foolish children! Anybody who could draw that fast and shoot that straight was too good for anybody around here, and I wanted no part of him!

"Important thing is, McQueen was never out of my sight from the time he left town headin' west an' away from where Webb was killed until he reached Squirrel Springs Canyon, and that's a rough fifteen miles, the way he rode! It was right at dusk when he shot that turkey, so he never even seen Webb, let alone killed him."

Ren Oliver swore under his breath. The crowd was shifting, many were getting up to leave. He glanced again toward the corner of the room and waited while the judge pounded for order.

Oliver attacked Warneke's testimony but could not shake the man. Finally, angered, he demanded, "Did McQueen pay you to tell this story?"

Warneke's face turned ugly. "Pay me? Nobody lives who could pay me for my oath! I've rustled a few head of stock, and so has every man of you in this courtroom if the truth be known! I'd shoot a man if he crossed me, but by the Eternal my oath ain't for sale to no man!

"I got no use for McQueen! He burned us out over in Bear Canyon, he shot friends of mine, but he shot 'em face to face when they were shootin' at him! The man I'd like to find is the one who killed Chalk! Shot him off his horse to keep him from tellin' that Webb put them up to rustlin' Firebox stock!"

Ward McQueen got to his feet. "Judge, I'd like this case to be dismissed. You've no case against me."

The judge looked at Ren Oliver, who shrugged and turned away.

"Dismissed!"

The judge arose from his bench and stepped down off the platform. Ward McQueen turned swiftly and looked toward the corner of the room where Oliver's eyes had been constantly turning. The chair was empty!

People were crowding toward the door. McQueen's eyes searched their faces. Only one turned to look back. It was Silas Hutch.

McQueen pushed his way through the crowd to Flagg Warneke. The big man saw him coming and faced him, eyes hard.

"Warneke," McQueen said, "I'd be proud to shake the hand of an honest man!"

The giant's brow puckered and he hesitated, his eyes searching McQueen's features for some hint of a smirk or a smile. There was none. Slowly the big man put his hand out and they shook.

"What are your plans? I could use a hand on the Firebox."

"I'm a rustler, McQueen. You've heard me admit it. You'd still hire me?"

"You had every reason to lie a few minutes ago, and I think a man who values his word that much would ride for the brand if he took a job. You just tell me you'll play it straight and rustle no more cattle while you're workin' for me and you've got a job."

"You've hired a man, McQueen. And you have my word."

As the big man walked away Sartain asked, "You think he'll stand hitched?"

"He will. Warneke has one thing on which he prides himself. One thing out of his whole shabby, busted-up life that means anything, and that's his word. He'll stick, and we can trust him."

Tough as Ward McQueen felt himself to be, when he rode back to the ranch, he was sagging in the saddle. For days he had little sleep and had been eating only occasionally. Now, suddenly, it was hitting him. He was tired, and he was half asleep in the saddle when they rode into the yard at the Tumbling K's Firebox.

Lights in the cabin were ablaze and a buckboard stood near the barn. Stepping down from the saddle he handed the reins to Kim. No words were necessary.

He stepped up on the low porch and opened the door.

Ruth Kermitt stood with her back to the fireplace, where a small fire blazed. Even at this time of the year, at that altitude a fire was needed.

She was tall, with a beautifully slim but rounded body that clothes could only accentuate. Her eyes were large and dark, her hair almost black. She was completely lovely.

“Ward!” She came to him quickly. “You’re back!”

“And you’re here!” He was pleased but worried also. “You drove all the way from the ranch?”

“McGowan drove. Shorty rode along, too. He said it was to protect me, but I think he had an idea you were in trouble. Naturally, if that were the case Shorty would have to be here.”

“Ruth,” he told her, “I’m glad to have you here. Glad for me, but I don’t think you should have come. There is trouble, and I’m not sure what we’ve gotten into.”

He explained, adding, “You know as well as I do that where there’s good grass there will always be somebody who wants it, and what some of them haven’t grasped is that we are not moving in on range. We *own* the water holes and the sources of water.”

