

as plain as the nose on your face. Found his camp. Then he hit into the brush an' we lost the trail. Didn't have no tracker with us.

"Think he went into the mountains. But we took a chance an' rid over the rest of the way, seein' Ord was so close. Anybody come in here late last night or early this mornin'?"

"Nope," replied Fletcher.

His response was what Duane had expected from his manner, and evidently the cowboy took it as a matter of course. He turned to the others of the posse, entering into a low consultation. Evidently there was difference of opinion, if not real dissension, in that posse.

"Didn't I tell ye this was a wild goose chase, comin' way out here," protested an old, hawk-faced rancher. "Them hoss tracks we follered ain't like any of them we seen at the water-tank, where the train was held up."

"I'm not so sure of that," replied the leader.

"Wal, Guthrie, I've follered tracks all my life—"

"But you couldn't keep to the trail this feller made in the brush."

"Gimme time an' I could. Thet takes time. An' heah you go hell-bent fer election! But it's a wrong lead out this way. If you're right, this road-agent, after he killed his pals, would hev rid back right through town. An' with them mail-bags! Supposin' they was greasers? Some greasers has sense, an' when it comes to thievin' they're shore cute."

"But we ain't got any reason to believe this robber who murdered the greasers is a greaser himself. I tell you, it was a slick job, done by no ordinary sneak. Didn't you hear the facts? One greaser hopped the engine an' covered the engineer an' brakeman. Another greaser kept flashin' his gun outside the train. The big man who shoved back the car door an' did the killin'—he was the real gent, an' don't you forget it."

Some of the posse sided with the

cowboy leader and some with the old cattleman. Finally the young leader disgustedly gathered up his bridle.

"Aw, thet sheriff shoved you off this trail. Mebbe he hed reason! Savvy thet? If I hed a bunch of cowboys with me—I tell you what—I'd take a chance an' clean up this hole!"

All the while Jim Fletcher stood quietly with his hands in his pockets.

"Guthrie, I'm shore treasurin' up your friendly talk," he said. The menace was in the tone, not the content of his speech.

"You can—an' be darned to you. Fletcher!" called Guthrie as the horses started.

Fletcher, standing out alone before the others of his clan, watched the posse out of sight.

"Lucky fer you-all thet Pogy wasn't here," he said as they disappeared. Then, with a thoughtful mien, he strode up on the porch and led Duane away from the others into the barroom. When he looked into Duane's face it was somehow an entirely changed scrutiny.

"Dodge, where'd you hide the stuff? I reckon I git in on this deal, seein' I staved off Guthrie."

Duane played his part. Here was his opportunity, and, like a tiger after prey, he seized it. First he coolly eyed the outlaw, and then disclaimed any knowledge whatever of the train-robbery other than Fletcher had heard himself. Then, at Fletcher's persistence and admiration and increasing show of friendliness, he laughed occasionally and allowed himself to swell with pride, though still denying.

Next he feigned a lack of consistent will-power and seemed to be wavering under Fletcher's persuasion, and grew silent, then surly. Fletcher, evidently sure of ultimate victory, desisted for the time being; however, in his solicitous regard and close companionship for the rest of that day, he betrayed the bent of his mind.

Later when Duane started up, announcing his intention to get his horse

and make for camp out in the brush, Fletcher seemed grievously offended.

"Why don't you stay with me? I've got a comfortable 'dobe over here. Didn't I stick by you when Guthrie an' his bunch come up? Supposin' I hedn't showed down a cold hand to him? You'd be swingin' somewheres now. I tell you, Dodge, it ain't square."

"I'll square it. I pay my debts," replied Duane. "But I can't put up here all night. If I belonged to the gang it'd be different."

"What gang?" asked Fletcher bluntly.

"Why, Cheseldine's."

Fletcher's beard nodded as his jaw dropped.

Duane laughed.

"I run into him the other day over at Bradford. Knowed him on sight. He was loadin' a big bunch of steers. Sure he's the king-pin rustler. Shippin' stolen cattle by train! I was some took back. But when he seen me an' asked me what reason I had for bein' on earth or some such like—why, I up an' told him."

Fletcher appeared staggered.

"Who in all-fired air you talkin' about?"

"Didn't I tell you once—Cheseldine? He calls himself Levitt over there."

All of Fletcher's face not covered by hair turned a dirty white.

"Cheseldine—Levitt!" he whispered hoarsely. "Gord Almighty! You braced the—"

Then a remarkable transformation came over the outlaw. He gulped; he straightened his face; he controlled his agitation; but he could not send the healthy brown back to his face. Duane, watching this rude man, marveled at the change in him, the sudden checking motive, the proof of a wonderful fear and loyalty. It all meant Cheseldine—a master of men!

