

Under the Burning Sky

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[Originally appeared in *Collier's Weekly*, 30 May 1953 and 6 June 1953]

GRAYSON reined in the steeldust on top of the rise and hooked a long leg about the saddle horn. He got out tobacco and papers and, while he rolled a cigarette, his narrowed eyes studied the land ahead of him.

This was arid country. Rain, when it came, was usually in cloudbursts that filled the arroyos with raging torrents for a little while, and then the water disappeared and the arroyos were dry and not a drop of moisture remained in the parched ground. Under circumstances like these, sage and mesquite and greasewood and cactus all flourished, for they seemed to thrive on aridity, but little else grew. The sage-dotted hills hunkered lonesomely and the mountain crests reared up bleak and barren, all giving an impression of hostility and desolation under the burning sky.

Yet men—some of them because they were foolish and some because they were gamblers and some because they were homeless—had settled in this land. They left their marks in the glittering stretches of barbwire, and in their houses and barns and sheds that seemed to shrivel beneath the heat of the sun, and in the brave thrust of their windmill towers. It was a harsh and meager existence, yet some of

these men loved this country and would not have exchanged it for the greenest, lushest spot in the world.

Here, as wherever else men settled, they brought with them their joys and their sorrows, their hopes and their despairs, their goodness and their wickedness. It was because of men's wickedness that Burt Grayson had come into this country.

Grayson was twenty-nine years old, and in that time he had come into contact with quite a large amount of iniquity, for his job had to do with the badness in men, so that he had acquired a hard shell of cynicism. He knew there was good in many men, but that all men had their weaknesses and failings. Yet Grayson never lost his faith in man. Like all lonely men, Grayson was a dreamer, and if there was nothing good to dream about, then a man might just as well be dead.

He sat in his saddle, smoking thoughtfully, consuming the cigarette down to the tiniest butt before pinching it out and tossing it away. The buildings of Twin Hearts seemed to dance and shimmer in the heat waves, and Grayson studied them carefully. A strange reluctance gripped him, but it was like this for him with the beginning of every job. He supposed it was because he did not yet

know what particular brand of rottenness he would probe into this time.

With a shrug of irritation and impatience, Grayson took his leg from around the saddle horn and put his foot in the stirrup. He touched the steeldust gently with a spur, and the horse moved on.

The buildings ahead appeared deserted. Nothing moved about them. There was a hot wind, and the windmill clanked creakingly as it pumped water. This was the only sound. Grayson looked about him, intrigued by the name of the place and the brand—Twin Hearts. It denoted someone with romantic leanings, which was not exactly in keeping with a business that included castration and the burning of living flesh with a hot iron. However, every man had a right to choose a brand that suited him, Grayson thought.

The buildings were not only sun-blasted; they appeared run-down, as if whoever owned them no longer cared. Remembering what he knew about a former resident of Twin Hearts, Grayson could understand. Sometimes the death of a loved one tore the will and the heart out of a man—or a woman.

Grayson glanced again at the house, and this time he saw a girl standing there. She had come out of the door, and now she stood bareheaded, the wind making a tangled disorder of her hair.

Grayson dismounted and started toward her, leaving his horse to drink. He realized that his was a rather forbidding appearance. He was very tall, standing all of six foot four,

and he walked with the slight slouch that most extremely tall men have. His hair was black, and he also affected a black mustache that drooped down around the comers of his wide mouth. His nose was prominent and hooked, and he had high cheekbones that produced a permanent squint in his brown eyes. It made him seem like he was forever gazing off into the vast distances. He was wearing a black, wide-brimmed hat and a checked cotton shirt and black trousers tucked into the tops of plain black riding boots. The only gaudy thing about him was the pair of large-roweled, silver-plated Mexican spurs. The sun kept winking off these, and off the badge pinned to Grayson's shirt.

He came to a halt, and he touched his hat and said to the girl, "Are you Anita Flores?"

THE girl was staring at him with suspicious eyes. She seemed tense and apprehensive. Her glance darted once to the badge on Grayson's shirt, and he thought he saw a look of utter hate in her eyes. Then she was studying his face again.

She gave no indication that she had heard him. She just went on staring at him with that cool hostility, a tall, dark girl with long, black hair swirling about her face. She was obviously of Spanish extraction. Her face was round, and the lips were full and the color of ocotillo blossoms in bloom. Sun and wind had darkened her skin beyond its natural olive tint. Beneath the plaid blouse appeared the sharp, firm thrust of her breasts. She was wearing a divided riding skirt, and around her waist she had a belt

studded with silver conchas that reflected the sun brightly.

When she did not speak, Grayson said, "Are you the sister of Ben Flores?"

She nodded.

"I'm Burt Grayson," he said, "U.S. marshal for this territory. I'm investigating the Border Pacific holdup at La Fuente."

A shadow passed through her eyes, like the reflection of some unpleasantness, but it was quickly gone, and the only emotion she indicated was a slight, angry tightening of her lips. She said nothing.

Grayson found it difficult to continue. She looked cold and hostile standing there, and though he could appreciate the bond that must have existed between her and her brother, he had his job to do. So he said, "I'd like to know if you've got any idea who your brother's side-kicks were."

He thought he caught a glimmer of defiance and scorn in her glance. She shook her head.

"Who were your brother's closest friends?" She finally spoke. "I'm not telling you anything." Her voice was low and cool.

Grayson sighed. "I wish you'd co-operate," he said. "You can't hurt your brother any more. He was killed during the holdup, and we have nothing to go on. His pals all made clean getaways. Wouldn't you like to see them caught?"

"I have my own ideas about that."

HE PAUSED, puzzled by her attitude. She did not look like the kind to have been involved in the matter

along with her brother. But of course appearances could be deceiving, as Grayson had learned on other occasions. He could not see where loyalty would enter since her brother was dead, although someone else dear to her could also have been a member of the bandit gang. Grayson had not thought of this before.

"I wish you'd tell me," he said quietly. "I can find out about your brother's friends from other sources, but I'd rather get it from you. You know how people twist things."

Her face paled a little. "You don't think very highly of the kind of man my brother was, do you?" she said.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Anybody who was my brother's friend is automatically a member of that holdup gang. Isn't that what you're driving at?"

"You're assuming too much," said Grayson. "I don't mean that at all. Whoever was in the holdup with your brother was obviously an acquaintance of his. I doubt very much that he'd have thrown in with a bunch of strangers." He looked at her keenly. "Don't you have any idea who your brother's partners were?"

"If I have, I'm not telling you!"

"Why?"

"I don't have to explain anything to you."

"Look, Miss Flores," he said, starting to feel a little exasperated. "I'm only working at my job. The bandits in that holdup made off with a bullion Shipment for the mint in Denver worth close to a quarter of a million dollars. There was an express messenger killed as well as your

brother. I'm going to find those bandits, and I'm going to recover that bullion."

He drew a breath. "I've never been one to pass judgment on the worth of any man. I don't intend to do so in regard to your brother. He's dead, and the matter is ended for him. But the fact that he was one of the holdup gang is all that I've got to go on. That's why I've come here even though La Fuente is a hundred miles to the west. There's more than one way of getting the information I'm after, but I came first to you because I felt that what you'd tell me would be honest and reliable."

"Honest and reliable?" The voice of Anita Flores was heavy with scorn and bitterness. "I'm the sister of a train robber. I could hardly be called honest and reliable." There was a small break in her voice, as if from a deep hurt.

GRAYSON began to get an understanding of her attitude. Her hostility was a defiant compensation for the disillusion and hurt and shame that she had endured because of her brother's participation in the robbery. Evidently they had been quite close. If so, it was anything but pleasant for her to be living here with everything reminding her of him and of the past. For her, he was still in the very atmosphere of the place. He was dead and buried, but he was still a part of Twin Hearts.

"Believe me, Miss Flores," said Grayson, "I don't like this one little bit. What's in the past is gone and best forgotten. That is why I'd like this to be as brief as possible. Tell me what I want to know, and I'll ride on."

For a moment, she seemed to relax, the tenseness going out of her as if she were on the verge of collapse, but then her chin tilted a trifle more and her mouth was a tight, uncompromising line again. "I'll never tell you," she said.

"Then I'll have to ask elsewhere."

"Go ahead and ask."

"Tell me this," said Grayson, eyes narrowing. "You do know who your brother's partners were, don't you?"

She said nothing, but her mouth curved upward in just the hint of an arch smile. There was, however, no mirth in her eyes. They held a cold luminosity, as unfeeling and fierce as that in the glance of a puma contemplating a kill. Suddenly, her motive was very clear to Grayson.

"I know what you've got in mind," he told her slowly. He felt a moment of pity for her. "I know why you won't tell me about your brother's partners." He shook his head. "It's no good, Miss Flores. Get it out of your mind."

"Get what out of my mind?"

"The idea that you can square for your brother."

She gave a small start as if caught in some guilty act. However, she recovered quickly and glared at him. "You don't know one little thing that goes on in my mind, Grayson," she said.

"There is nothing good in vengeance," said Grayson. "In thinking about it, you're just keeping the grave open. It's time the grave was covered and kept that way. It's time you started to forget, Miss Flores. Tell

me what I want to know, and I'll see that your brother's partners are sent to prison, if they don't hang."

"I'll never tell you," she said. Grayson sighed. He could see the uselessness of it. She was very tense now; she seemed to be poised on the balls of her feet; her fists were clenched so tightly the knuckles showed white. She was as taut as a fiddle string, and she looked as though she would break at any instant. Grayson did not want to have a hysterical woman on his hands. It would serve no purpose.

"Well, thanks anyway," he said, and turned away.

The steeldust had drunk its fill. Grayson swung up into the saddle, but before riding off he looked one more time at Anita Flores. Her shoulders were slack, and she looked very sad and forlorn. Compassion for her stirred in Grayson. He wished there was something he could say or do, but she was too caught up in her grief and loss to be comforted. It was a hurt she would have to work out for herself. However, it was wrong for her to be here at Twin Hearts alone, with the memory of her brother eating away at her. Still, Grayson could do nothing to help her.

Sadly, he started the steeldust and turned into the face of the hot wind. The windmill clanked; somewhere a door banged aimlessly. When he reached the rise, Grayson turned in the saddle for another look, but he could no longer see her. Only the buildings and the windmill were there, and the memory of a man a short time dead.

Grayson faced into the wind

and rode on. He had an idea that he would not forget Anita Flores for a long, long time.

THE town of Blue Hat lay sprawled under the copper sky. Its builders had exercised a certain wisdom in not erecting the dobe buildings too close together. There was ample room for a breeze or a wind to move about, if that was any consolation to the inhabitants. Whatever air currents passed through the town were usually hot anyway.

Burt Grayson rode out of the sea of cactus and sage that bordered the town, and he followed the track of the Border Pacific into Blue Hat. The sun was on its way down, but it still scorched the land as if reluctant to let up until its rays could no longer touch the ground.

When he reached the B. P. depot, Grayson turned down a street. Despite the heat, there were a few people moving about but, of course, they were accustomed to this, and though they might grumble and curse when they discussed the weather, they really felt a certain fondness for it and a pride that they could survive its vicissitudes.

Grayson stabled his horse at the O. K. Corral, and then he registered for a room at Dutcher's Hotel. The temperature in the room was a little cooler than that outside, because the room was out of the searing sun, but it was no more comfortable inside than out.

After a day under the sun, Grayson felt very dry. He went out and walked into a saloon that went by the name of the Trail Drivers Bar. The barroom was large, and it had an

earthen floor and thick dobe walls.