He put his hands on her shoulders. “All that can wait.” He drew her to him. His lips stopped hers and he felt her body strain toward him and her lips melt softly against his. He held her there, his lips finding their way to her cheek, her ears, and her throat. After a few minutes she drew back, breathless.

“Ward! Wait!”

He stepped back and she looked up at him. “Ward? Tell me. Has there been trouble? Baldy said you were in court, that you might have to go on trial.”

“That part is settled, but there’s more to come, I’m afraid.”

“Who is it, Ward? What’s been happening?”

“That’s just the trouble.” He was worried. “Ruth, I don’t know who it is, and there may be a joker in the deck that I’m not even aware of.”

She went to the stove for the coffeepot. “Sit down and tell me about it.”

“The ranch is a good one. Excellent grass, good water supply, and if we don’t try to graze too heavy we should have good grass for years. McCracken handled it well and he developed some springs, put in a few spreader dams to keep the runoff on the land, but he wanted to sell and I am beginning to understand why.”

“What about the trouble? Has it been shooting trouble?”

“It has, but it started before we got here.” He told her about the killing of McCracken, then his own brush with rustlers, and the fight with Flagg Warneke and the killing of Warneke’s brother before he could talk. And then the killing of Neal Webb.

“Then he wasn’t the one?”

“Ruth, I believe Webb had played out his usefulness to whoever is behind this, who deliberately had Webb killed, with the hope of implicating me. He’d have done it, too, but for Warneke.”

“He must be a strange man.”

“He’s a big man. You’ll see him. He’s also a violent man, but at heart he’s a decent fellow. Some men get off on the wrong foot simply because there doesn’t seem any other way to go.

"Without him, I think that Bear Canyon outfit will drift out and move away. I doubt if they will try to rebuild what was destroyed."

"Ward, we've been over this before. I hate all this violence! The fighting, the killing! It's awful! My own brother was killed. But you know all that. It was you who pulled us out of that."

"I don't like it, either, but it is growing less, Ruth, less with each year. The old days are almost gone. What we have here is somebody who is utterly ruthless, someone who has no respect for human life at all. You're inclined to find good in everybody, but in some people there just isn't any."

"Whoever is behind this, and I've a hunch who it is, is someone who is prepared to kill and kill until he has all he wants. He's undoubtedly been successful in the past, which makes it worse."

"No honest man would have such men as Hansen Bine and Overlin around. They did not ride for Webb—we know that now. They ride for whomever it was Webb was fronting for."

"I've got to ride down to Dry Leggett and roust out those wounded men, but you must be careful, Ruth—this man will stop at nothing."

"But I'm a woman!"

"I don't believe that would matter with this man. He's not like a western man."

"Be careful, Ward! I just couldn't stand it if anything happened to you."

As they talked, they had wandered out under the trees, and when they returned to the house only Baldy was awake.

"Wonder folks wouldn't eat their supper 'stead of standin' around in the dark! A body would think you two wasn't more'n sixteen!"

"Shut up, you old squaw man," Ward said cheerfully, "an' set up the grub! I'm hungry enough to eat even your food."

"Why, Ward!" Ruth protested. "How can you talk like that? You know there isn't a better cook west of the Brazos!"

Baldy perked up. "See? See there? The boss knows a good cook when she sees one! Why you an' these cowhands around here never knowed what good grub was until I came along! You et sowbelly an' half-baked beans so long you wouldn't recognize real vittles when you see 'em!"

A yell interrupted Ward's reply. "Oh, Ward? Ward McQueen!" Baldy Jackson turned impatiently and opened the door. "What the—!"

A bullet struck him as a gun bellowed in the night, and Baldy spun half around, dropping the coffeepot. Three more shots, fast as a man could lever a rifle, punctured the stillness. The light went out as Ward extinguished it with a quick puff and dropped to the floor, pulling Ruth down with him.

As suddenly as it had begun it ended. In the stillness that followed they heard a hoarse gasping from Baldy. Outside, all was dark and silent except for the pounding of hoofs receding in the distance.

As he turned to relight the lamp, there was another shot, this from down the trail where the rider had gone. Glancing out, Ward saw a flare of fire against the woods.

"Take care of Baldy!" he said, and went out fast.