"Who air you?" queried Fletcher in a strained voice.

"You gave me a handle, didn't you?

Dodge. That's as good as any. Shore it hits me hard. Jim, I've been pretty lonely for years an' I'm gettin' in need of pals. Think it over, will you? See you *mañana*."

The outlaw watched Duane go off after his horse, watched him as he returned to the tavern, watched him ride out into the darkness, all without another word.

Duane left the town, threaded a quiet passage through cactus and mesquit to a spot he had marked before, and made ready for the night. His mind was so full that he found sleep aloof.

Luck at last was playing his game. He realized the first slow heave of a mighty crisis. The end, always haunting, had to be sternly blotted from thought. It was the approach that needed all his mind.

He passed the night there, and late in the morning, after watching trail and road from a bridge, he returned to Ord. If Jim Fletcher tried to disguise his surprise the effort was a failure. Certainly he had not expected to see Duane again. Duane allowed himself a little freedom with Fletcher, an attitude hitherto lacking.

That afternoon a horseman rode in from Bradford—an outlaw evidently well known and liked by his fellows—and Duane heard him say, before he could possibly have been told the train-robber was in Ord, that the loss of money in the hold-up was slight. Like a flash Duane saw the luck of the report. He pretended not to have heard.

In the early twilight, at an opportune moment, he called Fletcher to him and, linking his arm within the outlaw's, he drew him off in a stroll to a log bridge spanning a little gully. Here, after gazing round, he took out a roll of bills, spread it out, split it equally, and without a word handed one half to Fletcher. With clumsy fingers Fletcher ran through the roll.

"Five hundred!" he exclaimed. "Dodge, thet's handsome of you, considerin' the job wasn't—"

"Considerin' nothin'," interrupted Duane. "I'm makin' no reference to a job, here or there. You did me a good turn. I split my pile. If thet doesn't make us pard's good turns an' money ain't no use in this country."

Fletcher was won.

The two men spent much time together after that day—ate, drank, smoked, gambled, hunted, and all but slept together—for Duane held to his custom of going to the open at night. He made up a short, fictitious history about himself that satisfied the outlaw, only it drew forth a laughing jest upon Duane's modesty.

For Fletcher did not hide his belief that this new partner was a man of achievements. Knell and Poggin, and then Cheseldine himself, would be persuaded of this fact, so Fletcher boasted.

He had influence. He would use it. He thought he pulled a stroke with Knell. But nobody on earth, not even the boss, had any influence on Poggin.

Poggin was concentrated ice part of the time; all the rest he was bursting hell. But Poggin loved a horse. He never loved anything else. He could be won with that black horse Bullet. Cheseldine was already won by Duane's monumental nerve, otherwise he would have killed Duane.

Little by little, day by day, Duane learned the points he longed to know, and how indelibly they etched themselves in his memory!

Cheseldine's hiding-place was on the far slope of Mount Ord, in a deep, high-walled valley. He always went there just before a contemplated job, where he met and planned with his lieutenants. Then, while they executed, he basked in the sunshine before one or another of the public places he owned.

He was there in the Ord den now getting ready to plan the biggest job yet. It was a bank robbery, but where Fletcher had not as yet been advised.

Then, when Duane had pumped the now amenable outlaw of all details per-

taining to the present, he gathered data and facts and places covering a period of ten years Fletcher had been with Cheseldine.

And herewith was unfolded a history so dark in its bloody régime, so incredible in its brazen daring, so appalling in its proof of the outlaws' sweep and grasp of the country from Pecos to Rio Grande, that Duane was stunned.

Compared to this Cheseldine of the Big Bend, to this Levitt of Bradford, to this rancher, stock-buyer, cattle-speculator, property-holder, all the outlaws Duane had ever known sank into insignificance. The power of the man stunned Duane; the strange fidelity given him stunned Duane; the intricate inside working of his great system was equally stunning.

But when Duane recovered from that the old, terrible passion to kill consumed him, and it raged fiercely and it could not be checked.

If that red-handed Poggin, if that cold-eyed, death-faced Knell had only been at Ord! But they were not, and Duane, with help of time, got what he hoped was the upper hand of himself.

CHAPTER XXI.

KNELL DEALS A HAND.

AGAIN inaction and suspense dragged at Duane's spirit. Like a leashed hound with a keen scent in his face, Duane wanted to leap forth when he was bound.

He almost fretted. Something called to him over the bold, wild brow of Mount Ord. But while Fletcher stayed in Ord, waiting for Knell and Poggin, or for orders, Duane knew his game was again a waiting one.

