

The
Whisperer

A REATA STORY

MAX BRAND
(George Owen Baxter)

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**MAX
BRAND**

**THE WHISPERER:
A REATA STORY**

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THE WHISPERER

A Reata Story

Frederick Faust's original title for this story was "The Whisperer." Street & Smith's *Western Story Magazine*, where it was first published in the November 25, 1933, issue under the byline George Owen Baxter, changed the title to "Reata's Danger Trail." This was the second short novel to feature Reata, who proved to be one of Faust's most popular characters among readers of this magazine, harking back to the enthusiasm that had met a previous, very different Faust character, Bull Hunter, in the same magazine a decade earlier. Like Bull Hunter, who was accompanied on his adventures by the stallion, Diablo, and the wolf dog, The Ghost, Reata also gains a mare and a mongrel, but they are very different from those found in the Bull Hunter stories. There would be seven short novels in all about Reata. The first, "Reata," appears in *THE FUGITIVE'S MISSION* (Five Star Westerns, 1997). This is the second and continues Reata's adventures after he successfully accomplishes the first of his three labors for Pop Dickerman.

I

“QUINN’S RETURN”

The scattered length of Rusty Gulch drew the whole heart of Harry Quinn. By the roofs of the houses he knew them. His brow puckered at the flat top of the jail, and his mouth watered when he identified the saloon. He could hear, merely through the power of the mind, the clicking of dice as they rattled and rolled, the whisper of shuffled cards, and the clinking of ice in the glass. As he looked across the town, he was biting his teeth into the fat of a good cigar and lifting one finger to tell the bartender to set them up all down the line.

There were not many elements in the heaven desired by Harry Quinn; he could find them all in Rusty Gulch. But instead of riding straight into the arms of that paradise, he knew that it would be wisest for him to turn aside, at the outskirts of the town, to what looked like a barn from a distance and only appeared as a dwelling when one came up close to it and saw the high, wooden wall pierced by a few shuttered windows.

The gate to the yard was open, so Harry Quinn jogged his mustang inside and looked over the familiar heaps of junk that were arranged in ordered piles. It always seemed to him that Pop Dickerman’s junk yard was a cemetery for the entire range. The rags and tags of everything used by a cowpuncher, lumberman, or farmer could be found in these outdoor heaps, or in those that filled the huge mow of the convened barn where Dickerman lived.

Pop himself was now unloading a wagon in front of which stood two little down-headed skeletons of mules. He must have been out early to collect this load, the relics of some small shack among the hills, the sign that one more family had moved away. Pop Dickerman, buzzard that he was, had come to the emptying house and picked up for a song an entire load, in which Harry Quinn could notice the joints of a stovepipe and the dingy gray-black of the stove, a little single plow with toil-worn handles, a heap of old furniture, the clustered handles of brooms and spades and axes, a mound of saddles, and even a pair of chicken coops had been added.

On top of this load or rubbing against the legs of Dickerman on the ground were a score of cats. A Maltese giant sat on the driver’s seat and luxuriously licked a forepaw and washed his face with it. Harry Quinn thought of rats so strongly that he could almost sniff the odor out of the air. He thought of rats, too, when he saw the long, grizzled face of Pop Dickerman, furred over with curling hair like the muzzle of an animal. Harry Quinn came up close and dismounted, calling out: “Hello, Pop. How’s things?”

He began to untie the lead rope of the wiry roan mare he had brought in with him.

Pop Dickerman went straight past Harry Quinn as though his arrival were a matter not worthy of comment, as though he had not schemed day and night for the delivery of him from most imminent death. But Dickerman went by him and first greeted the mare, stroking her ewe neck with his grimy hand.

“How are you, Sue, old gal?” he asked. “How they been treatin’ you, honey?”

She pricked one ear and looked at him with lazy eyes.

“And where’s him that was ridin’ Sue?” asked Dickerman.

“He’s gone,” said Harry Quinn.

“Dead?” asked Dickerman.

“He ain’t dead. But he’s gone. He brought me all the way along the trail until we come in sight of Rusty Gulch, and, when he seen the roof of your house, he looked like he was smellin’ rats under the roof of it. He hopped off Sue and throwed me the reins. He ain’t dead, but he’s gone for good.”