He grabbed a horse from the corral, slipped on a halter, and went down the trail riding bareback. As he drew near the fire he heard pounding hoofs behind him and slowed up, lifting a hand.

Suddenly he saw a huge man standing in the center of the trail, both hands uplifted so there would be no mistakes.

“McQueen! It’s me! I got him!” the man shouted. It was Flagg Warneke.

McQueen swung down, as did Kim Sartain, who had ridden up behind him. A huge pile of grass, dry as tinder, lay in the center of the road, going up in flames. Nearby lay a rider. He was breathing, but there was blood on his shirtfront and blood on the ground.

Warneke said, “I was ridin’ to begin work tomorrow and I heard this hombre yell, heard the shot, so I threwed off my bronc, grabbed an armful of this hay McCracken had cut, and throwed it into the road. As this gent came ridin’ I dropped a match into the hay. He tried to shoot me, but this here ol’ Spencer is quick. He took a .56 right in the chest.”

It was the sallow-faced rider Ward had seen before, one of those who had ridden in the posse. “Want to talk?” he asked.

“Go to the devil! Wouldn’t if I could!”

“What’s that mean? Why couldn’t you talk?”

The man raised himself to one elbow, coughing. “Paid me from a holler tree,” he said. “I seen nobody. Webb, he told me where I’d get paid an’ how I’d—how I’d get word.”

The man coughed again and blood trickled over his unshaved chin.

“Maybe it was a woman,” he spoke clearly, suddenly. Then his supporting arm seemed to go slack and he fell back, his head striking the ground with a thump. The man was dead.

“A woman?” Ward muttered. “Impossible!”

Warneke shook his head. “Maybe—I ain’t so sure. Could be anybody.”

When the sun was high over the meadows, Ward McQueen was riding beside Ruth Kermitt near a cienaga, following a creek toward Spur Lake. They had left the ranch after daybreak and had skirted some of the finest grazing land in that part of the country. Some areas that to the uninitiated might have seemed too dry she knew would support and fatten cattle. Much seemingly dry brush was good fodder.

“By the way,” Ruth inquired, “have you ever heard of a young man, a very handsome young man named Strahan?”

“When I was in Holbrook there was a Pinkerton man there who was inquiring about this man. He is badly wanted, quite a large reward offered. He held up a Santa Fe train, killing a messenger and a passenger. That was about four months ago. Before that he had been seen around this part of the country, as well as in Santa Fe. Apparently he wrecked another train, killing and injuring passengers. Each time he got away he seemed headed for this part of the country.”

“Never heard of him,” Ward admitted, “but we’re newcomers.”

“The Pinkerton man said he was a dead shot with either rifle or pistol, and dangerous. They trailed him to Alma once, and lost him again on the Gila, southeast of here.”

They rode on, Ward pointing out landmarks that bordered the ranch. "The Firebox has the best range around," he explained. "The Spur Lake country, all the valley of Centerfire, and over east past the Dry Lakes to Apache Creek.

"There's timber, with plenty of shade for the hot months, and most of our range has natural boundaries that prevent stock from straying."

"What about this trouble you're having, Ward? Will it be over soon or hanging over our heads for months?"

"It won't hang on. We're going to have a showdown. I'm taking some of the boys, and we're going to round up some of the troublemakers. I'm just sorry that Baldy is laid up. He knows this country better than any of us."

"You'll have trouble leaving him behind, Ward. That was only a flesh wound, even though he lost blood. It was more shock than anything else."

They turned their horses homeward. Ward looked at the wide, beautiful country beyond Centerfire as they topped the ridge. "All this is yours, Ruth. You're no wife for a cowhand now."

"Now don't start that! We've been over it before! Who made it all possible for me? If you had not come along when you did I'd have nothing! Just nothing at all! And if my brother had not been killed he could not have handled this! Not as you have! He was a fine boy, and no girl ever had a better brother, but he wasn't the cattleman you are.

"And it isn't only that, Ward. You've worked long and you've built my ranch into something worthwhile. At least twice you've protected me when I was about to do something foolish. By rights half of it should belong to you, anyway!"

"Maybe what I should do is leave and start a brand of my own. Then I could come back with something behind me."