Suddenly a thought flashed into his mind bringing patience—the longer he was detained the surer MacNelly was to have time to receive his message and act upon it.

But one day there were signs of the long quiet of Ord being broken. A messenger, strange to Duane, rode in on a secret mission that had to do with Fletcher.

When he went away Fletcher became addicted to thoughtful moods and lonely walks.

He seldom drank, and this in itself was a striking contrast to former behavior. The messenger came again. Whatever communication he brought, it had a remarkable effect upon the outlaw.

Duane was present in the tavern when the fellow arrived, saw the few words whispered, but did not hear them. Fletcher turned white with anger or fear, perhaps both, and he cursed like a madman.

The messenger—a lean, dark-faced, hard-riding fellow, reminding Duane of the cowboy Guthrie—left the tavern without even a drink and rode away, off to the west. This west mystified and fascinated Duane as much as the south beyond Mount Ord.

Where were Knell and Poggy? Apparently they were not at present with the leader on the mountain. After the messenger left Fletcher grew silent and surly. He had presented a variety of moods to Duane's observation, and this latest one was provocative of thought. Fletcher was dangerous. It became clear now that the other outlaws of the camp feared him, kept out of his way. Duane let him alone, yet closely watched him.

Perhaps an hour after the messenger had left, not longer, Fletcher manifestly arrived at some decision, and he called for his horse. Then he went to his shack and returned. To Duane the outlaw looked in shape both to ride and fight. He gave orders for the men in camp to keep close until he returned. Then he mounted.

"Come here, Dodge," he called.

Duane went up and laid a hand on the pommel of the saddle. Fletcher walked his horse with Duane beside

him till they reached the log bridge, when he halted.

"Dodge, I'm in bad with Knell," he said. "An' it 'pears I'm the cause of friction between Knell an' Poggy. Knell never had any use fer me an' Poggy's been square, if not friendly. The boss has a big deal on, an' here it's been held up because of this scrap.

"He's waitin' over there on the mountain to give orders to Knell or Poggy, an' neither one's showin' up. I've got to stand in the breach, an' I ain't enjoyin' the prospects."

"What's the trouble about, Jim?" asked Duane.

"Reckon it's a little about you, Dodge," said Fletcher dryly. "Knell hadn't any use fer you thet day. He ain't got no use fer a man onless he can rule him. Some of the boys here hev blabbed before I edged in with my say, an' there's hell to pay.

"Knell claims to know somethin' about you thet'll make both the boss an' Poggy sick when he springs it. But he's keepin' quiet. Hard man to figger—thet Knell. Reckon you'd better go back to Bradford fer a day or so, then camp out near here till I come back.

"Why?"

"Wal, because there ain't any use fer you to git in bad, too. The gang will ride over here any day. If they're friendly I'll light a fire on the hill there, say three nights from to-night. If you don't see it thet night you hit the trail. I'll do what I can. Jim Fletcher sticks to his pals. So long, Dodge."

Then he rode away.

He left Duane in a quandary.

The news was black. Things had been working out so well. Here was a setback. At the moment Duane did not know which way to turn, but certainly he had no idea of going back to Bradford.

Friction between the two great lieutenants of Cheseldine! Open hostility—between one of them and another of the chief's right-hand men! Among

outlaws that sort of thing was deadly serious. Generally such matters were settled with guns.

Duane gathered encouragement even from disaster. Perhaps the disintegration of Cheseldine's great band had already begun.

But what did Knell know? Duane did not circle around the idea with doubts and hopes—if Knell knew anything it was that this stranger in Ord, this new partner of Fletcher's, was no less than Buck Duane. Well, it was about time, thought Duane, that he made use of his name, if it were to help him at all.

That name had been MacNelly's hope. He had anchored all his scheme to Duane's fame. Duane was tempted to ride off after Fletcher and stay with him. This, however, would hardly be fair to an outlaw who had been fair to him. Duane concluded to await developments, and when the gang rode in to Ord, probably from their various hiding places, he would be there ready to be denounced by Knell.

Duane could not see any other culmination of this series of events than a meeting between Knell and himself. If that terminated fatally for Knell there was all probability of Duane's being in no worse situation than he was now. If Poggin took up the quarrel—

Here Duane accused himself again—tried in vain to revolt from a judgment that he was only reasoning out excuses to meet these outlaws.

Meanwhile, instead of waiting, why not hunt up Cheseldine in his mountain retreat? The thought no sooner struck Duane than he was hurrying for his horse.

He left Ord, ostensibly toward Bradford, but once out of sight he turned off the road, circled through the brush, and several miles south of town he struck a narrow, grass-grown trail that Fletcher had told him led to Cheseldine's camp.