“If he ain’t dead, he’ll come back,” said Dickerman. “He’s swore to me, and he’s got a conscience. Maybe he thinks now that he won’t come back, but a conscience is a funny thing. You dunno nothin’ about it, Harry, because you never had one, but when the night starts and the world gets dark, a gent’s conscience will come out with the stars. Yeah, we’ll have Reata back here with us not long after dark. Here . . . gimme a hand unloadin’ this stuff, will you?”

“I ain’t hired out to handle junk,” protested Harry Quinn. “I’m goin’ to put up the hosses and go have a snack of sleep. I stopped sleepin’ when the hangin’ day got closer.”

Pop Dickerman did not argue. He merely stood there with a rusty bale of plowshares in his hands and watched Quinn lead the horse away.

Afterward, Quinn entered the barn. He so hated the sight of the piles of junk on the floor of the old mow and the great bundles that hung down on ropes from the rafters of the place that he half squinted his eyes and hurried on to the little rooms at the end of the building. There he entered the kitchen, found the five-gallon jug behind the door, helped himself to a large slug of good whiskey, and then went up to a room where bunks were built in two tiers against the wall. Those bunks were heaped with disordered, second-hand blankets of all colors, but the taste of Harry Quinn was not at all fine.

“In jail again,” was all he said, and, pulling off his tight boots, he lay down and rolled himself in one blanket. He stared for a moment at the window, dusted over with cobwebs, and then went to sleep.

When he wakened, it was near the end of the day. He went down and discovered Pop Dickerman cooking supper. On the oilcloth covering of the kitchen table, three places were laid out.

“Who’s goin’ to chow with us?” asked Harry Quinn.

“Reata. He’ll be back,” said Dickerman.

“Yeah? And the devil he will,” answered Quinn. “That *hombre* was so fed up when he just seen the roof of your barn, Pop, that he looked sick at the stomach. He couldn’t come no nearer.”

He went to the stove and lifted the lids from the pots. He found boiling potatoes, stewing chicken that gave out a rich mist of savor, and a great pot of coffee. Inevitable bacon simmered in another pan. He opened the oven door. A hot breath of smoky air boiled out at him, but he saw a deep pot of baking beans, brown-black and bubbling at

the top, and two wide pans of baking-powder biscuits that were just coming to the right golden brown.

“You feed a man,” admitted Harry Quinn, slamming the door shut. “I gotta say that the chuck is all right here. Dog-gone my heart, though, but it must nigh kill you to part yourself from so much good grub.”

“A good man has gotta have good grub,” said Dickerman. And he lifted an eyebrow at Harry Quinn.

“Meaning that I ain’t so good, eh?” said Quinn. “That’s all right by me. But hop to it, Pop. It’s sundown, and I get a regular appetite at the regular hour.”

In fact, food was presently on the table, and Harry Quinn sat down to it with a capacious grin on his bulldog face. He held a fork in his left hand, but it was poised in an attitude of attention and only made vague dipping motions toward the plate from time to time. Sitting well slued around in his chair, far enough back to have leaped to his feet at any moment, Harry Quinn leaned forward and with sweeping gestures of a broad-bladed knife conveyed quantities to his mouth.

Opposite him, at the other end of the little table, Pop Dickerman ate some stale pone he had found in the bread box and drank small sips of some milk that had just gone sour. He seemed half revolted, and one could not tell whether it was the taste of his own portion or the vast appetite of Quinn that disgusted him. Certainly, Quinn’s manners made no difference to him. He kept his shoulders hunched up a little in rigid disfavor as he lowered his hairy face toward his sour milk. Now and then he put out a hand and stroked one of the cats that rubbed against his feet. One or another of them was continually jumping onto his lap, the half-starved creatures reaching their paws out in vain, tentative gestures toward that richly loaded table.

“This kid . . . this here Reata,” said Quinn, when his mouth was only occasionally filled, “what I’d like to know is how you ever tied him up to you, you old blatherskite?”

“Brain work . . . brain work is the thing,” answered Pop Dickerman thoughtfully. “I seen him workin’ in a crowd at the rodeo the other day with his reata.”