"How long would that take, Ward?" She put her hand over his on the pommel. "Please, darling, don't even think about it! The thought of you leaving makes me turn cold all over! I have depended on you, Ward, and you've never failed me."

They rode on in silence. A wild turkey flew up and then vanished in the brush. Ahead of them two deer, feeding early, jumped off into the tall grass and disappeared along the stream.

"Don't you understand? I'm trying to see this your way. You've told me what has to be done and I'm leaving it up to you. I'm not going to interfere. I'm a woman, Ward, and I can't bear to think of you being hurt. Or any of the other boys, for that matter. I'm even more afraid of how all this killing will affect you. I couldn't stand it if you became hard and callous!"

"I know what you mean but there's no need to worry about that now. Once, long ago, maybe. Every time I ride into trouble I hate it, but a man must live and there are those who will ride roughshod over everybody, given a chance. Unfortunately force is the only way some people understand."

When they dismounted at the cabin, she said, "You're riding out tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"Then good luck!" She turned quickly and went into the house.

Ward stared after her, feeling suddenly alone and lost. Yet he knew there was no need for it. This was his woman, and they both understood that. She had come with a considerable investment, but with too little practical knowledge of range or

cattle. With his hands, his savvy, and his gun he had built most of what she now possessed.

Under his guidance she had bought cattle in Texas, fattened them on the trail north, sold enough in Kansas to pay back her investment, and driven the remainder further west. Now she controlled extensive range in several states. Alone she never could have done it.

Kim came down from the bunkhouse. "Tomorrow, Ward?"

"Bring plenty of ammunition, both rifle and pistol. I'll want you, Bud Fox, Shorty Jones, and—"

"Baldy? Boss, if you don't take him it'll kill him. Or you'll have to hog-tie him to his bunk, and I'm damned if I'd help you! That ol' catamount's a-rarin' to go, an' he's already scared you're plannin' to leave him behind."

"Think he can stand the ride?"

Kim snorted. "Why, that ol' devil will be sittin' a-saddle when you an' me are pushin' up daisies! He's tougher 'n rawhide an' whalebone."

Daylight came again as the sun chinned itself on the Continental Divide, peering over the heights of the Tularosas and across the Frisco River. In the bottom of the Box, still deep in shadow, rode a small cavalcade of horsemen. In the lead, his battered old hat tugged down to cover his bald spot from the sun, rode Baldy Jackson.

Behind him, with no talking, rode McQueen, Sartain, Fox, and Jones. They rode with awareness, knowing trouble might explode at any moment. Each man knew what he faced on this day, and once begun there'd be no stopping. It was war now, a war without flags or drums, a grim war to the death.

For some reason Ward found his thoughts returning time and again to Ruth's account of the Pinkerton who was trailing the handsome killer named Strahan. It was a name he could not remember having heard.

He questioned Baldy. "Strahan? Never heard of a youngster by that name, but there was some folks lived hereabouts some years back named that. A bloody mean outfit, too! Four brothers of them! One was a shorty, a slim, little man but mean as pizen. The others were big men. The oldest one got hisself shot by one o' them Lincoln County gun-fighters. Jesse Evans it was, or some friend of his.

"Two of the others, or maybe it was only one of them, got themselves hung by a posse somewhere in Colorado. If this here Strahan is one o' them, watch yourselves because he'd be a bad one."

Their route kept the ridge of the Friscos on their left, and when they stopped at Baldy's uplifted hand they were on the edge of a pine-covered basin in the hills.

Ward turned in his saddle and said, "This here's Heifer Basin. It's two miles straight ahead to Dry Leggett. I figure we should take a rest, check our guns, and get set for trouble. If Hansen Bine is down there, this will be war!"

Dismounting, they led their horses into the trees. Baldy located a spring he knew and they sat down beside it. McQueen checked his guns and then slid them back into their holsters. He rarely had to think of reloading, for it was something he did automatically whenever he used a gun.

"Mighty nice up here," Kim commented. "I always did like high country."

“That’s what I like about cowboyin’,” Shorty Jones commented. “It’s the country you do it in.”