There were a number of drinkers in the place, refugees from the heat of the sun or from responsibilities they could no longer tolerate. The Trail Drivers Bar was cool and the beer was not too warm, and all in all it added up to a certain degree of conviviality. So they came here, to drink and to talk, and for a while they were oblivious to the heat outside and of tedious tasks undone.

Grayson walked up to the bar, conscious of a few interested glances, and ordered a beer. He had made a quick survey of the room as he had entered, but now he kept his eyes on the bar. Still, he could feel several glances probing at him, and he knew it was because of his badge. This was nothing new for Grayson; he encountered curiosity wherever he went.

He drank his beer slowly, savoring the taste of it. Although it was a little warm, it was much better than the alkaline taste of the water hereabouts.

He was about to order another glass when someone said: "Will you let me buy this one, *amigo*?"

The man who had spoken had been at the far end of the bar. Now he came up to Grayson, holding a half-empty beer glass in his hand and smiling in a friendly fashion. The fellow was big, although he was not as tall as Grayson, but his shoulders had more breadth and his chest was thick and his weight probably added up to more than Grayson's.

Apparently the man had been drinking for quite a while. His eyes had that happy shine, and he was

obviously at a stage of intoxication where he felt an overpowering urge for unloading his troubles on any listener, whether interested or not.

The bartender filled Grayson's glass. The fellow who had ordered it took a hand out of his pocket and scattered a fistful of change over a small area of the bar. "Take it out of here, Sid," he said. He kept on smiling at Grayson. "My handle's Hamner. Bob Hamner."

"I'm Burt Grayson."

HAMNER leaned one elbow on the bar so that he faced Grayson. Hamner started to place one foot on the bar rail, but he missed and almost lurched up against Grayson. Then Hamner righted himself and made good his second try at the rail. He squinted at Grayson's badge. "I see you're a U.S. marshal," said Hamner.

"That's right."

"You in Blue Hat on business?" Grayson paused and made another study of Hamner. Now that Grayson looked closely, Hamner did not appear as drunk as he would seem to be. He had a round, jovial face and bright blue eyes and blond hair, and he looked like the happy-go-lucky sort. He gave the impression that when it was payday, money probably burned his pockets and he could hardly wait to get rid of it. But Grayson, because of his deep skepticism, suspected that there was more to the man than utter thoughtlessness.

When Grayson did not answer, Hamner said, "I'll bet you're here on that La Fuente holdup."

"I might be," said Grayson.

Hamner leaned toward him confidentially and winked. Hamner's

voice was low. "I can add two and two," he said. "Ben Flores was killed at La Fuente. Ben was from around here." He winked again. "I can add two and two." Grayson took a sip of his beer. He said nothing.

Hamner leaned close in drunken intimacy. "You know, Grayson, you're on the wrong trail here in Blue Hat."

"What makes you think so?"

"La Fuente is a hundred miles from here. Because Ben Flores was from Blue Hat, it doesn't necessarily follow that his *compadres* were from

"I don't think Flores would have thrown in with strangers for a job like this," Grayson said quietly.

"Maybe Ben got around," Hamner said, and winked again.

"Did he?" Grayson said.

Hamner leaned back and regarded Grayson with a cunning smile. "You trying to get something out of me?"

"You started this," Grayson said. Hamner appeared to consider this thoroughly. Then he nodded gravely. "You're right, Grayson," he said. He leaned forward again and placed a hand on Grayson's shoulder in drunken camaraderie. "Look, Grayson, I'm telling you how it is. Ben got mixed up with a bunch of train robbers, and it was his tough luck to pick up a stray piece of lead. Now you're being smart about it. You figure that Ben's *compadres* were good friends of his, and I suppose that on a job like that holdup an *hombre* would have to throw in with somebody he could trust. So you've come here to Blue Hat to see what you can see. Well, Ben Flores had a lot of friends

the same place." Hamner burped and then he winked. "I know what I'm talking about, Grayson.

Grayson felt his heart speed up a little. He was open to any lead that might furnish him the information he was after and Hamner might provide one. If the man's drunkenness was genuine, he might spill something, provided he knew some fact and was not just being garrulous. On the other hand, if Hamner's drunkenness was feigned, then there was a motive behind his talk. Still, Hamner looked and smelled like he was on a toot.

around here. I was one of them. Me and Ben were just like that," Hamner said, holding up a hand with two fingers pressed together. "Does that make me one of the train robbers, Grayson?" Grayson thought this was slightly reminiscent of something that Anita Flores had said. Association could be damning, Grayson knew, but he did not intend to jump to conclusions.

"You're going a little too far, Hamner," he said quietly. "Naturally every acquaintance of Flores will come under suspicion, but unless they were involved in the holdup, they have nothing to worry about." He gave Hamner a direct, hard stare. "After all, not every friend of Flores could have been a member of the gang. As near as is known, there were only seven or eight of them."

"That's right," said Hamner, nodding his head sagely. "But look, Grayson. Me and Ben were just like that," he said, holding up those fingers again. "Of course, Ben never told me what he had in mind, but I can tell you how it was." His voice was hardly

above a whisper. "Did it ever occur to you, Grayson, that Ben Flores threw in with a bunch of hard cases right from La Fuente?" He winked. "Ben moved around quite a bit. Go to La Fuente and ask around, and you'll find that Ben went there now and then. Just add two and two."

"Maybe I don't know how to add." Grayson finished his beer. "Thanks for the drink, Hamner," he said, and started for the door.

BEHIND him Hamner hurriedly scooped up his change. He followed Grayson outside. This irritated Grayson a little, but then he told himself Hamner had a right to go wherever he pleased.

Hamner came alongside Grayson. He burped and patted his stomach. "That's enough beer for me for a while." He cast a sidelong glance at Grayson. "Where you staying?"

"Dutcher's Hotel."

Hamner laughed. "Me, I sleep in the haymow of the O.K. Corral."

The sun was hanging just above the mountain peaks to the west; the shadows were long and inviting. A rider came down the street on a paint horse, and Grayson became aware that Hamner had stopped to watch. Grayson looked again and saw that the rider was a woman, and he felt his steps slow.

She was slim, and very pretty, Grayson thought. Beneath the brim of her hat, he could see the red-gold of her hair done up in a ball on the back of her neck. The tip of her nose and her cheeks had been burned a bright red by the sun, but even this could not detract from her loveliness. She had clear blue eyes, and she looked first at

Grayson in a thoroughly impersonal way and then at Hamner, and she ducked her head a little in greeting.

Then she was past them, riding down the street, sitting the paint astride, the Levi's she was wearing tight about her hips. Grayson glanced at Hamner. The man had turned a little as he watched the woman go, and now he looked very sober. The corners of his mouth were pulled in a little, and hopelessness and futility seemed to be written in every line of his face. He looked like he was watching something very precious riding away from him.

"Who is she?" Grayson asked.

"Blanche Shackelford," Hamner said. He paused and then he went on, "Her husband owns Lazy S where I work."

The woman turned the paint into a side street and was gone from sight. Hamner pulled his hat down lower. His eyes looked bleak and empty.

"She's a wonderful woman, Grayson," he said quietly. Hamner's steps were now steady as he walked away.

GRAYSON first became aware of a man watching him while he was passing through the tiny lobby of Dutcher's Hotel. The man was seated in a corner, and Grayson had the feeling of being watched but when he glanced that way, the man was staring at the faded print of a Morgan horse on the opposite wall.

Grayson passed the feeling off as a false premonition and went upstairs to his room. He washed, and then he went downstairs on his way to eat. The man still sat in his corner

chair, and once again Grayson had the sensation of being surreptitiously studied, but when he glanced that way, the man was looking down at his fingernails.

Grayson gave the fellow a closer scrutiny this time. He noted that the man was rather slight. He had red hair and a thin face that seemed to have the mark of an innate cruelty in it. The lips were thin and held in tightly, as if the fellow made a point of being surly. The chin was small and receding, and a bright red bandanna was wrapped around the fellow's wrinkled neck.

Grayson went outside and entered the first eating place he came to. He ordered roast beef and potatoes and had just begun to eat when the man in the red bandanna walked inside and took a seat at the far end of the counter. Again Grayson had the feeling of eyes secretly studying him, and he tried once to look swiftly at the fellow in an effort to surprise him. He thought the man had just averted his glance, but he could not be sure. The fellow was looking at the wall across from him while he chewed his food ruminatively. Anger and irritation began to grow in Grayson.

He had coffee and apple pie. Then he paid for his meal and started for the door. The fellow was seated at the end of the lunch counter, next to the entrance. He kept his back to Grayson and his eyes straight ahead. Grayson gave him another good look, noting the .41 Colt Lightning pistol in a tied-down holster on the fellow's thigh.

Grayson's stride broke and he was tempted to say something, but

then he thought better of it and passed it up. He went outside and turned down the street. In front of the building next to the eating place, Grayson halted. Leaning his back against the wall, he made himself a cigarette, lighted it and began smoking it, every now and then glancing at the entrance to the cafe.

It was night now. The heat of the day was only a memory. A penetrating chill filled the air. Overhead the stars twinkled like white pin points of steel. To the west the afterglow of the setting sun still showed vivid and amber above the rugged mountain crests.

IN a little while, the man in the red bandanna came out of the cafe and paused just beyond the door. His glance darted up and down the street. The look took in Grayson lounging there against the wall, but the sweep of the glance did not break or linger. It moved on smoothly past Grayson, and then the man in the red bandanna was walking across the street. He disappeared into a saloon.

A feeling of uneasiness settled over Burt Grayson. There no longer was any doubt that the man was interested in him. That interest could be due to only one fact—the reason for Grayson's presence here in Blue Hat. Yet the interest was so surreptitious and sly that it left Grayson with a sleazy sensation crawling down his back.

He wanted a drink or two before going to bed, and so Grayson went to the Trail Drivers Bar. There was a fair crowd in the place, and Grayson found a spot at the far end of the bar. He ordered a glass of beer and sipped it

slowly while he had another cigarette.

He was halfway through his second glass when the swing doors parted and then the man in the red bandanna was standing there. The man paused while his eyes searched the room, and when they lighted on Grayson they stayed there for the slightest instant, and then the man was strolling up to the bar.

There was an opening just two drinkers down from Grayson, and the man stopped there. He ordered a shot of whisky, threw it down without delay, and ordered a second. He wiped his mouth with the back of a hand, and then turned and looked deliberately at Grayson.

Grayson met the fellow's glance and it was hard and direct and calculative. The man's lips were pinched tighter than ever, as if he were in the grip of a mean mood. After a while, he shifted his eyes and began staring down at the bar directly in front of him. He did not stir for some time, and he looked down at the bar with a fixity that proclaimed he was considering something of vast importance. Finally, his head lifted, and he raised his shot glass and drank swiftly. He beckoned the bartender for another drink.

Then the fellow turned and said something in a low voice to the two drinkers standing between him and Grayson. Grayson did not catch what was said, but the two hastily grabbed their drinks and stepped away from the bar. The man in the red bandanna turned back to his shot glass and downed his third drink. He exhaled loudly, and then he straightened and gave a hitch to his belt. He stepped

back from the bar and faced Grayson.

There was a look of hate in the man's eyes, and Grayson could not understand this for he did not even know the fellow. The man stood there a moment, glaring savagely at Grayson, and then he spoke. "Your name's Burt Grayson, isn't it?"

Grayson took a step back from the bar, moving slowly, eyes narrowed while he watched the other. There was a .44 Frontier Colt six-shooter in Grayson's holster, but he was never hasty in using it; and when he did, he usually shot to kill. So he was careful not to make any hostile move that would prompt the other into drawing his .41. "I'm Grayson," he said.