The horse-tracks along this trail

were not less than a week old, and very likely much more. It wound between low brush-covered foothills, through arroyos and gullies lined with mesquit, cottonwood, and scrub-oak.

In an hour Duane struck the slope of Mount Ord, and as he climbed he got a view of the rolling, black-spotted country, partly desert, partly fertile, with long, bright lines of dry streambeds winding away to grow dim in the distance.

He got among broken rocks and cliffs, and here the open, downward-rolling land disappeared, and he was hard put to it to find the trail. He lost it repeatedly, and made slow progress.

Finally he climbed into a region of all rock benches, rough here, smooth there, with only an occasional scratch of iron horseshoe to guide him. Many times he had to go ahead and then work to right or left till he found his way again. It was slow work; it took all day; and night found him half-way up the mountain.

He halted at a little side cañon with grass and water, and here he made camp. The night was clear and cool at that height, with a dark-blue sky and a streak of stars blinking across. With this day of action behind him he felt better satisfied than he had been for some time.

Here, on this venture, he was answering to a call that had so often directed his movements, perhaps his life, and it was one that logic or intelligence could take little stock of.

And on this night, lonely like those he used to spend in the Nueces gorge, and memorable of them because of a likeness to that old hiding-place, he felt the pressing return of old haunting things—the past so long ago—wild flights—dead faces—and one quiveringly alive, white, tragic, with its dark intent speaking eyes.

The last memory he yielded to until he slept.

In the morning, satisfied that he had left still fewer tracks than he had fol-

lowed up this trail, he led his horse up to the head of the cañon, there a narrow crack in low cliffs, and with branches of cedar fenced him in. Then he went back and took up the trail on foot.

Without the horse he made better time, and climbed through deep clefts, wide cañons, over ridges, up shelving slopes, along precipices—a long, hard climb till he reached what he concluded was a divide. Going down was easier, though the farther he followed this dim and winding trail the wider the broken battlements of rock.

Above him he saw the black fringe of piñon and pine, and above that the bold peak, bare, yellow, like a desert butte. Once, through a wide gateway between great escarpments, he saw the lower country beyond the range, and beyond this, vast and clear as it lay in his sight, was the great river that made the Big Bend.

He went down and down, wondering how a horse could follow that broken trail, believing there must be another better one somewhere into Cheseldine's hiding-place.

He rounded a jutting corner, where view had been shut off, and presently came out upon the rim of a high wall. Beneath, like a green gulf seen through blue haze, lay an amphitheater walled in on the two sides he could see.

It lay perhaps a thousand feet below him, and plain as all the other features of that wild environment there shone out a big red-stone or adobe cabin, white water shining away between green borders, and horses and cattle dotting the levels.

It was a peaceful, beautiful scene. Duane could not help grinding his teeth at the thought of Cheseldine living there in quiet and ease.

Duane worked half-way down to the level, and well hidden in a niche he settled himself to watch both trail and valley. He made note of the position of the sun, and saw that if anything developed, or if he decided

to descend any farther, there was small likelihood of his getting back to his camp before dark. To try that after nightfall he imagined would be vain effort.

Then he bent keen and fascinated eyes in downward gaze. The cabin appeared to be a crude structure, though large in size, and of course had been built by outlaws. There was no garden, no cultivated field, no coral; excepting for the rude pile of stones and logs plastered together with mud the valley was as wild probably as on the day of discovery.

Duane seemed to have been watching for a long time before he saw any sign of a man, and this one apparently went to the stream for water, and returned to the cabin.

The sun went down behind the wall and shadows were born in the darker places of the valley. Duane began to want to get closer to that cabin. What had he taken this arduous climb for? He held back, however, trying to evolve further plans.

While he was pondering the shadows quickly gathered and darkened. If he was to go back to camp he must set out at once. Still he lingered.

Suddenly his wide-roving eye caught sight of two horsemen riding up the valley. They must have entered at a point below, round the huge abutment of rock, beyond Duane's range of sight. Their horses were tired and stopped at the stream for a long drink.

Duane left his perch, took to the steep trail, and descended as fast as he could without making noise. It did not take him long to reach the valley floor. It was almost level, with deep grass, and here and there clumps of bushes.

Twilight was already thick down there. Duane marked the location of the trail and then began to slip, like a shadow, through the grass and from bush to bush.

He saw a bright light before he made out the dark outline of the cabin. Then he heard voices, a merry whistle,

a coarse song, and the clink of iron cooking utensils. He smelled fragrant wood-smoke. He saw moving dark figures cross the light. Evidently there was a wide door, or else the fire was out in the open.