“You ever rode in west Texas when the dust was blowin’?” Bud wanted to know.

“I have, an’ I liked it. I’ve rid nearly every kind of country you can call to mind.”

“Ssh!” Ward McQueen came to his feet in one easy movement. “On your toes! Here they come!”

Into the other end of the basin rode a small group of riders. There were six men, and the last one McQueen recognized as Hansen Bine himself.

Kim Sartain moved off to the right. Baldy rolled over behind a tree trunk and slid his Spencer forward. Jones and Fox scattered in the trees to the left of the spring.

McQueen stepped out into the open. “Bine! We’re takin’ you in! Drop your gun belts!”

Hansen Bine spurred his horse to the front and dropped from the saddle when no more than fifty paces away. “McQueen, is it? If you’re takin’ me you got to do it the hard way!”

He went for his gun.

McQueen had expected it, and the flat, hard bark of his pistol was a full beat before Bine’s. The bullet struck Bine as his gun was coming up, and he twisted sharply with the impact. Ward walked closer, his gun poised. Around him and behind him he heard the roar of guns, and as Bine fought to bring his gun level McQueen shot again.

Bine fell, dug his fingers into the turf, heaved himself trying to rise, and then fell and lay quiet.

Ward looked around to find only empty saddles and one man standing, his left hand high, his right in a sling.

“Your name?”

“Bemis.” The man’s face was pale with shock, but he was not afraid. “I did no shooting. Never was no good with my left hand.”

“All right, Bemis. You’ve been trailing with a pack of coyotes, but if you talk you can beat a rope. Who pays you?”

“Bine paid me. Where he got it, I don’t know.” His eyes sought McQueen’s. “You won’t believe me but I been wantin’ out of this ever since the McCracken shootin’. That was a game kid.”

“You helped kill him,” McQueen replied coldly. “Who else was in it? Who ran that show?”

“Somebody I’d not seen around before. Young, slight build, but a ring-tailed terror with a gun. He came in with Overlin. Sort of blondish. I never did see him close up. None of us did, ’cept Overlin.” Bemis paused again. “Said his name was Strahan.”

That name again! The Pinkerton man had been right. Such a man was in this country, hiding out or whatever. Could it be he who was behind this? That did not seem logical. Strahan by all accounts was a holdup man, gunfighter, whatever, not a cattleman or a cautious planner.

“You goin’ to hang me?” Bemis demanded. “If you are, get on with it. I don’t like waitin’ around.”

McQueen turned his eyes on Bemis, and the young cowhand stared back, boldly. He was a tough young man, but old in the hard ways of western life.

"You'll hang, all right. If not now, eventually. That's the road you've taken. But as far as I'm concerned that's up to the law. Get on your horse."

The others were mounted, and Bine was lying across a saddle. Kim looked apologetic. "He's the only one, boss. The rest of them lit out like who flung the chunk. I think we winged a couple here or there, but they left like their tails was a-fire."

Kim Sartain looked at Bemis. "Dead or gone, all but this one. Maybe on the way in—you know, boss, it's easier to pack a dead man than a live one."

Bemis looked from Sartain to McQueen and back. "Now, see here!" he said nervously. "I said I didn't know who did the payin', but I ain't blind. Bine an' Overlin, they used to see somebody, or meet somebody, in the Emporium. There or the Bat Cave. They used to go to both places."

"So do half the men in the county," McQueen said. "I've been in both places, myself." He paused. "How about Strahan?"

"Never seen him before—or since."

"Put him on a horse and tie him," McQueen said. "We'll give him to Foster."

Ward led the way toward Pelona. There trouble awaited, he knew, and secretly he hoped Foster would be out of town. He wanted no trouble with the old lawman. Foster was a good man in his own way, trying to steer a difficult course in a county where too many men were ready to shoot. Foster was a typical western sheriff, more successful in rounding up rustlers, horse thieves, and casual outlaws than in dealing with an enemy cunning as a prairie wolf and heartless as a lynx.

They rode swiftly down the S U Canyon to the Tularosa, and then across Polk Mesa to Squirrel Springs Canyon. It was hard riding, and the day was drawing to a close when they reached the plains and cut across toward Pelona. They had ridden far and fast, and both men and horses were done in when they walked their horses up the dusty street to the jail.