"You get around, don't you?" said the man, with the hint of a sneer.

"I'm the marshal for this whole Territory," said Grayson quietly. "It's my job to cover all of it."

"Is it your job to frame people?" Grayson lifted one brow. For an instant a cold fear settled in his stomach as the inevitability of what lay ahead dawned on him. Then the coldness was gone and anger filled him. "In all my life I never framed anybody," he said.

"That's what you say," the man said, viciously. "You sure framed a pal of mine—right into a hang noose!" Grayson's face paled slightly with the rage that surged in him. With an effort he kept his voice calm and subdued. "What was the name of this pal of yours I'm supposed to have framed?"

"You know his name," said the man.

"I don't know what you're talking about or even who you are. I

never saw you until an hour ago.”

“I’m Red Davenport,” said the fellow. “I always square for my pals.”

Grayson drew a deep breath. “I’m going to tell you something, Davenport,” he said in a low, purposeful tone. “I know what you’re up to. You’re trying to build up to an excuse to pull a gun on me. For some reason I don’t know, you want to kill me. Well, you’re welcome to try, but first let me tell you this. I’ve been in tough scrapes before and I’m still alive. You don’t scare me one little bit. However, I’m willing to overlook what you’ve just said. Turn around and walk out of here, and that will be the end of it between you and me.” He paused. “I don’t want to have to kill you, Davenport.”

DAVENPORT laughed derisively. “Kill me?” he cried. “If you weren’t so scared of me you wouldn’t be trying to talk your way out of it.” Davenport’s shoulders hunched; his body inclined forward at the waist; his eyes burned with evil brightness. “I’m going to make sure you’re not going to frame anybody any more!”

“Name some names,” Grayson said with vehemence. The wrath was starting to overwhelm him. “Quit rattling your tongue and name some names!”

“We don’t need no names. You know who I’m talking about.”

“Name some names or shut up!”

“Nobody is shutting me up, least of all a dirty, stinking, sneaking law-dog!”

“For the last time, Davenport, produce some names or shut your filthy, lying mouth!”

“We’ll see about that,”

Davenport cried, and reached for his gun.

Grayson saw it come. He saw the swift, practiced dart of Red Davenport’s hand, and he grabbed for his own weapon. Davenport was good and fast and confident. He would not have got into this if he hadn’t expected to triumph. The .41 Colt Lightning was a light, compact gun, but it could hit hard. Davenport got his out in a hurry and Grayson saw it pointing at him.

However, his own heavier .44 was in his hand, and he shot. The .41 exploded, but its roar was a quick echo to Grayson’s .44. The slug staggered Davenport. He reeled back and then lurched sideways, falling against the bar. His mouth was a wide grimace of agony, but he was not through yet.

Braced against the bar, Davenport started to aim his .41 again. Grayson fired. This slug reared Davenport up on his toes. A moan began in his throat, and then the sound choked up and a trickle of blood came out of one corner of his straining mouth. His knees gave way, and he started to sink toward the floor, but with his left hand he clasped the rim of the bar and kept himself from collapsing all the way. The .41 wavered crazily in his hand, but then it steadied and pointed at Grayson again.

Grayson fired once more. This bullet hit Red Davenport in the forehead. Abruptly, there was only the vacuity of death in his eyes; and an instant later he hit the floor and lay unmoving. He would do no more squaring, real or imaginary, for his pals.

THE land lay flat for quite a way around the buildings of Lazy S. The spines of the cholla cactus poked up at the copper sky, razor-sharp, and the inevitable sage and greasewood seemed to huddle forlornly under the glare of the sun. In the distance, the craggy peaks of a mountain range shimmered behind a purple mist. In the air, there was only the arid smell of sand and sage.

Grayson kept the steeldust at a walk as he approached the yard of Lazy S. He kept thinking how different this place was from Twin Hearts. There was nothing of despair and idleness about Lazy S. He saw someone cross from a corral to a shed, and there were horses in one corral and several white-faces in another, and out on the range Grayson could see other animals grazing. Lazy S looked as if it at least tried to be a going concern.

A windmill reared its tower at the sky, but the pump was silent for there was no breeze today. Grayson dismounted and watered his horse, all the while staring thoughtfully up at the house. A message had been sent to him, asking him to come out to Lazy S, although no explanation of why his presence was desired had been attempted. Still, he thought, it could be about only one matter, and this feeling left him a little taut and excited inside.

There was little doubt in Grayson's mind now that he had come to the right place in his search for the robbers of the Border Pacific train at La Fuente.

The attack by Red Davenport had made this a certainty in Grayson's

mind. Davenport, apparently, had been one of the gang. He had thought to get rid of Grayson by killing him in a gun duel on the pretense of avenging an imaginary friend. There could be no other motive for Davenport's attempt.

When the steeldust had drunk its fill, Grayson took the lines and, leading the horse, walked slowly up toward the house. He thought he felt eyes observing him from a shed, but when he glanced that way there was nothing to be seen. In a corral, a couple of horses whinnied and the steeldust threw up its head and answered. It was then that the woman appeared.

She was the same one Grayson had seen in Blue Hat and whom Bob Hamner had identified as Blanche Shackelford. She stepped out into the sun, and instantly her red hair was ablaze with luminescent color. She was smiling.

"How do you do, Mr. Grayson," she said. "My husband isn't home right now, but he will be shortly. If you'd care to wait, you can put your horse in a corral and then come into the house where you'll be out of the sun. I'll have something cool for you to drink."

Without waiting for a reply, she turned and disappeared into the house. Grayson led the steeldust to a corral, stripped bridle and saddle from the animal, and turned it into the enclosure. Then he started for the house.

She was waiting for Grayson at the door, and she ushered him into the parlor. The room was furnished with practical severity. The chairs and round table and couch were strictly

utilitarian. There were no frills whatever in the room. But it was neat and clean, and the windows were edged with curtains made out of a white-and-red flowered material. They struck a cheerful note in the room.

Grayson selected a chair and seated himself, very much aware of the dust on his clothing. He had tried brushing himself off outside but nothing short of washing could do a thorough job.

Blanche Shackelford appeared, carrying a tall glass. "Here is some cold lemonade," she said, her cheeks dimpling a little as she smiled at him. "If you'd rather have something stronger—"

"Thank you. This will do just fine." She took a chair across the room from Grayson, and for the next half hour carried on a light conversation about trivial things. Grayson sipped his lemonade and listened and looked at her. After a while, he became aware of something stirring in him, something which he could not define exactly but which struck him as being a lot like envy—envy for a man who had a wife like this.

She was young, no more than twenty-three or twenty-four, Grayson thought. Today she was wearing a high-necked blue dress that reached to the floor, but even the billowing folds of the ample skirt could not conceal the slim suppleness of her body. She gestured now and then as she spoke, and the shaft of sunlight slanting in through a window flashed on the wedding band on her finger, reflecting the light almost mockingly into Grayson's eyes.

She was detailing her efforts to

start a flower garden in this arid land, and Grayson felt his attention wavering. Suddenly he found himself thinking of another girl, also young and pretty, and of another ranch whose atmosphere was so much in contrast to this, and then over all of this came a portent of evil that left him feeling ill at ease.

GRAYSON came back to the present to hear Blanche Shackelford saying, "I believe that's my husband now." She left the room, and Grayson's heart was hammering in anticipation.

A door banged and a deep masculine voice said something which Grayson could not catch and she answered even more quietly, and then there was a moment's silence followed by an intimate, pleased giggle. Then, after a short while, they entered the parlor.

Glenn Shackelford was a big, handsome man, a year or two younger than Grayson. Shackelford's barrel chest strained the buttons of his shirt, and he had his sleeves rolled up almost to the armpits, revealing his immense biceps. His waist was flat and hard, and around it he wore a slanting shell belt that supported a holstered Remington .44-40. His face was square; the line of his jaw was straight. He apparently had not shaved for several days, and a tawny beard stubble covered his cheeks and chin and the front of his neck. His stare was clear and direct, but Grayson had the impression of a calculating shrewdness deep in those gray eyes.

"Grayson?" Shackelford said in his husky voice. "I'm Glenn Shackelford. Welcome to Lazy S." He

held out his hand and gripped Grayson's hard. Then Shackelford smiled at his wife. "Will you bring us some more lemonade?" While she was gone, Shackelford sat down opposite Grayson and remarked that it was mighty dry going this time of year and that he hoped it would rain soon, but that there was little chance for it. Then he said the beef market looked promising if only a man had enough steers to take advantage of it. By this time, Blanche Shackelford had returned with two glasses.

She handed Grayson his first, and then she went over to her husband and gave him his glass with a lingering tenderness. It was apparent that she worshiped her husband. Grayson did not know why, but the realization made him a little sick.

Blanche Shackelford retired demurely to a chair to one side. Shackelford drained half his glass. Then he leaned forward in his chair. A grave look came over his face. "I suppose you're wondering, Grayson, why I asked you out here."

"That's right."

Shackelford raised a hand and scratched at his whiskers. He was frowning a little. "It's very difficult for me to begin," he said, more to himself than to Grayson. "It's about that holdup at La Fuente," he said.

"Yes?" Grayson said.

Shackelford uttered a short, embarrassed laugh. "It's come to my ears that you've been asking around about all the acquaintances of Ben Flores, who was killed during the holdup. Well, you've no doubt learned that I was one of Ben's friends. But I'm not worried," said Shackelford. "I

had nothing to do with that holdup, and you can investigate me all you want, Grayson, and there will be no hard feelings on my part. I know it's your job, and I want to tell you I've got nothing to hide from you." He paused and frowned again. "However, there's something coming up which you might not understand. That's why I had you come out here. Like I said, I've got nothing to hide."

"I don't know what you mean," said Grayson. He had heard rumors, but he didn't intend tipping his hand.

Shackelford looked straight at Grayson. "Am I under suspicion?"

Grayson smiled, somewhat wryly. "Right now, everyone in and around Blue Hat is under suspicion. But suspecting somebody and proving it are two different matters, Shackelford." Shackelford made a deprecating gesture. "Well, I'm not really interested too much. I'm clean. I've got nothing to hide," he said with indifference. "But it all depends on who you talked to about me. There are people in Blue Hat who don't like me and there are those who are my friends. There are two kinds of information you could have picked up. Which kind was it?"

"I always discount a certain amount of what I hear as prejudice either one way or another. You've got nothing to fear in that respect, Shackelford."

"Well, since you might have talked to people who have no use for me," Shackelford said, "I've called you out here to tell you this in advance." He paused. "I'm leaving the country."

"Oh?" said Grayson.

"Don't you see?" said

Shackelford, leaning forward in earnestness. "There are those who are going to say that the reason I am leaving is that I was in that holdup and so I'm running away. That is why I called you out here, Grayson. I wanted to tell you personally. I wanted you to know before I left. If I was afraid of anything, I wouldn't be telling you a thing like this. I'd just slip away in the night, and before anyone knew I was gone, I'd be halfway to Mexico. But I've got nothing to hide."

THE man sounded sincere enough, Grayson thought. What he said made sense, yet Grayson had a feeling that there was more to this than what appeared on the surface. He glanced at Blanche Shackelford and saw that she was sitting quietly in her chair, her glance fixed unwaveringly and adoringly on the face of her husband.

Grayson turned his lemonade glass around in his fingers. He stared down at it and he said slowly, "You seem to be set up pretty good right here, Shackelford. Why would you want to leave?" Shackelford made an exasperated gesture. "You've seen the country. There's too little water, too little graze. I know you can fatten cattle here, but you've got to be careful you don't overgraze. You've got to have a lot of land to pasture only a few head. A man can't get ahead like that."