Duane swerved to the left, out of direct line with the light, and thus was able to see better. Then he advanced noiselessly but swiftly toward the back of the house.

There were trees close to the wall. He would make no noise, and he could scarcely be seen—if only there was no watch-dog! But all his outlaw days he had taken risks, with only his useless life at stake; now, with that changed, he advanced stealthily and bold as an Indian.

He reached the cover of the trees, knew he was hidden in their shadows, for at a few paces distance he had been able to see only their tops. From there he slipped up to the house and felt along the wall with his hands.

He came to a crack between logs and stones where light shone through. He peeped in.

He saw a room shrouded in shadows, a lamp turned low, a table, chairs. He saw an open door with bright flare beyond, but could not see the fire. Voices came indistinctly. Without hesitation Duane stole farther along—all the way to the end of the cabin.

Peeping round, he saw only the flare of light on bare ground. Retracing his cautious steps, he paused at the crack again, saw that no man was in the room, and then he went on round that end of the cabin.

Fortune favored him. There were bushes, an old shed, a wood-pile, all the cover he needed at that corner.

Before he peered between the rough corner of wall and the bush growing close to it Duane paused a moment. This excitement was different from that he had always felt when pursued. It had no bitterness, no pain, no dread. There was as much danger here, perhaps more, yet it was not the same. Then he looked.

He saw a bright fire, a red-faced man bending over it whistling while he handled a steaming pot. Over him was a roofed shed built against the wall with two open sides and two supporting posts. Duane's second glance, not so blinded by the sudden bright light, made out other men, three in the shadow, two in the flare, but with backs to him.

"It's a smoother trail by long odds, but ain't so short as this one right over the mountain," one outlaw was saying.

"What's eatin' you, Pan Handle?" ejaculated another. "Blossom an' me rode from Faraway Springs, where Poggin is with some of the gang."

"Excuse me, Phil. Shore I didn't see you come in, an' Boldt never said nothin'."

"It took you a long time to get here, but I guess that's just as well," spoke up a smooth, suave voice with a ring in it.

Levitt's voice—Cheseldine's voice!

Here they were—Cheseldine—Phil Knell—Blossom Kane—Pan Handle Smith—Boldt—how well Duane remembered the names!—all here, the big men of Cheseldine's game, except the biggest—Poggin.

Duane had holed them, and his sensations of the moment deadened sight and sound of what was before him. He sank down, controlled himself, silenced a mounting exultation, then, from a less strained position, he peered forth again.

The outlaws were waiting for supper. Their conversation might have been that of cowboys in camp, ranchers at a round-up. Duane listened with eager ears, waiting for the business talk that he felt would come. All the time he watched with the eyes of a wolf upon its quarry.

Blossom Kane was the lean-limbed messenger who had so angered Fletcher. Boldt was a giant in stature, dark, bearded, silent. Pan Handle Smith was the red-faced cook, merry, profane, a short, bow-legged man re-

sembling many rustlers Duane had known, particularly Luke Stevens.

And Knell, who sat there, tall, slim, like a boy in build, like a boy in years, with his pale, smooth, expressionless face and his cold, gray eyes.

And Cheseldine, who leaned against the wall, handsome, with his pointed face and beard, like an aristocrat, resembled many a rich Louisiana planter Duane had met. The sixth man sat so much in the shadow that he could not be plainly discerned, and though addressed, his name was not mentioned.

Pan Handle Smith carried pots and pans into the cabin, and cheerfully called out: "If you gents air hungry fer grub don't look fer me to feed you with a spoon."

The outlaws piled inside, made a great bustle and clatter as they sat to their meal. Like hungry men they talked little.

Duane waited there a while, then guardedly got up and crept round to the other side of the cabin. After he became used to the dark again he ventured to steal along the wall to the crack, and peeped in. The outlaws were in the first room and could not be seen.

Duane waited. The moments dragged endlessly. His heart pounded. Cheseldine entered, turned up the light, and taking a box of cigars from the table he carried it out.

"Here you fellows, go outside and smoke," he said. "Knell, come on in now. Let's get it over."

He returned, sat down and lighted a cigar for himself. He put his booted feet on the table.

Duane saw that the room was comfortably, even luxuriously furnished. There must have been a good trail, he thought, else how could all that stuff have been packed in there. Most assuredly it could not have come over the trail he had traveled. Presently he heard the men go outside, and their voices became indistinct.

Then Knell came in to Cheseldine, and seated himself, without any of his

chief's ease. He seemed preoccupied, and as always, cold.

"What's wrong, Knell? Why didn't you get here sooner?" queried Cheseldine.

"Poggin. We're on the outs again."