Foster came to the door to greet them, glancing from McQueen to Bemis.

"What's the matter with him?"

"He rode with the crowd that killed Jimmy McCracken. Jimmy gave him the bad arm. I've brought him in for trial."

"Who led 'em?" Foster demanded of Bemis.

Bemis hesitated, obviously worried. He glanced around to see who might overhear. "Strahan," he said then. "Bine was in it, too."

Foster's features seemed to age as they watched. For the first time he looked his years.

"Bring him in," Foster said. "Then I'll go after Bine."

"No need to." McQueen jerked his head. "His body's right back there. Look," he added, "we've started a clean up. We'll finish it."

"You're forgettin' something, McQueen! I'm the law. It's my job."

"Hold your horses, Sheriff. You are the law, but Bine is dead. The boys who were with him are on the run, except for Bemis, and we're turnin' him over to you. Anybody else who will come willin' we'll bring to you."

"You ain't the law," Foster replied.

“Then make us the law. Deputize us. You can’t do it alone, so let us help.”

“Makes me look like a quitter.”

“Nothing of the kind. Every lawman I know uses deputies, time to time, and I’m askin’ for the job.”

“All right,” Foster replied reluctantly. “You brought Bemis in when you could have hung him. I guess you aim to do right.”

Outside the sheriff’s office, Baldy waited for McQueen. “You name it,” he said, as McQueen emerged. “What’s next?”

“Fox, you, an’ Shorty get down to the Emporium. If Hutch comes out, one of you follow him. Let anybody go in who wants to, but watch him!”

He turned to Jackson. “Baldy, you get across the street. Just loaf around, but watch that other store.”

“Watch that female? What d’you take me for? You tryin’ to sidetrack me out of this scrap?”

“Get goin’ an’ do what you’re told. Kim, you come with me. We’re goin’ to the Bat Cave.”

Foster stared after them and then walked back into his office. Bemis stood inside the bars of his cell door. “I’m gettin’ old, Bemis,” Foster said. “Lettin’ another man do my job.”

He sat down in his swivel chair. He was scared—he admitted it to himself. Scared not of guns or violence but of what he might find. Slowly the fog had been clearing, and the things he had been avoiding could no longer be avoided. It was better to let McQueen handle it, much better.

“Leave it to McQueen.” Bemis clutched the bars. “Believe me, Sheriff, I never thought I’d be glad to be in jail, but I am. Before this day is over men will die.

“Foster, you should have seen McQueen when he killed Bine! I never would have believed anybody could beat Bine so bad! Bine slapped leather and died, just like that!”

“But there’s Overlin,” Foster said.

“Yeah, that will be somethin’ to see. McQueen an’ Overlin.” Suddenly Bemis exclaimed, “Foster! I forgot to tell them about Ren Oliver!”

“Oliver? Don’t tell me he’s involved?”

“Involved? He might be the ringleader! The boss man! And he packs a sneak gun! A stingy gun! Whilst you’re expecting him to move for the gun you can see, he kills you with the other one.”

Foster was on his feet. “Thanks, Bemis. We’ll remember that when you’re up for trial.”

As Foster went out of the door, Bemis said, “Maybe, but maybe it’s too late!”

The Bat Cave was alive and sinning. It was packed at this hour, and all the tables were busy. Behind one of them, seated where he could face the door, was Ren Oliver. His hair was neatly waved back from his brow, his handsome face composed as he dealt the tricky pasteboards with easy, casual skill. Only his eyes seemed alive, missing nothing. In the stable back of the house where he lived was a saddled horse. It was just a little bit of insurance.

At the bar, drinking heavily, was Overlin. Like a huge grizzly he hulked against the bar. The more he drank, the colder and deadlier he became. Someday that

might change, and he was aware of it. He thought he would know when that time came, but for the present he was a man to be left strictly alone when drinking. He had been known to go berserk. Left alone, he usually drank the evening away, speaking to no one, bothering no one until finally he went home to sleep it off.

Around him men might push and shove for places at the bar, but they avoided Overlin.