He edged forward in his chair. "This is the way I've got it figured out, Grayson." He seemed carried away by what he was saying. "Maybe the land in Mexico isn't much better than here, but everything down there is much

cheaper. Labor and supplies and stuff like that costs half of what it does here. I'm selling Lazy S, but I'm keeping my stock. I'm driving my cattle down to Mexico, and there I'm raising my steers cheap and then driving them back across the line and selling them at U.S. market prices. I figure I can clear twice what I'm making now."

"You've got a point there," Grayson agreed, "but why tell me all this?"

SHACKELFORD leaned back in his chair. He looked rather disgusted. "I want everything squared up before I go. I don't want to leave any loose ends lying around. I don't want you to get the idea I'm trying to run away from you." He laughed shortly. "After all, if I was trying to skip the country, I wouldn't be driving several hundred head of cattle with me. I'd be traveling real light, you can bet on that."

Grayson drank the last of his lemonade. He did not know what to make of this. There was a powerful logic behind everything Shackelford had said, but the situation could be interpreted in two ways. What confounded Grayson most of all was that he was helpless to do anything about it.

He stared intently at Shackelford. "What about this Red Davenport? Didn't he work for you?"

"That's right," said Shackelford, "but what my men do in their free time is none of my business and none of my responsibility." He cocked an eyebrow at Grayson. "The way I understand it, it was strictly a private fight between the two of you. Red was squaring for some old pal of his,

wasn't that it?"

"I never knew any pals of Davenport's," Grayson said flatly. "He tried to kill me because he was one of the gang at La Fuente."

Shackelford was silent a minute. The corners of his mouth pulled down in an expression of indifference. "Well," he said, shrugging, "maybe he was. Come to think of it, Red did take a few days off about a month ago. He always did fancy himself as a tough *hombre* and a top gun-slinger. Of course, I never inquired into his private affairs. All I ask of my men is that they do their jobs."

"Did anybody else on Lazy S take any time off along with Davenport?" Shackelford's glance turned cold for an instant. Then something sly seemed to enter his eyes. "Not that I know of," he said blandly. "My boys are all accounted for at the time of the La Fuente holdup."

"I think I'll be going," Grayson said, rising to his feet.

"Won't you stay for supper?" Shackelford said.

"No, thanks."

Grayson went down to the corral and roped and saddled the steeldust. He had just shut the corral gate when he noticed Bob Hamner riding up on a roan streaked with sweat and dust. Hamner smiled a greeting and Grayson nodded his head, and then he heard the quick footsteps behind him.

Grayson turned to find Blanche Shackelford standing there. She stared up at him, her face taut and drawn with anxiety. "You don't really suspect Glenn, do you?" she said, her

voice full of worry. "You don't believe my husband had anything to do with that holdup, do you?"

He stared gravely down at her, thinking how pretty she looked with the sun blazing in her hair and how desirable and comforting she had looked moving about in the house. This was all that a lonely man dreamed of, Grayson thought, but she was another man's wife and that was that.

"I never make an arrest, Mrs. Shackelford," he said, "unless I have proof."

"Glenn isn't guilty," she said, hurrying on, tense and straining to convince him. "I know all the ugly lies that have been spread about him, but if you knew him like I know him—so kind and considerate and gentle—you'd know that a thing like that is beyond him. Glenn would never rob or kill!"

He smiled as reassuringly as he could at her. "Like I just said, I never act unless I have proof. If your husband is innocent, it stands to reason I'll never have that proof so far as he is concerned, so why worry about it?"

"Thank you," she whispered. Her eyes turned soft and reflective, but her lips were pale and stiff. "I love my husband very much," she said. Then she turned and ran up to the house.

Grayson looked at Hamner. The man had stripped the saddle from his roan and now he stood, holding the saddle, watching Blanche Shackelford disappearing through the door. Again Grayson had the impression of an old hopelessness and futility in Hamner's

face. He stood there as if lost in some secret, poignant reflection.

Grayson mounted his horse. The creak of saddle leather appeared to rouse Hamner. He turned and looked up at Grayson.

"How long have they been married?" Grayson asked quietly.

"About a year."

"She thinks a lot of Shackelford, doesn't she?"

"He's always been the only one for her," said Hamner. Grayson thought he detected a note of bitterness. "He'll always be the only one."

"I hope I never have to hurt her."

"So do I," said Hamner sadly.

WHEN Shackelford's trail herd started out, a week later, Grayson followed it. About noon of the next day he dismounted, just below the sky line of a ridge. He tied the steeldust to a manzanite, and then he went up to the crest of the ridge and over it, cautiously, so he would not be outlined against the sky. Then he was on the other side, crouched behind a mesquite bush while he studied the scene below.

As usual, the sun blazed down. In the great distance stretched the low, alkali flats, a vast white expanse topped by a shimmering, glowing mist. Only the foolhardy or those to whom life no longer mattered would attempt to cross these flats.

The cows were strung out in a long line. Grayson estimated their number at no more than three hundred head. Not a very large trail herd, he thought, but large enough if it was being used only as a blind.

The herd moved slowly, sluggishly, under the heat of the sun. Over the cattle hung a pall of fine, swirling dust that at times almost obliterated them from Grayson's view. He was high up on the ridge, and the cows were skirting the bottom of the hill, but still their plaintive lowing drifted up to him.

Preceding the herd was the chuck wagon, and there also appeared to be several pack horses loaded with possessions. Grayson thought of the comfortableness of the parlor of Lazy S and how a neat and clean home was a woman's pride, and how a woman could become deeply attached to a few simple pieces of furniture. As he thought of this, a great disgust rose in him.

There they are, he told himself, quivering with helpless anger. There are your train robbers of La Fuente. They're running away from you right under your nose. They're laughing at you and heading for Mexico—and you can't do a damn' thing about it.

GRAYSON almost wept with frustration and rage. Then he got himself in hand and began to look at the matter calmly and sanely again. It was still a long way to Mexico, he thought. Cattle moved slowly. In this heat they might average about ten miles a day. Of course Shackelford could drive them mercilessly, not caring how many cows he killed, if deception was the motive behind all this and he had a quarter of a million dollars in gold bullion. But if he was to maintain a pretense of innocence and legality, he would have to drive the herd at a normal pace, and Grayson figured that Glenn Shackelford was

just smart enough and cocky enough to do that.

So Burt Grayson took a deep breath and settled back and watched the herd below. It was a long way to Mexico at the rate the Lazy S herd was traveling, he thought again. Much could happen between here and the border.

The drive came on. The chuck wagon. passed below Grayson, and the pack horses and then the leaders were there. The two men riding point were the most fortunate. They ate very little dust. It was the flankers and the drag riders who rode in a hell of swirling, choking dust. They were blurred, barely visible figures there far below, and Grayson suspected that because of the spuming dust they could not have seen him even if he were in the open.

The sun bore down; the alkali flats shimmered. Only the cholla and prickly pear and ocotillo and the other native plants did not seem to mind. This was their country.

The sun flashed brightly now and then when its rays were reflected by some polished stone or glittering strip of sand. It was the repeated flashing in one particular spot that finally caught Grayson's attention. The flashes came from off to the right and just a little way down the slope. He glanced in that direction and saw that the dazzling reflections were the sunlight off a rifle barrel.

There were several large slabs of rock there which formed a small parapet. Behind this wall, the rifleman crouched. Grayson took another look, and then he was out of his own shelter and angling across the

slope toward the parapet. He moved at a crouch even though there was not much chance of his being spied from below. The dust was now too thick about the cattle for the riders to see any distance up the slope. So Grayson moved swiftly and quietly.

The bawling of the cattle sounded harsh and forlorn. In the clear air he could hear the sharp clicking of their horns as they plodded on, bunched close together. Whoever it was behind the parapet watched all this with fixed absorption.

This person's back was to Grayson, and he leaped down on him quickly. Sand shifted a little under Grayson's boots, and the soft whisper of this sufficed to warn the other. By now Grayson knew who it was. As the figure whirled, Grayson lunged, one hand grabbing the rifle by its barrel and twisting it aside; then he was staring into the startled, contorted face of Anita Flores.

One instant they froze like that, breaths caught sharply in their throats, and then the girl struck. She let go the rifle with her left hand and brought her palm across Grayson's face. It was done so swiftly he had no time to avert his head. She hit him again. Grayson swore with vehemence.

THE girl started another blow at him, but he reached up and caught her free arm. Releasing her right hand from the rifle, Anita Flores swung that hand at Grayson, and he barely caught it in time. The girl was in a frenzy. Her eyes were luminous with hate and rage, and her lips were drawn back, baring her teeth in a furious grimace, and suddenly her head ducked down as she sought to

sink her teeth in one of Grayson's hands. He twisted her arms sharply, wrenching a gasp of pain out of her, and then he had her arms behind her back.

"Will you cut it out?" he said violently. "Will you behave?"

"Let me go," she said. "Let me go or I'll kill you!"

"Will you stop it?"

"I'll kill you, I'll kill you!" she said over and over, twisting and jerking in wild, frenzied efforts to free herself. She began to kick at his shins.

Grayson gave another twist to her arms, and this brought a small, short shriek out of her. "Will you behave?" he said. "Or do you want me to break your arms?"

He gave another twist and she gasped in agony, and then she seemed to give up. Her eyes closed, and she hung there limp and empty of resistance. The fury had left her features, and Grayson was conscious only of the smooth curve of her cheeks and the delicate length of her lashes and the tiny lines of haunted grief about her mouth. She sobbed once; as Grayson released his grip on her, she fell to her knees. Her head dropped down on her breast, and she knelt there like that, head bowed, a pitiable figure of utter dejection.

GRAYSON sank down behind the parapet beside her. Below, the Lazy S herd was still passing, but this was only the drag, and soon the last cows had gone by and the two drag riders; and then the sounds of the herd began to wane. Grayson sat down and stared at the girl.

At last her head lifted. She made it a point not to look at Grayson.

He could see her profile, and she looked as though she were in control of her emotions. She brushed her hair back, and then she picked up her hat from where it had fallen and dusted it against her thighs and fitted it on her head. After that, she rose to her feet and began brushing at her skirt. All this while, she studiously did not look at him.

Grayson said, "What were you trying to do?"

"I don't see where it's any of your business." Her tone was flat and thin.

Grayson sighed. "If you had fired, you could have started a stampede."

She whirled on him now. "That would have been just fine," she cried. "Maybe some of them would have been caught in the stampede and killed. That would have been just fine!"

He felt a chill at the unbridled savagery of her tone, but in the next instant, however, he felt a vast pity. She lived too much with grief and tormenting memories. This kind of living could only lead to more tragedy, one way or another. "Why don't you let it be?" he said gently. "Things will work out."

"I don't want to think about anything else," she said, her mouth a straight, purposeful line. "I won't think about anything else until they're all dead!"

"Why do you feel like this?"

"Why? He was my brother. He was all I had in the world. He was good and honest until they started working on him, filling him with stories of big money, fast and easy. He never would have done a thing like

that on his own. They talked him into it and he went to La Fuente with them and now he's dead and they're going to Mexico and nobody seems to care."

She could no longer control herself. She put her face in her hands and began to cry. Her shoulders shook with anguish. Grayson suspected that she had not cried about it for a long while. Perhaps it would do her good to give voice to some of her grief, instead of keeping it locked inside where it rankled and built up to overwhelming proportions. Gradually, her crying diminished.

She took out a handkerchief and dried her face. She sniffled once, and then her features were cold and stern and determined once more.

Grayson said, "They won't get to Mexico. I'll see to that."