"What for?"

"Aw, he needn't have got sore. He's breakin' a new hoss over there at Faraway, an' you know him where a hoss's concerned. That kept him, I reckon, more than anythin'."

"What else? Get it out of your system so we can go on to the new job."

"Well, it begins back a ways. I don't know how long ago—weeks—a stranger rode into Ord, an' got down easy like as if he owned the place. He seemed familiar to me. But I wasn't sure. We looked him over, an' I left, tryin' to place him in my mind."

"What'd he look like?" asked Cheseldine.

"Rangy powerful man, white hair over his temples, still, hard face, eyes like knives. The way he packed his guns, the way he walked an' stood, an' swung his right hand showed me what he was. You can't fool me on the gun-sharp. An' he had a grand hoss, a big black."

"I've met your man," said Cheseldine. "Had a—rather pleasant little chat with him."

"No!" exclaimed Knell.

It was wonderful to hear surprise expressed by this man that did not in the least show it in his strange physiognomy.

"Yes. I saw him rather too interested in a cattle shipment of mine, so I asked him what he was looking for. I'll gamble you can't guess what he said."

"I'm not gamblin' on this man," replied Knell grimly.

"He said he was looking for—Cheseldine!"

Knell sat perfectly motionless, like a statue.

"You could have knocked me down with a feather," continued Cheseldine. "I made a blunder—was off my bal-

ance—mentioned you and Poggy before I got back my wits. Then he laughed in my face—called my bluff hard."

"He knew you!"

"I should smile," replied Cheseldine, and he showed his white teeth.

Knell's stiff body flashed into action as he banged his fist down upon the table.

"Laugh! It's funny! Ho! Ho—Wait, boss, wait! I'll spring him on you in a minute—How did you miss gettin' it—that's what stumps me."

"Getting what?" queried Cheseldine blandly.

Knell laughed a short, grim, hollow laugh. But he settled back in his seat without answering that.

"I interrupted your story," continued Cheseldine. "Make it short."

"Boss, this here big gent drifts into Ord again an' makes up to Jim Fletcher. Jim, you know, is easy led. He likes men. An' when a posse come along trailin' a blind lead, huntin' the wrong way for the man who held up No. 6, why, Jim—he up an' takes this stranger to be the fly road-agent an' cottons to him. Got money out of him sure. An' that's what stumps me more. What's this man's game? I happen to know, boss, that he couldn't have held up No. 6."

"How do you know?" demanded Cheseldine.

"Because I did the job myself."

A dark and stormy passion clouded the chief's face.

"Damn you, Knell! You're incorrigible. You're unreliable. Another break like that queers you with me. Did you tell Poggin?"

"Yes. That's one reason we fell out. He raved. I thought he was goin' to kill me."

"Why did you tackle such a risky job without help or plan?"

"It offered, that's all. An' it was easy. But it was a mistake. I got the country an' the railroad hollerin' for nothin'. I just couldn't help it."

"You know, Cheseldine, what idle-

ness means to one of us. You know, also, that this very life breeds fatality. It's wrong—that's why. I was born of good parents an' I know what's right.

"We're wrong an' we can't beat the end, that's all. An' for my part I don't care a damn when that comes."

"Fine wise talk from you, Knell," said Cheseldine scornfully. "Go on with your story."

"As I said, Jim cottons to the pretender, an' they get chummy. They're together all the time. You can gamble Jim told all he knew an' then some. A little liquor loosens his tongue. Several of the boys rode over from Ord, an' one of them went to Poggin an' says Jim Fletcher has a new man for the gang.

"Poggin, you know, is always ready for any new man. He says if one doesn't turn out good he can be shut off easy. He rather liked the way this new pard of Jim's was boosted. Jim an' Poggin always hit it up together.

"So, until I got on the deal, Jim's pard was already in the gang, without Poggin or you ever seein' him. Then I got to figurin' hard. Just where had I ever seen that chap? As it turned out I never had seen him, which accounts for my being doubtful. I'd never forget any man I'd seen.

"I dug up a lot of old papers from my kit an' went over them. I guess I had a pretty good notion what I was lookin' for an' who I wanted to make sure of. At last I found it. An' I knew my man.

"But I didn't spring it on Poggin. Oh, no! I want to have some fun with him when the time comes. He'll be wilder than a trapped wolf. I sent Blossom over to Ord to get word from Jim, an' when he verified all this talk I sent Blossom again with a message calculated to make Jim hump. Poggin got sore, said he'd wait for Jim, an' I could come over here to see you about the new job. He'd meet me in Ord."

Knell had spoken hurriedly and low, now and then with passion. His pale eyes glinted like fire in ice.