The smoke-laden atmosphere was thick, redolent of cheap perfume, alcohol, and sweaty, unwashed bodies. The night was chill, so the two stoves glowed red. Two bartenders, working swiftly, tried to keep up with the demands of the customers.

Tonight was different, and the bartenders had been the first to sense it. Overlin only occasionally came in, and they were always uncomfortable until he left. It was like serving an old grizzly with a sore tooth. But Overlin was only part of the trouble. The air was tense. They could feel trouble.

The burning of Bear Canyon, the slaying of Chalk Warneke, and the gun battle in Heifer Basin were being talked about, but only in low tones. From time to time, in spite of themselves, their eyes went to Overlin. They were not speculating if he would meet McQueen, but when.

Overlin called for another drink, and the big gunfighter ripped the bottle from the bartender's hand and put it down beside him. The bartender retreated hastily, while somebody started a tear-jerking ballad at the old piano.

The door opened and Ward McQueen stepped in, followed by Kim Sartain.

Kim, lithe as a young panther, moved swiftly to one side, his eyes sweeping the room, picking up Ren Oliver at once, and then Overlin.

Ward McQueen did not stop walking until he was at the bar six feet from Overlin. As the big gunman reached again for the bottle, McQueen knocked it from under his hand.

At the crash of the breaking bottle the room became soundless. Not even the entry of Sheriff Foster was noted, except by Sartain.

"Overlin, I'm acting as deputy sheriff. I want you out of town by noon tomorrow. Ride, keep riding, and don't come back."

"So you're McQueen? And you got Bine? Well, that must have surprised Hans. He always thought he was good. Even thought he was better'n me, but he wasn't. He never saw the day."

McQueen waited. He had not expected the man to leave. This would be a killing for one or the other, but he had to give the man a chance to make it official. Proving that he had had a hand in the murder of Jimmy McCracken would have been difficult at best.

Overlin was different from Bine. It would take a lot of lead to sink that big body.

"Where's Strahan?" McQueen demanded.

Ren Oliver started and then glanced hastily toward the door. His eyes met those of Kim Sartain, and he knew that to attempt to leave would mean a shootout, and he was not ready for that.

"Strahan, is it? Even if you get by me you'll never get past him. No need to tell you where he is. He'll find you when you least expect it."

Deliberately, Overlin turned his eyes away from McQueen, reaching for his glass with his left hand. "Whiskey! Gimme some whiskey!"

“Where is he, Overlin? Where’s Strahan?”

The men were ready, McQueen knew. Inside of him, Overlin was poised for the kill. McQueen wanted to startle him, to throw him off balance, to wreck his poise. He took a half step closer. “Tell me, you drunken lobo! *Tell me!*”

As he spoke he struck swiftly with his left hand and slapped Overlin across his mouth!

It was a powerful slap and it shocked Overlin. Not since he was a child had anybody dared to strike him, and it shook him as nothing else could have. He uttered a cry of choking rage and went for his gun.

Men dove for cover, falling over splintering chairs, fighting to get out of range or out the door.

McQueen had already stepped back quickly, drawn his gun, and then stepped off to the left as he fired, forcing Overlin to turn toward him. McQueen’s first bullet struck an instant before Overlin could fire, and the impact knocked Overlin against the bar, his shot going off into the floor as McQueen fired again.

Overlin faced around, his shirt bloody, one eye gone, and his gun blazed again. McQueen felt himself stagger, shaken as if by a blow, yet without any realization of where the blow had come from.

He fired again, and not aware of how many shots he had fired, he drew his left-hand gun and pulled a border shift, tossing the guns from hand to hand to have a fully loaded gun in his right.

Across the room behind him, another brief drama played itself out. Ren Oliver had been watching and thought he saw his chance. Under cover of the action, all attention centered on McQueen and Overlin, he would kill McQueen. His sleeve gun dropped into his hand and cut down on McQueen, but the instant the flash of blue steel appeared in his hand two guns centered on him and fired: Sartain was at the front door and Sheriff Foster on his left rear. Struck by a triangle of lead, Oliver lunged to his feet, one hand going to his stomach. In amazement, he stared at his bloody hand and his shattered body. Then he screamed.