She turned her head toward him, and her look was piercing. "Are you going to arrest them?" she said.

"As soon as I get some proof."

"Proof? What more proof do you want?" she said, anger putting a flush into her cheeks. "They're down there. You asked me once to name them for you. Well, I'll do it." She flung the names out with bitter vehemence. "Glenn Shackelford, Ed Ingram, Bob Hamner, Dick McEwen, and a couple others whose names I don't know. Well, go ahead and arrest them!"

"I can arrest them," Grayson said with quiet patience, "but when I bring them before a judge and he asks me for some evidence, what am I going to do?"

"I see," she said. Scorn filled her eyes. "While you sit on your rump and say you don't have evidence, they keep on getting closer to Mexico. I still

think my way is the best one."

It was Grayson's turn to color. "At the rate they're moving, they won't reach Mexico for another ten days. I'll turn something up in that time."

"I just bet you will," she said, her tone weighted with contempt.

Grayson got to his feet. He reached out and took her arms in his hands. She tensed and started to pull away, but then she refrained and stood there stiff and suspicious, staring up at him.

"I want to tell you this, Anita," Grayson said. "I know how you feel. I don't blame you one little bit for wanting to get even. But this is something too big for you. They're a smart and clever bunch. They stole a quarter of a million dollars in bullion, and you can bet that they won't stand for anyone trying to keep them from getting away with it. They're smart and they're desperate. Tangle with them and they'll kill you!"

"I don't care," she said stiffly, "just so I take some of them with me."

"Don't talk like that," he said sternly. Again that feeling of pity for her passed through him. It made him feel futile wanting to help her so much and not getting anywhere with it. "Twin Hearts is no place for you, Anita," he said. "It's too full of memories. Don't you have any friends in Blue Hat that you can move in with for a while?"

"I won't go back to Blue Hat."

"Are you going back to Twin Hearts then?"

"I am—when that Lazy S bunch is all dead!"

A FEELING of going around in circles filled Grayson again. The talk

always came back to this. It was an obsession with her.

"Don't you believe in me?" he said, getting a little exasperated. "I've told you I'll take care of the Lazy S bunch. It's a long way to Mexico, and they'll slip up somewhere along the way. Their kind always makes mistakes, and when they do I'll be there to take advantage of it. Don't you see?"

She said nothing. Her eyes, looking up at him, were bright with skepticism. There was a cynical curve to her mouth.

"Look, Anita," he said, trying hard to make her see the light. "If I can find the bullion in their possession that's all the evidence I'll need. And I'll bet anything that they've got the bullion with them. They wouldn't run off and leave a quarter of a million dollars behind them, and once I find it they're done for. Now do you believe in me, Anita?" She pulled back a step, and Grayson let go of her arms. He could see that she still was not convinced, and this made him angry and disgusted.

"You do it your way, Grayson," she said, "and I'll do it mine."

TWO days went by with Burt Grayson following the Lazy S herd. He made no effort now to conceal his presence; he silhouetted himself against the sky line. At times, he rode to within a hundred yards of the herd and he could feel the hard scrutiny of the riders, and always he rode away without hailing them. It was slow and dull work, but Grayson felt that if he could plant the seeds of worry and anxiety in Shackelford and his men it would be a form of progress.

In those two days Grayson did not have a glimpse of Anita Flores. He began to think that she had finally reconciled herself to the uselessness of her efforts and had gone home. Grayson had troubled moments when he thought of her alone at Twin Hearts, living with all those morbid, useless memories. She needed to get out among people, to learn to smile and hope again, but Grayson doubted that she would. Those brooding thoughts of remorse and vengeance had gone too far in her. She was obsessed with them; she could think of nothing else. Sadly, Grayson shook his head and put his mind to the matter at hand.

It was not as easy and simple as he had pretended to Anita Flores it would be. Grayson did not underestimate the shrewdness of the men he was trailing. They were clever and daring. They knew they were under suspicion, and if they fled outright that would establish their guilt. Instead they were leaving the country in an ostensibly innocent and guileless manner. They were taking their time and they were leaving right under his nose and he had to think of something before they reached the border. The pressure was all on him.

When the trail herd bedded down that evening, Grayson made a circle around it and rode on for about a mile before pitching camp. He had been seen, he knew, but he wanted to be. He wanted them to be constantly reminded that he was dogging them. Maybe a weak member of the gang would become panicky and crack. That was all the break Grayson was asking for.

He made camp at the foot of a high bluff. While it was still daylight, he built a fire and made coffee and cooked some fat back and beans and pan bread. He kept the fire going, but when it grew dark he moved his blankets just out of the range of the firelight. He was taking no chances.

Grayson lay there quietly on his blankets, his head propped on his saddle, listening to the sounds of the steeldust moving about at the end of its picket rope. He had not shaved in three days, and already a black growth covered his cheeks and chin and the front of his neck and it was beginning to itch, but he told himself he would have to get used to it. He had a feeling he would not shave again for quite a while.

The quiet of the night induced a somber thoughtfulness in him. He remembered that today he had seen Blanche Shackelford riding beside the herd. She had been dressed in men's clothing, and he had taken her at first for a slim boy. Then she had taken her hat off to fan her face, and when the sun struck the crimson gold in her hair, it had come with a shock to Grayson who this really was.

He could not understand why her presence should upset him. She was Shackelford's wife, and it was only natural that she should be going with her husband. Yet Grayson wished that she were not here. He had a premonition of the events to come, and he did not relish the thought of Blanche Shackelford being hurt and disillusioned the way Anita Flores had been. A wound like that took away all the joy of living and made a person a hollow, resentful shell.

Grayson was just beginning to doze off when a sound brought him up abruptly to a sitting position. Tense and apprehensive, he listened, and the noise came again and Grayson recognized it as the approach of two horses.

He slid the .44 out of its holster and lay down on his stomach. He was not in the light of the fire, but the sky was clear and the stars were out, and it was possible to make out shapes for a little distance.

The two riders loomed up out of the dim dark, riding side by side. Their approach was too direct and lacking in caution to be hostile. They were making straight for the fire.

Grayson rose to his feet and holstered his gun. Stepping into the firelight, he waited for the two to come up. They reined in their horses and stared at Grayson a while and then both dismounted. One of them said, "Loosen the cinches, Virgil."

"In a pig's ear," said the one called Virgil. He walked up to the fire and squatted on his haunches. He was quite young, around nineteen or so, and he had a long, sullen face with a pointed chin and a small, mean mouth and yellow eyes. He took out a brown-paper cigarette and lighted it with a brand from the fire.

THE other one had the appearance of a dandy. His Stetson was cream-colored and looked expensive, and he had stuck a red feather in the band. His coat was a green fustian, and even out here in the middle of nowhere, he was wearing a bright red cravat with a diamond stickpin that kept reflecting the red glare of the fire. His shirt was white

linen and his vest was a gaudy red and yellow. The only concession he had made to the harshness of the country was a pair of buckskin leggings.

His face looked vain and almost feminine in its well-kept appearance. The eyes were large and wide as if he regarded everything with a constant air of wonderment. He affected a thin, hairline mustache. He said, "You're Grayson, the U.S. marshal, aren't you?" Grayson nodded.

The fellow showed white, even teeth in a smile. "Permit me to introduce ourselves. I'm Lucky Waddell." He uttered a soft, polite laugh. "They call me that because I win now and then at cards. The young man is Virgil Bartlett. Say hello to Grayson, Virgil."

"In a pig's ear," Virgil said. Waddell gave a polite laugh again. "Virgil is a trifle sullen tonight."

"Did you want to see me about something?" Grayson asked.

"Well, yes and no," Waddell said. "Make up your mind," Grayson said. Waddell's laugh had a trace of embarrassment in it this time. "I really came to see if you were interested in say—ah—a game of cards?"

"You a gambler?" Grayson said.

"Well—ah—I play cards now and then, but my profession is really salesmanship. Isn't that right, Virgil?"

"In a pig's ear," said Virgil, blowing a cloud of smoke defiantly.

It was starting to get Grayson. "Can't he say anything else?"

"He can be very difficult at times," Waddell said; "he can be most trying. Just don't pay any attention to

him."

"Well, what do you want with me?" Grayson asked.

Lucky Waddell took out a brown cigarette, identical to the one Virgil was smoking. He lighted the cigarette, took a couple of puffs and then he said, "You must be very lonely traveling all by yourself. I felt I should make your acquaintance and then we could pass a few hours in conversation with perhaps a hand or two of cards, just something to while away the time."

"Who sent you?" Grayson said. "Shackelford?"

"Well, now, really," Waddell said. "You are with him, aren't you?"

Waddell drew on his cigarette and blew smoke out slowly, as if all this were giving him time to think. Beside the fire, Virgil lighted another cigarette from the butt of the first.

"Yes, I am traveling with Shackelford," Waddell admitted. "Like I told you, I'm a salesman. I travel a lot."

"You'd travel much faster if you didn't tie yourself down to a trail herd. Or are you a cow hand too?" Grayson said. His tone was dry.

"Well, as a matter of fact, I'm not, but Virgil is a cowpuncher and a very good one. Aren't you, Virgil?"

"In a pig's ear," said Virgil. Grayson's lips tightened. "Doesn't he ever get smashed in the mouth when he's like this?"

Waddell gave his apologetic laugh. "Just don't pay any attention to him." Grayson's temper flared up. "Just what are you up to, Waddell?" he asked.

"I'm not up to anything,"

Waddell said with hurt innocence. "I just came to see if you wanted to play some cards." He winked. "You really should, Grayson. I have a hunch you'd win. I have a most definite hunch that you'd win." Waddell laughed again. "Don't let my name frighten you. I'm really not lucky all the time. Tonight I have a feeling I couldn't win at all."

"Yet you insist on playing."

"That's right. I wouldn't mind losing to you, Grayson; I'd like to very much."

"I see," Grayson said. "Is there any specific sum you're prepared to lose?"

"Let's say it's substantial," Waddell said. "It will be a very profitable night for you, Grayson."

"And after I've won all this money from you," said Grayson, "what then?"

"Well," said Waddell, gesturing daintily, "after making such a killing, it would be only natural for you to want to celebrate. I imagine you'd ride all the way back to Blue Hat and have yourself a real time."

"And forget all about Shackelford?"

"Shackelford has nothing to do with this; this is strictly between you and me, Grayson," Waddell said. "Just a friendly game of cards."

"Just a friendly case of bribery," Grayson said, coldly. "Isn't that what you mean?"

"Oh-oh," Waddell said, making a face, "bribery is such an ugly word. We would really play cards, Grayson. Here, I have a deck with me. There is nothing wrong with a couple of men playing cards, is there? Naturally one man will have to lose. Unfortunately,

in this case, the loser will be me." He winked knowingly. "What do you say?"

"In a pig's ear," said Grayson.

WADDELL lost his easy composure for an instant, and then he gave his soft, polite laugh. "Well, if you must be facetious," he said. "Seriously, though, Grayson, you should wait and see what I am prepared to lose before you reach a decision. I assure you I can lose a most attractive sum."

Grayson paled. "Get out," he said. The fury of his tone drove Waddell back a step. "Wait a minute," he said, throwing up his hands as if to defend himself. "Hear me out, Grayson. I am not proposing anything wrong. I'm—"

"Get going," Grayson said. "And don't forget that stupid squirt that came with you."

Virgil came to his feet like a shot, his right hand poised above the handle of the gun at his hip. Grayson turned to face him. "Go on, squirt," he said. "If you want what Red Davenport got, go on and pull your iron!"