"Knell, unless you give good reasons I'll back Poggin and Fletcher," said Cheseldine. "Rather liked the looks and nerve of that chap who called me."

The laugh Knell uttered had behind its scorn something absolute. Cheseldine dropped his cigar. Knell leaned over toward him.

"Did you say nerve? Who do you think called you that day?"

"No idea," snapped Cheseldine.

"Buck Duane!"

Down came Cheseldine's boots with a crash, then his body grew rigid.

"That Nueces outlaw! That two-shot ace-of-spades gun-thrower who killed Bland, Alloway—"

"An' Hardin." Knell whispered this last name with more feeling than the apparent circumstance demanded.

"Yes, and Hardin, the best one of the Rim-Rock fellows. Buck Duane!"

Cheseldine was so ghastly white now that his black mustache seemed outlined against chalk. He eyed his grim lieutenant. They understood each other without more words—without asking why Duane was in the country. It was enough that he was there in the Big Bend. Cheseldine rose presently and reached for a flask, from which he drank, then offered it to Knell. He waved it aside.

"Knell," began the chief slowly, as he wiped his lips, "I gather you have some grudge against this Buck Duane."

"Yes."

"Well, don't be a fool now and do what Poggin or most any of you men would—don't meet this Buck Duane. Never mind if all the gang's backing you. They couldn't keep him from throwing his gun. And you want to live—and I need you."

"Here's a better way. Hit the trail early. Go to Ord and give Jim Fletcher a hunch. Then ride to Bradford and tell Sheriff Bridger that I sent you—that I've located one of the men who held up No. 6, also suspected of safe-blowing. Bridger will do the rest. He'll come heeled enough to get even Buck Duane."

"All right. I'll do my best. But if I run into Duane—"

"Don't run into him!" Cheseldine's voice fairly rang with the force of its passion and command.

He wiped his face, drank again from the flask, sat down, resumed his smoking, and drawing a paper from his vest-pocket he began to study it.

"Well, I'm glad that's settled," he said, evidently referring to the Duane matter. "Now for the new job. This is October the 18th. On or before the 25th there will be a shipment of gold reach the Ranchers' Bank of Val Verde."

"After you return from Bradford with Bridger and get Duane out of the way, give Poggin these orders. Keep the gang quiet. You, Poggin, Kane, Fletcher, Pan Handle Smith and Boldt to be in on the secret and the job. Nobody else."

"You'll leave Ord on the 23d, ride across country by the trail till you get within sight of Mercer. It's a hundred miles from Bradford to Val Verde—about the same from Ord."

"Time your travel to get you near Val Verde on the morning of the 26th. You won't have to more than trot your horses. At two o'clock in the afternoon, sharp, ride into town and up to the Ranchers' Bank."

"Val Verde's a pretty big town. Never been any hold-ups there. Town feels safe. Make it a clean, fast daylight job. That's all. Have you got the details?"

Knell did not even ask for the dates again.

"Suppose Poggin or me might be detained?" he asked.

Cheseldine bent a dark glance upon his lieutenant.

"You never can tell what'll come off," said Knell. "I'll do my best."

"The minute you see Poggin tell him. A job on hand steadies him. And I say again—look to it that nothing happens. Either you or Poggin carry the job through. But I want both of you in it."

"A big haul, Knell, a big haul! Don't miss it. Now a last word, then we'll play some *monte*. I'll be in Bradford on the 25th, and next day I'll have business in Val Verde.

"I'll be across the street in the hotel when you pull off the job. Break for the hills, and when you get up in the rocks where you can hide your tracks head for Mount Ord. When all's quiet again I'll join you here. That's all. Call in the boys."

Like a swift shadow and as noiseless Duane stole across the level toward the dark wall of rock. Every nerve was a strung wire.

For a little while his mind was cluttered and clogged with whirling thoughts, from which, like a flashing scroll, unrolled the long-baffling order of action. The game was now in his hands.

He must cross Mount Ord at night. The feat was improbable, but it might be done. He must ride into Bradford, forty miles from the foothills, before eight o'clock next morning, in time to catch Buell, the night operator, before he went off duty.

He must telegraph MacNelly to be in Val Verde on the 25th. He must ride back to Ord to intercept Knell—face him—be denounced—kill him—and, while the iron was hot, strike hard to win Poggin's half-won interest as he had wholly won Fletcher's.

Failing that last he must let the outlaws alone to bide their time in Ord, to be free to ride on to their new job in Val Verde. Meanwhile he must hide in the brush till the 25th, then face Cheseldine in Bradford, arrest him or kill him, and go on to Val Verde to meet Poggin at the finish.