In that scream was all the coward’s fear of the death he had brought to so many others. In shocked amazement he stared from Foster to Sartain, both holding guns ready for another shot if need be. Then his legs wilted and he fell, one hand clutching at the falling deck of cards, his blood staining them. He fell, and the table tipped, cascading chips and cards over him and into the sawdust around him.

At the bar, Overlin stood, indomitable spirit still blazing from his remaining eye. “You—! You—!”

As he started to fall, his big hand caught at the bar’s rounded edge and he stared at McQueen, trying to speak. Then the fingers gave way and he fell, striking the brass rail and rolling away.

Ward McQueen turned as if from a bad dream, seeing Kim at the door and Sheriff Foster, gun in hand, inside the rear door.

Running feet pounded the boardwalk, and the door slammed open. Guns lifted, expectantly.

It was Baldy Jackson, his face white, torn with emotion. “Ward! Heaven help me! I’ve killed a *woman!* I’ve killed Sharon Clarity!”

The scattered spectators were suddenly a mob. “*What?*” They started for him.

“Hold it!” McQueen’s gun came up. “Hear him out!”

Ward McQueen was thumbing shells into his gun. “All right, Baldy. Show us.”

“Before my Maker, Ward, I figured her for somebody sneakin’ to get a shot at me! I seen the gun, plain as day, an’ I fired!”

Muttering and angry, the crowd followed. Baldy led the way to an alley behind the store, where they stopped. There lay a still figure in a riding habit. For an instant Ward looked down at that still, strangely attractive face. Then he bent swiftly, and as several cried out in protest he seized Sharon Clarity’s red gold hair and jerked!

It came free in his hand, and the head flopped back on the earth, the close-cropped head of a man!

Ward stooped, gripped the neckline, and ripped it away. With the padding removed, all could see the chest of a man, lean, muscular and hairy.

“Not Sharon Clarity,” he said, “but Strahan.”

Kim Sartain wheeled and walked swiftly away, McQueen following. As they reached the Emporium, Bud Fox appeared.

“Nobody left here but that girl. She was in there a long time. The old man started out but we warned him back. He’s inside.”

Ward McQueen led the way, with Sheriff Foster behind him, then Sartain, Jackson, Fox, and Jones.

Silas Hutch sat at his battered rolltop desk. His lean jaws seemed leaner than ever. He peered at them from eyes that were mean and cruel. “Well? What’s this mean? Bargin’ in like this?”

“You’re under arrest, Hutch, for ordering the killing of Jimmy Mc-Cracken and Neal Webb.”

Hutch chuckled. “Me? Under arrest? You got a lot to learn, boy. The law here answers to me. I say who is to be arrested and who is prosecuted.

“You got no proof of anything! You got no evidence! You’re talkin’ up the wind, sonny!”

Baldy Jackson pushed forward. “Ward, this here’s the one I told you about! This is the first time I’ve had a good look at him! He’s Shorty Strahan, the mean one! He’s an uncle, maybe, of that one out there who made such a fine-lookin’ woman!”

“Hutch, you had your killings done for you. All but one. You killed Chalk Warneke.”

He turned to Foster. “Figure it out for yourself, Sheriff. Remember the position Chalk was in, remember the crowd, and Warneke on a horse. There’s only one place that shot could come from—*that* window! And only one man who could have fired it, him!”

Silas Hutch shrank back in his chair. When Foster reached for him, he cringed. “Don’t let them hang me!” he pleaded.

“You take it from here, Foster,” McQueen said. “We can measure the angle of that bullet and you’ve got Bemis. He can testify as to the connection between Neal Webb and Hutch as well as that with Chalk. He knows all about it.”

Ward McQueen turned toward the door. He was tired, very tired, and all he wanted was rest. Besides, his hip bone was bothering him. He had been aware of it for some time, but only now was it really hurting. He looked down, remembering something hitting him during the battle with Overlin.

His gun belt was somewhat torn and two cartridges dented. A bullet had evidently struck and glanced off, ruining two perfectly good cartridges and giving him a bad bruise on the hip bone.

“Kim,” he said, “let’s get back to the ranch.”