Virgil's mouth twitched. His blazing eyes flashed once at Waddell as if seeking instructions, then came back to Grayson, but they wavered a little too much; he made no move to pull his gun.

Lucky Waddell got his handkerchief out. He began to dab at his sweating face. "Let's go, Virgil," he said, and this time Virgil made no reply.

The two mounted their horses. Waddell opened his mouth as if to speak, then he took another look at Grayson's face and said nothing. He turned his horse and rode off, Virgil

following.

Grayson watched them go. He was still trembling with anger.

TWO evenings later, Burt Grayson rode into Shackelford's camp. The cattle were bedded down. They had water and graze this night, and some of them were lowing contentedly. The sun was down; the cool of evening had begun to pervade the air.

Grayson spotted Virgil and one other man he didn't recognize circling around the herd. As Grayson pulled up beside the cooking fire, Glenn Shackelford came forward to meet him.

There was a small tent pitched to one side, and standing in front of it was Blanche Shackelford. Grayson nodded to her, but she made no acknowledgment. Her eyes rested on him, wide and fearful. Grayson wished that the woman weren't around. It would have made his job easier for him.

Shackelford planted himself, with his legs slightly spraddled, and hooked both thumbs in his cartridge belt. His shirt was open halfway down his chest, and he still had wet splotches of sweat under his armpits. He stood there, not friendly nor hostile, watching Grayson.

Grayson dismounted. He saw Bob Hamner and Lucky Waddell and one other man come up and stand silently behind Shackelford. Neither Hamner nor Waddell made any effort to greet Grayson, and he let it go like that.

Without preliminary, Grayson said, "I want to examine all your packs." Shackelford's face showed no emotion. "You got a search warrant?"

"No," said Grayson. He took a breath. "But I still want to take a look." Suddenly Shackelford smiled. There was derision more than anything else in the smile. "Sure, go ahead," he said, waving a hand in an amiable gesture. "Look wherever you want. I'm not stopping you." He turned to his men. "Give Grayson a hand, boys. He's the law. He's the U.S. marshal for this Territory. Let's cooperate."

Nobody moved. "Come on, come on," Shackelford exhorted. "You heard me. Open up the packs, every single one of them. Clear out the chuck wagon. You heard Grayson, didn't you? He's the law, and we've got to do what he says. Get a move on, boys." Silently, the three fell to work. Shackelford turned to Grayson. The smile, full of mockery, was still on his face. "Evidently you don't believe everything that's said to you, Grayson," he said. "Well, I don't blame you. I suppose in a job like yours you can't be too careful. But I told you once I had nothing to hide. Evidently, I didn't convince you. Maybe now I will." Grayson watched with tightened lips. It was bitter medicine for him. He could feel the men's derisive glances on him. None of them spoke to him, but he was aware that they were silently laughing in his face. They cleared everything out of the chuck wagon, and Grayson took a look inside and saw only the barrenness of the floor boards. It made him feel more futile than ever.

"Well?" Shackelford asked. "You satisfied, Grayson? Or do you want to search us now? Maybe we're carrying the bullion in our pockets."

"You haven't reached Mexico yet, Shackelford," Grayson said grimly. "That's right," Shackelford said. Abruptly, his face sobered; his eyes turned hard. "Now I'm going to tell you something, Grayson. I've taken all I'm going to take from you. I've stood for your trailing me day and night. I've even allowed you to search my camp without a warrant. I've done everything in my power to prove to you I had nothing to do with that La Fuente holdup. If I've finally convinced you, you can ride away and that will be the end of that. But don't dog me any more, Grayson. Understand? Law or no law, I won't stand for it. I'm no criminal."

"If you're so clean," said Grayson, "why did you try to bribe me?"

"When did I try to bribe you?"

"You sent Waddell, didn't you?"

"Oh, that," Shackelford said. "Lucky told me about it." Shackelford seemed amused. "Lucky likes to talk, and sometimes he gets all mixed up. If you want to know the truth, Grayson, Lucky is a cardsharp. He's always looking for a sucker. It's just his way of talking someone into a game by pretending he is going to lose." Shackelford laughed. "You should've tried playing with Lucky, Grayson. He'd have won even your badge from you."

"All right," said Grayson. Disappointment and resentment filled him. "Have it your way, Shackelford, but you still haven't reached Mexico."

"I know I haven't," said Shackelford through his teeth, in his first display of rage, "but you aren't going to stop me." Grayson swung up

on the steeldust. "We'll see about that," he said.

SOMEWHERE off in the night a couple of coyotes were crying at each other. Grayson lay on his blankets, staring at the stars. About him the land lay quiet and sleeping. Mesquite and sage and prickly pear were dark, huddled shapes against the white of the sand. Saguaro cactus loomed here and there with bristly arms lifted in mute supplication to the distant, indifferent sky.

As usual, Grayson had laid his bed beyond the reach of the light of his fire. It was the result of an old caution in him. He was old and wise in the ways of the lawless, and he realized that the closer the Lazy S herd got to Mexico, the greater the tension became, and in direct proportion his own peril increased. So he lay quietly in the darkness, ears attuned to any hostile sounds.

Another day had passed in which he had relentlessly dogged the trail of the Lazy S herd. He was getting irritable and impatient. The merciless heat of the sun and the unbroken loneliness of the land made him feel ugly and vicious inside. The thought began to grow in him that he was doomed to failure. He knew who his quarry was, but he could not do anything about it. This realization left him angry and helpless.

Abruptly from out of the dark came the sounds of an approaching horse. Grayson rolled on his side, his hand on his gun. He remembered the night when Lucky Waddell and Virgil had arrived like this, and remembrance filled him with fury and distaste.

The rider came on, making no effort to conceal his presence. Grayson's first glimpse was of the dark silhouette of the horseman alongside that of a barrel cactus. The rider came into the circle of firelight, and with a start Grayson saw that it was Blanche Shackelford.

He walked forward to meet her. He did not speak. He merely ducked his head once in greeting and waited.

She was still dressed in men's clothing—faded blue Levi's and scuffed riding boots with small, steel spurs on the heels. Her stiff-brimmed black hat was pulled down low, shading her eyes and her features, but even so Grayson could tell they look strained and apprehensive.

"Aren't you ever going to stop following us, Grayson?" she asked.

A sadness filled Grayson. He knew now what lay ahead and he knew it was not going to be pleasant, but he would have to put up with it. The duties and responsibilities of his job allowed him no other choice. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Shackelford," he said.

"But why, Grayson, why?" she cried, spreading both hands in appeal.

Grayson's lips tightened. "I'm working at my job."

She shook her head in puzzlement. "I can't understand why you persist in believing that my husband had anything to do with that holdup. He has been quite frank with you. He has not tried to hide anything from you. He has cooperated all along with you. He even allowed you to search all our belongings although you had no right to. What more does Glenn have to do to convince you of his innocence?"

"If he's innocent, he has nothing to worry about."

She came up to him now and placed a hand on his arm. Looking down, he could see the wedding band on her finger, and the sight of it made him angry.

"Please, Grayson," she said, "can't you see that Glenn is all right?"

He could not think of anything to say in the face of this woman's blind loyalty. She was going to be badly hurt and disillusioned someday, and Grayson hoped he would have no part in it, but he could see no way out if he was going to carry his job to a successful conclusion.

"Please, Grayson," she said again. "I'm not worried about Glenn, because he's innocent, but your following us day in and day out is getting on his nerves, and I'm afraid he's going to do something rash if you don't stop." Grayson was delighted. So Shackelford was beginning to crack, he thought gratefully. Then he thought what this could eventually mean to Blanche Shackelford, and all the exuberance drained out of him. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Shackelford," he said.

HER fingers pressed tightly against the flesh of his arm. "If you only knew how things really were, Grayson, you'd realize it was ridiculous to suspect Glenn of that holdup."

Grayson said nothing. He stared at her without seeing her, seeing only the rottenness and duplicity of the setup.

"If you only knew him like I know him, Grayson," she went on when he did not speak. "If you only knew the gentleness of his heart and

soul, you'd realize how wrong you are."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Shackelford."

Her face changed. A look of resolution came over it, the lips pinching in a determined line, and then a slight flush touched her cheeks.

"Tell me this, Grayson," she said. "Would a man do what you say my husband has done when he knows he's going to be a father? Would he think so little of his unborn child that he would jeopardize its future?"

The unexpectedness of this announcement left Grayson stunned and bewildered. His mind could not begin to grasp its implications.

"Now is everything clear, Grayson?" she continued. "Now do you know why we are going to Mexico? It's to give our child a fresh, clean start in life. We don't want him burdened even before birth with the ugly rumors that his father was a train robber. Do you understand? Will you stop following us?"

Grayson awoke with the roll of far-off thunder in his ears. Another day had passed, and this night Grayson had been deep in exhausted slumber. All day he had been troubled by an uneasy anxiety, but as soon as he had wrapped himself in his blankets, he had dropped off. Now he came awake, instantly alert, listening to the distant rumble.

For an instant he froze there, listening, then he bolted to his feet, grabbed his saddle, and raced for the steeldust. This was not thunder that he was hearing. The sky was clear, the stars glittered brightly, there was not the trace of a cloud anywhere. The sound came unbroken and mounting in volume; it carried a threatening

urgency; it was swelling into a savage, heart-freezing roar. The ground seemed to shake and shudder beneath its fury.

Stampede!

The steeldust was wild-eyed and snorting with terror at the end of its taut picket rope. Above the pounding of his heart, Grayson kept his voice cool and soothing. He got the saddle on and cinched. He pulled the picket pin and leaped onto his horse.

That was all the time he had. He saw the black mass of the stampeding cattle loom up swiftly. The clacking of horns sounded above even the deafening rumble of a thousand pounding hoofs. The Lazy S herd came on headlong, blind and heedless in its primal terror, smashing and flattening everything that came under its churning hoofs.

Grayson saw a saguaro cactus go down. One instant it was there, upright in the gloom, solid and strong as if it would endure for a hundred years. Then it was gone. Where it had stood was a surging mass of frenzied cattle.

Grayson whirled the steeldust and jabbed hard with the spurs, but it was not really necessary. With a snort of fear, the horse had taken off. Grayson bent low in the saddle. Behind him there was only the sharp clacking of horns, brittle and terrifying, the earth-shaking pounding of a thousand hoofs and the nearness of death.

THE steeldust streaked across the land. Grayson had no doubt that the horse could outrun the stampeding herd. But a stumble or a fall would be fatal. He had a brief, terrifying vision

of going down beneath the mad, senseless pound of those hoofs. He could feel the hand of death reaching out toward him from among the leaders of that racing horde; he could feel its touch on the back of his neck.

Above the roar of the stampeding herd, Grayson thought he detected the sharp crack of several gunshots. He began to edge his horse toward the side, seeking to work out of the direct path of the hurtling cattle. Once, the steeldust's rhythm faltered for a terrible instant, and the cold thought hit Grayson that here he went, but the steeldust straightened out and again was running straight and true.

Grayson drew his gun. Turning in the saddle, he shot at the ground directly in front of the lead steers. The flash of it frightened several of them and they veered inward toward the body of the herd, but the pressure inside that maddened horde was too great and the leaders were thrown back. Grayson tried another shot. This one, too, proved ineffective.

So Grayson faced ahead, settling down now to the task of getting out of the path of the stampeding cattle. He edged the steeldust farther and farther to one side, and finally, with a breath of relief, he saw the steers swerve in the opposite direction. He was safe.

At that moment, a bullet tore past Grayson's cheek.