It was a magnificent outline, incredible, alluring, unfathomable in its nameless certainty. He felt like fate. He seemed to be the iron consequences falling upon these doomed outlaws.

Under the wall the shadows were black, only the tips of trees and crags showing, yet he went straight to the

trail. It was merely a grayness between borders of black. He climbed and never stopped.

It did not seem steep. His feet might have had eyes. He surmounted the wall, and looking down into the ebony gulf, pierced by one point of light, he lifted a menacing arm and shook it. Then he strode on and did not falter till he reached the huge shelving cliffs.

Here he lost the trail; there was none; but he remembered the shapes, the points, the notches of rock above. Before he reached the ruins of splintered ramparts and jumbles of broken walls the moon topped the eastern slope of the mountain, and the mystifying blackness he had dreaded changed to magic silver light. It seemed as light as day, soft, mellow, and the air held a transparent sheen.

He ran up the bare ridges and down the smooth slopes, and, like a goat, jumped from rock to rock. In this light he knew his way and lost no time looking for a trail. He crossed the divide and then had all down-hill before him. Swiftly he descended, almost always sure of his memory of the landmarks.

He did not remember having studied them in the ascent, yet here they were, even in changed light familiar to his sight. What he had once seen was pictured on his mind. And true as a deer striking for home he reached the cañon where he had left his horse.

Bullet was quickly and easily found. Duane threw on the saddle and pack, cinched them tight, and resumed his descent. The worst was now to come.

Bare downward steps in rock, sliding weathered slopes, narrow, black gullies, a thousand openings in a maze of broken stone—these Duane had to descend in fast time leading a giant of a horse. Bullet cracked the loose fragments, sent them rolling, slid on the scaly slopes, plunged down the steps, and followed like a faithful dog at Duane's heels.

Hours passed as moments. Duane was equal to his great opportunity. But he could not quell that self in him which reached back over the lapse of lonely, searing years and found the boy in him.

He who had been worse than dead was now grasping at the skirts of life—which meant victory, honor, happiness. Duane knew he was not just right in part of his mind. Small wonder that he was not insane, he thought!

He tramped on downward, his marvelous faculty for covering rough ground and holding to the true course never before, even in flight, so keen and acute.

Yet all the time a spirit was keeping step with him. A slender shape kept pace with him. He was descending once again as in the Nueces gorge and Jennie walked with him.

For months, except at long intervals, he had excluded her image from his mind. Thought of her, as he had left her, made him weak. But now, with the game clear to its end, with the trap to spring, with success strangely haunting him, Duane let the memory of Jennie Lee come beating back to him.

And that night became sweeter than any dream he had ever had in idle haunted hours. He saw her white face with its sweet, sad lips, and the dark eyes so tender and tragic. And time and distance and risk and toil were nothing.

The moon sloped to the west. Shadows of trees and crags now crossed to the other side of him. The stars dimmed. Then he was out of the rocks with the dim trail pale at his feet.

Mounting Bullet, he made short work of the long slope and the foothills and the rolling land leading down to Ord. The little outlaw camp, with its shacks and cabins and row of houses, lay silent and dark under the paling moon.

Duane passed by on the lower trail,

headed into the road, and put Bullet to a gallop. He watched the dying moon, the waning stars, and the east. He had time to spare, so he saved the horse. Knell would be leaving Chelseldine's camp about the time Duane turned back toward Ord. Between noon and sunset they would meet.

The night wore on. The moon sank behind low mountains in the west. The stars brightened for a while, then faded. Gray gloom enveloped the world, thickened, lay like smoke over the road. Then shade by shade it lightened, until through the transparent obscurity shone a dim light.

Duane reached Bradford before dawn. He dismounted some distance from the tracks, tied his horse, and then crossed over to the station.

He heard the clicking of the telegraph instrument and it thrilled him. Buell sat inside reading. When Duane tapped on the window he looked up with startled glance, then went swiftly to unlock the door.

"Hello, son. I'm here. Give me paper and pencil. Quick," whispered Duane.

With trembling hands the operator complied. Duane wrote out the message he had carefully composed.

"Send this—repeat it to make sure—then keep mum. I'll see you again on the 25th. Good-by."

Buell stared, but did not speak a word.

Duane left as stealthily and swiftly as he had come. He walked his horse a couple of miles back on the road and then rested him till break of day. When the east began to redden Duane turned grimly in the direction of Ord.

When Duane swung into the wide, grassy square on the outskirts of Ord he saw a bunch of saddled horses hitched in front of the tavern. He knew what that meant. Luck still favored him. If it would only hold! But he could ask no more.

The rest was a matter of how