An involuntary shout of alarm burst out of him. He grabbed his gun and ducked low along his horse's neck. Another shot cracked out above the roar of the stampede, and there, outlined against the darkness, was the

hulk of a rider. It was all clear to Grayson now. The stampede was no accident. It had been deliberately started and aimed for his camp to trample him to death. This having failed, they were trying something else.

He pushed the steeldust ahead as the rider fired again. Grayson held his aim low and got off a shot. He followed it with a quick second one, and a scream of intense agony tore the night apart. Grayson saw the rider's arms go up, clawing at the sky, like the gesture of an Indian dancer in some primeval rite. Then the horse bolted, and suddenly the saddle was empty as the animal raced off in panicked fright.

Grayson crouched in his saddle, breathing hard, his sweaty hand closed tight about the handle of his gun. They were out to get him this night, he realized chillingly. They were done with subterfuge and pretense.

The last of the stampeding herd raced by, and now the thunder began to recede, but it was still awesome and terrifying in its fury. No more riders appeared, however. The cattle were being allowed to run themselves out. There was no effort being made to turn them and stop them, but of course the cows no longer mattered. They had only been a blind anyhow, Grayson thought. Now Shackelford and his men were free to flee without any encumbrances; that is, unless Shackelford was the man Grayson had just killed.

But Grayson did not investigate just yet. He waited a while, motionless in the dark, hearing the quick, hard

breathing of his horse and, in the distance, the sound of the stampeding herd growing fainter and fainter. Grayson studied the gloom so intently his eyes ached, but no one else appeared.

Then the land was quiet again. The fury of the stampede was gone, yet the terror it had inspired still seemed to permeate the air. Now there was only the glitter of the stars overhead and the whiteness of the sand and the lonesome huddling of sage and greasewood. It seemed to Grayson that he and the steeldust were the only living things in all this desolation.

Gently, he urged the horse ahead. Beside the dead man, Grayson dismounted. The fellow was lying on his face, and with the toe of his boot Grayson rolled him over. He did not know the man's name, but Grayson remembered having seen him with Shackelford.

AT DAWN, Grayson rode up to where Shackelford had made camp the previous evening. He was surprised to see the tent used by Blanche Shackelford still standing. That was the only evidence of the campsite.

Grayson rode warily. He assumed that Shackelford and his men had fled, swift and headlong, intent on reaching the border. Still, one or more of them might have been left behind to waylay Grayson, and this last consideratio'n made him cautious, even though the land about him seemed deserted.

He came across the tracks of the chuck wagon, and suddenly he saw the pattern of it. A sense of humiliation swept over him briefly, as he realized

how he must have been tricked. He recalled the interior of the chuck wagon as he had seen it a couple of nights ago, completely empty, and the memory of it mocked him. It had not then occurred to him that the wagon probably had a false bottom in which the bullion was concealed. But now it did. Why else would Shackelford slow himself down with a cumbersome vehicle now?

Angry and determined, Grayson was about to start in pursuit of the wagon when some intuition prompted him to look into the tent. As he turned toward it, he saw Blanche Shackelford.

She had just stepped from the interior, and now she stood quietly. Her face was turned toward him, but Grayson had the feeling that she was not seeing him. She was staring past him with a blankness and despondency that made him instantly think of Anita Flores. He cursed softly to himself as he dismounted and walked over to her. In all his life he had never wanted to kill anyone as much as he wanted to kill Glenn Shackelford right now.

Grayson saw the focus of her eyes change. She was aware of him now, he knew, but the sadness and the hurt still prevailed in her expression.

"Hello, Grayson," she said dully.

He did not quite know how to begin. He nodded. After a short pause, he said, "Are you alone?"

She lowered her head in acknowledgment. Rage surged again in Grayson. Because she was an encumbrance, she had been abandoned, like the cattle. The bullion far outweighed any other

consideration so far as Shackelford was concerned. Still, Grayson was not sure she knew how low her husband had sunk, and he was not going to destroy any last illusion she might have. She obviously had suffered enough this past evening, and if she was still hanging on to a tiny bit of her dream, Grayson was not going to take it from her.

"What happened?" he asked gently. "I don't really know." Her tone was wooden, but underneath it he could detect heartbreak. "It all happened so suddenly. I was asleep, and I woke up when the cattle spooked." She passed a hand over her face and shuddered. "There was so much noise and confusion, I don't rightly remember." Her eyes sought his beseechingly. "I imagine Glenn and the boys are out rounding up the cattle. They should be back any time now, shouldn't they?"

WHEN Grayson did not answer, she said, "He *is* coming back. I *know* Glenn is coming back."

"Did he tell you he was?"

"He didn't tell me anything. Don't you see how it was, Grayson? It all happened so fast, everyone went out after the cattle. I didn't even see Glenn. But he'll be back," she said.

Grayson said nothing. He could not decide what to do. His job demanded that he take off in pursuit of Shackelford, but that meant abandoning Blanche Shackelford. He could not leave her here in the middle of nowhere, and if he encumbered himself with her, Shackelford would make good his flight to Mexico. Damn you, Shackelford, Grayson thought, damn you for the dirty, stinking

coward you are.

"Glenn will be back," Blanche Shackelford was saying. "He has to come back. It isn't only me, Grayson, don't you see? It's our child. It means so much to Glenn. He'll be back," she said, nodding, as if she had finally convinced herself. "He'd never leave me. Not now."

"Sure," Grayson said. "Sure."

He could have wept in impotent rage. She had built a fine and noble world around her husband, and now it was crumbling with all the heartache and anguish that always accompany the shattering of a dream. Her world lay shattered, but she was trying desperately to fit it together again.

"I'll wait here," she said with naive simplicity. "Glenn will be coming for me any time now. He'd go crazy with fear if he came back and found me gone."

Grayson had little choice. He would have to take her with him. But when it came to telling her this, he was helpless.

There came the sound of a horse, and Blanche Shackelford gave a small and happy cry. "That's Glenn. See? I told you he'd be back!"

They had both turned, Grayson drawing his gun instinctively. Even before he recognized the rider, Grayson heard Blanche Shackelford's sharp gasp of disappointment.

The rider was Anita Flores.

GRAYSON left Blanche Shackelford in Anita's care. He made Anita understand Blanche's torment, and for the first time, Grayson saw a crack in the hard shell of bitterness and grim purpose that had once seemed to be such an inflexible part of

her. A soft look had come into her eyes, and so Grayson had no misgivings as he rode off.

He had not been especially surprised to see Anita Flores. He had never quite believed that she had returned home. She had been too much obsessed with thoughts of vengeance to have given up simply because he told her to. She had followed the Lazy S herd as he had followed it, except that she had remained out of sight.

Grayson had little difficulty following the trail laid down by the wheels of the chuck wagon. Progress of the vehicle would be much slower than that of a horse, and Grayson was confident he could overtake the wagon. However, he did not dare push his horse too hard.

The sun was high now. All the land felt like a suffocating oven beneath the glare of the burning sky. Every little patch of shadow thrown by a mesquite or a cactus looked cool and inviting. However, Grayson stopped only now and then to rest the steeldust. He felt all in; the weight of the world seemed to be pressing down on his shoulders; his mind kept thinking of cool shade and icy water and the bliss of untroubled sleep. Then he would think of Shackelford and Hamner and the others, and of a lonely, forsaken woman still clinging stubbornly to the shards of a dream, and the weariness was forgotten.

He looked up once, and there against the burnished sky he saw a couple of vultures banking and wheeling. There was something gruesome and loathful in the pattern of their flight; they seemed to be

waiting with unclean, brutal patience for death to come to something far below them.

Grayson's heart quickened. No longer was he aware of his tiredness. He squinted in the glare of the sun, seeking to find what it was that kept the buzzards wheeling above, and knowing that it could be only one thing.

The steeldust plodded on, following the twin lines in the sand made by the wheels of the chuck wagon. One of the vultures glided down almost to the ground, then swiftly rose again. Grayson was so close now he could almost hear the dismal, foul flapping of the great black wings.

Then he saw the bodies. There were two of them. Virgil lay slumped against a boulder, one arm thrown over it, his cheek resting against his forearm. His eyes were closed and the sullenness was gone from his mouth, and he looked like he had just dropped off to sleep. However, this impression was quickly dispelled by the large blot of dried blood that covered the front of his shirt.

The other one lay on his stomach, his face pressed into the sand. However, the green fustian and the faint reek of cologne water was all that Grayson needed for identification of this one. It was Lucky Waddell.

There was no question about Virgil's being dead. Grayson halted beside Waddell and dismounted. He turned Waddell over and for a moment thought that Waddell, too, was dead. Then a soft, sighing breath came through Waddell's slack lips.

Grayson felt for Waddell's pulse

and found it faint and erratic. Getting his canteen, Grayson propped Waddell's head up a little and poured some water in the man's mouth. Waddell swallowed at first. Then he gagged and choked.

Grayson lowered Waddell's head back on the sand. "Waddell," he said. "Can you hear me, Waddell?"

He did not expect any answer. However, Waddell's eyes fluttered and then opened, and he was staring up, eyes filmed with a glazed incomprehension. "Can you talk?" asked Grayson. Waddell's lips moved soundlessly. Then it seemed that he realized he was not making any sound, and he stopped his efforts. A focus entered his eyes now, however, and they moved ever so slightly and fixed on Grayson. His lips moved again and this time he spoke. "He killed Virgil," Waddell whispered. "Shackelford?" Grayson said.

"He killed Virgil," Waddell repeated.

"Can you tell me how it happened?"

"He killed Virgil," Waddell said once more.

Grayson said nothing. He waited patiently while Waddell's eyes brightened and a frantic, lucid comprehension glittered in them. Waddell's tongue touched his lips, and then he spoke again. "He told me and Virgil to stay behind, and if you came along we were to kill you, Grayson. I said no and Virgil said no. I said he was just trying to get rid of us. He had the bullion, and he didn't care what happened to us. And so I said what he had said when Red was killed—one less to split with."

The light in Waddell's eyes sharpened and grew more frantic as if he were aware of the swift, inexorable approach of death. "He said he would meet us at a rendezvous in Mexico, and there we would have the split. I said if he had abandoned his wife, he would abandon us, too, and I was having no part of that, and Virgil was having no part of that. So he pulled a gun and shot Virgil, and then he shot me."

"Shackelford?" Grayson asked. Waddell nodded weakly.

"Who's still with him?"

"Bob Hamner and Dick McEwen."

"Were you all in at La Fuente?" Again Waddell nodded. "You'll get him, won't you?" Waddell gasped. One last convulsion jerked him halfway up to a sitting position, his face straining with agony. "You'll square for me and Virgil, won't you?"

Abruptly a great gush of blood burst out of Waddell's mouth, cascading down over the gaudy vest. His eyes went blank, his whole body went lax, and he dropped back. He lay very still; his luck had run out.

THE shot screeched past Grayson's ear. He had been riding up this canyon, tense and alert, and at the instant he caught the bright wink of the sun on gun metal, he threw himself forward, and this was what saved his life.

The gun roared again, and Grayson, having pulled his Winchester from its saddle scabbard, allowed himself to fall. He hit the ground, momentarily shielded by the cloud of dust kicked up by the bolting steeldust. Grayson used this to cover

him as he rolled behind the shelter of some mesquite and stones.

He lay there on his stomach, breathing hard, sweat rolling down his beard-stubbed cheeks. He thought he understood what was happening. Someone had been left behind to delay him or kill him while Shackelford made for Mexico. Grayson was pretty sure it was only one man up there on the canyon slope. Whether it was Hamner or McEwen, Grayson had no way of knowing.

Glenn Shackelford was still playing it shrewdly and ruthlessly, Grayson thought. One by one he was cutting down the size of his gang, thus increasing his share of the bullion.

Grayson raised himself slightly for a better look up the slope. Instantly, there was a flash in the sun, and Grayson dropped as another shot went over his head. He lay there, cursing softly and telling himself he could not let himself be pinned down here for too long if he was to get Shackelford and the bullion.

He considered several possibilities, and then he decided on one. He rose abruptly, showing his head above the mesquite. He saw the glancing of the sun off metal, and this time when he went down he let out a scream. He made it as full of pain and terror as he could, and then he could only wait.

He poked a hole through the foliage of the mesquite and used this to watch the canyon slope. For a long time nothing showed or moved up there. All he saw was the sun-washed slant of the canyon wall, undisturbed and placid under the bright copper sky. Then the flash appeared again,

and one slug after another came toward the mesquite. Flat on the ground, Grayson rolled behind the more solid shelter of a stone. The bullets kept whining and ricocheting off the boulders.

Finally the shooting ceased, and then the silence set in again. Grayson began watching the canyon wall once more. The sun beat down on his back; he thought it would draw the last bit of moisture out of his body. Still nothing showed. Grayson cursed and tried to shift his position a little, but there was no way he could get out of the sun.

He was just beginning to think that his trick had not worked when the flash winked again up on the canyon wall. But this time there was no gunshot. The carbine came first and then the man. He came out carefully from behind a waist-high boulder, ready to duck back at the first hint of treachery.

Grayson's grip on his Winchester was wet with sweat. His heart hammered.

The man on the canyon slope took one tentative step ahead. When this brought no display of hostility, he took another and another. Now he was coming cautiously down the slope. Grayson waited until the man had no immediate cover. Then Grayson bolted upright, with his Winchester at his shoulder.

"Hold it," he shouted.

The man brought up his carbine and fired. He was startled, and too much in a hurry, however, and his shot was wide. Grayson's bullet hit the man in the chest, and he dropped. The carbine flew out of the fellow's hands.

He rolled down the slope a little way, and then a stone stopped his rolling descent.

Grayson started up the slope, wondering who it was that he had killed. The dead man lay with his body twisted in a cramped, jackknifed position. His wide-staring eyes looked straight up into the sun and a trickle of blood from out of the corner of his mouth had stained his close-cropped beard.

It was not Hamner. So this must be Dick McEwen, Grayson thought. It really didn't make much difference.

A THIN crescent moon was moving across the lower sky. This and the stars provided the only light. Grayson had kept going all night. He was sorry for the tired steeldust and he rested the horse often, but Grayson figured pushing on was his best chance of catching Shackelford. Shackelford would have to make camp and rest. He could not expect a team of horses to keep a heavy chuck wagon moving indefinitely.

Grayson finally found Shackelford's camp on a rise of ground. The land was open all about, and Shackelford had obviously selected the spot for this reason. He could see anyone coming from a long way off. However, Grayson figured that the sparse light of the moon and the stars and shelter of an occasional mesquite or sagebrush would suffice. Anyway, he was going to find out. He dismounted while still some distance from the camp and tied his horse to a mesquite. Then he removed his spurs and started in.

After a little way, he dropped to

his belly behind the sage. It was slow and tedious and nerve-racking progress. But he kept moving in.

The shape of the chuck wagon loomed up before him. He was very close now, and he knew he would have to be doubly careful. He could hear the sounds of several horses grazing, and he deliberately made a wide circle around them. He did not want them snorting a warning.

Grayson now rose up enough to look over the top of a mesquite. There, not twenty feet away, a man was sitting on a stone. He was facing Grayson, but his head was bowed on his chest and he was dozing. Apparently he was there on guard, but he had fallen asleep. From the cut of his shoulders, Grayson guessed it was Bob Hamner.

Grayson did not approach Hamner directly. He was more concerned with Shackelford, whom he considered the greater threat. So he made a circle around the nodding Hamner and came in behind him. Grayson gave a swift look around and saw Shackelford sleeping under the chuck wagon.

Grayson drew his pistol. He came up behind Hamner, painfully conscious that as he sneaked up on Hamner his back was to Shackelford lying under the wagon. Sweat trickled down into his eyes; he could feel its saltiness on his lips.

Hamner snorted as if awakening. His head started to come up. Grayson leaped. The long barrel of his .44 swept down. Hamner started to cry out in alarm; he began to whirl as he sensed the menace behind him, but then the barrel of Grayson's .44

cracked against the side of Hamner's skull, and with a gasp he slumped and rolled off the stone.

There was only one thought in Grayson's mind—Shackelford. Grayson was whirling to face the chuck wagon when the gun roared. He felt something pluck at his sleeve, and he realized it was only his sudden, swift movement that had saved him. He shot at the spot under the wagon, but Shackelford was scurrying behind the shelter of a wheel. Realizing that he made a wonderful target against the starlight, Grayson dropped on his stomach.

Shackelford fired again, and this slug hit the earth in front of Grayson, kicking dirt into his eyes. Blinded for an instant, he could only begin to roll frantically, hoping this movement was enough to spoil Shackelford's aim.

Shackelford tried again, and this slug burned a crease across Grayson's shoulder. His eyes were cleared now, however, and, flat on his stomach, he could see Shackelford again. To get better aim, Shackelford had come out from behind the wheel. He had his left arm up, and the long barrel of his Remington .44-40 rested on this as he took aim.

Grayson took another shot at him. This one hit Shackelford. He reared up on his toes; his .44-40 exploded, but the slug smashed harmlessly into the ground. Shackelford reeled, and then he lurched up against the side of the chuck wagon. Using this to brace himself, he started to aim once more.

GRAYSON fired again. This shot smashed into Shackelford's chest

and doubled him up with agony. His gun fell unfired from his fingers. He pitched forward on his face.

Grayson rose to his feet. His knees were shaking a little, and he felt very sick inside. He went up quickly to Shackelford and picked up the man's weapon. Shackelford still lay on his face, but his shoulders stirred a little as he breathed. However, he appeared to be unconscious.

Grayson thought of Hamner, and he reached the man just as Hamner was coming to. Grayson snapped cuffs on him and took his gun. Then he herded Hamner over to where Shackelford lay.

Grayson turned Shackelford over, on his back and propped his head on a saddle. Grayson examined the man's wound and saw that there was nothing that could be done. He looked at Hamner. "The bullion's in a false bottom in the wagon, isn't it?" he asked.

Hamner smiled a little. He seemed strangely unconcerned about what had happened. "You finally figured it out, didn't you?"

"You know what this means for you, Hamner?"

Hamner shrugged. "Well, anyway, it was a good idea while it lasted."

Shackelford moaned something unintelligible. Grayson looked at the man, but Shackelford was still in a coma. An hour later Shackelford called his wife's name twice, sharply. Then he was silent again. His breathing became slower and more labored. At dawn he died.

HAMNER had very nearly finished digging the grave when

Grayson spotted the two figures on the slowly moving horse. He watched them come up, his heart sinking, wishing that this did not have to be, but knowing of no way to avoid it.

Worry and anxiety were plain in Anita Flores' face. She said to Grayson, "There was no way I could stop her. She insisted on following you. She —she had to know about her husband."

"I understand, Anita," Grayson said. Blanche Shackelford screamed when she saw the blanket-covered body of her husband. She ran toward it; she dropped on her knees beside it. She pushed the blanket away from Shackelford's head, and then she cradled it against her breast and kissed the cold lips. Her tears dropped on Shackelford's face.

Grayson looked away. There was only one thing that could be done to help, he thought, and that really was beyond his control. He could suggest, that was all. He beckoned to Anita Flores, and they walked over to where Hamner had been working.

Hamner was leaning on his shovel. That old, hopeless look haunted his eyes as he stared at Blanche Shackelford. Her sobbing was a faint, lamenting sound in their ears.

Grayson said, "I want the two of you to listen carefully to what I'm going to say. I'm not ordering either one of you to do it like I want it. I only want both of you to consider thoroughly. I know how it is with both of you. You, Anita, have a brother who went wrong and who is dead because of it. You can blame one man for what happened to your brother and if you want to exact the last little bit of

vengeance I won't blame you. As for you, Hamner, you've got nothing to look forward to. If it isn't a hang noose for you, it'll be life in the penitentiary. However, I know how you feel about Mrs. Shackelford, and you'll have a chance to prove it, if you want it that way."

He paused and drew a breath. He felt both of them looking at him. He went on, "I know as well as both of you what Shackelford was like. His memory doesn't deserve anything. He's dead and it's all over for him, but there's someone who has to go on living and another one who still has to be born. It's going to be a pretty lonely and terrifying day for her when the baby comes. She has nothing right now, not even a dream, not even an illusion. The three of us can give her and her child a part of a dream. Maybe it won't be enough, but it should be better than nothing."

Grayson looked at them. Anita Flores was staring at him as if she were seeing him for the first time. The old hate and bitterness were gone from her eyes. They were clear and warm, and there was something in them for him which Grayson had never thought he would see there.

Hamner's face was drawn and taut; the creases at the corners of his mouth were deep and set. He gave a little shrug. "It makes no difference to me," he said.

"I'll go over and tell her," Grayson said. "The two of you can back me up, or you can tell it your own way."

Blanche Shackelford was still weeping over the face of her dead husband. Gently, Grayson drew her to

her feet and led her away. A little distance off, he stopped and said, "Listen to me, Mrs. Shackelford. I know he's gone and it hurts, but you've got nothing to be ashamed about. He was the only one of the outfit who was clean. He always said he was, didn't he? You aren't going to stop believing him now, are you? The others used him. They saw a chance to sneak out of the country by going with him to Mexico. He never found out the truth until the night of the stampede. He learned about the bullion being hidden in the chuck wagon, and when he figured I'd been killed in the stampede, he drove off with the wagon to turn it over to the law. He had to fight his way. He got this far when Hamner killed him. Your husband told me all this before he died. He told me to tell you not to take it too hard. Think of him now and then, he said, but first of all think of yourself and the child. Both of you always meant a lot to him. Do you understand, Mrs. Shackelford?"

She was staring at him wide-eyed now. The pain and the sense of loss were still engraved in the lines about her mouth, but there was a fierce, proud glint in her eyes. She now had a precious dream to sustain her for the rest of her life.

"I think Hamner will bear me out," Grayson said. Hamner stared at the ground. His voice, when he spoke, was thick. "It was just like Grayson said, Blanche. Glenn was clean. The holdup was all my idea. I rodded it from start to finish."

Grayson looked at Anita Flores. What he saw in her face told him that she, too, would always keep this

secret.

They buried Glenn Shackelford, and then they started back for Blue Hat. Bob Hamner drove the chuck wagon. For a man with no future he seemed very much at ease. Whether he was hanged or served out the rest of his life in a penitentiary, he had the knowledge that he had done one great service for the only woman he had ever loved. Seeing Hamner like this, there was no doubt in Grayson that the secret was secure.

Blanche Shackelford rode off to one side by herself, savoring her new dream. As the years wore on, the dream would become nobler and more treasured, and there would be no stigma attached to her and her child.

THIS was as it should be, Grayson thought. It was not the dead that mattered but the living. From greed and corruption and violent death had emerged one fine thing, and it was all that Burt Grayson asked. It made him feel that life was not so futile and evil after all.

After a while, Anita Flores reined her horse over close to Grayson. She had been looking at him quite often, and he knew what lay behind those half-shy, half-bold glances. He was experiencing the same feeling inside. They did not speak of this new emotion that had grown so suddenly in them. It seemed not to need any words. In the years to come they would have much time to speak of it. Now, just being near each other was enough.

They rode along, side by side, under the burning sky.