“Yeah, the dammedest thing I ever seen,” declared Harry Quinn, “the way he handles that rope of his. It ain’t no bigger’n a pencil, but it’ll hold a hoss. It looks like rawhide, but there’s gotta be something stronger than leather inside it. Is it wire?”

“I dunno,” answered Dickerman. “I seen him playin’ his tricks with it and pickin’ the pockets of the gents that stood around him while he was workin’, as slick as you ever seen.”

“Him? Pickin’ pockets? Hey, I wouldn’t think him that kind of low-down,” declared Quinn, amazed.

“There’s a lot of things that you wouldn’t think,” answered Dickerman, “and one of ’em is that young gents is often young fools, not meanin’ no real harm. I watched him, and his style was mighty fine. His hand was faster than any eye but mine, all right, and I seen that he didn’t lift nothing off anybody but the gents that looked like cattle kings and what not. You take a young fool like Reata and he wouldn’t steal enough to harm a man. What happened was that when he gets his loot, he looks it over and finds Tom Wayland’s watch that has a picture of Tom’s gal in it, and she’s so pretty that Reata is ashamed of stealin’ that watch and goes and puts it back in Wayland’s pocket.

“And while he’s puttin’ it in the pocket, puttin’ it back in . . . the poor fool! . . . Tom happens to catch him at it and raises a holler and downs him. But you can’t keep a cat like Reata down, and he eases through that whole crowd and swipes a hoss from the rack and gets away. And he ropes a new hoss pretty soon out of a field, and goes on. He leaves the whole gang away off behind him till he comes to the river, and there he sees a fool of a little mongrel dog on a bit of a chicken coop on a rock that’s been washed down the river. And he can’t leave that dog, but has to ride in and get it, and by that action he lets the sheriff and all come up to him.

“Well, they take and put him in jail, but on the way I give him a handshake, and I leave a good saw and a key to the back door of the jail in his hand. So, when he gets out that night, he comes to me and asks what can he do to pay me back. And I say that he can do for me what I’ve done for him, with three hundred percent interest, because I’ve got three men in a jam, and want to get them home. So he says he will and shakes hands on it.”

“That’s what he done, is it?” said Harry Quinn. “Well, conscience or no conscience, he’s done enough to pay you back already. When he got me loose, he did what nobody else in the world could ’a’ done, bar none. Not even Gene Salvio could ’a’ done it. Those Gypsies were goin’ to hang me up the next day, and they kept two men watchin’ me night and day. But Reata stepped in and fixed things.”

“Without a gun!” exclaimed Dickerman.

“Aye, with only hands and brain.”

“And how did he do it?”

“Well, I hardly know. But he sold himself to Queen Maggie, the head of the tribe, and she let him into the gang. Then he manhandled a couple of the Gypsies that was jealous of him, and they try to cut his throat, and he dodges that. And he picks out the prettiest gal you ever seen, which is Miriam, their bareback rider that hauls in the dough for them when they give their show at a town, and he gets her pretty dizzy, and he gets her to tell him where I am. Then he goes and just ties up the two mugs that are guardin’ me . . . and here I am. But here he ain’t, Pop, and here he’s goin’ to never be. There’s something kind of clean about him, and he wouldn’t stand the dirt around here.”

With irritating assurance, Pop said: “Conscience, it comes out with the stars. I’ll get some of this food back into the stove.”

He set about it as Quinn said: “Leave me another slab of them biscuits, and I’ll mop up some syrup with ’em. Gimme some more coffee, too. You think Reata is goin’ to come back here, do you, and keep on with you till he’s got Dave Bates and Salvio both loose?”

“He’ll try,” said Pop Dickerman.

A shrill sound of barking came stabbing through the night, small and thin.

“There,” said Dickerman, his little eyes glistening. “There he is now, with his dog, Rags, tellin’ him not to come back inside here, and Reata comin’ along just the same. You’d think that a smart feller like him would have sense enough to listen to a dog, wouldn’t you?”

A moment later the back door opened, and Reata stood on the threshold. The little dog, Rags, crouched, whimpering at his heels.

II

“REATA’S PRIDE”

The welcome for Reata was very effusive. Quinn called out: “Hey, Reata . . . dog-gone me, if I ain’t glad to see you! Dog-gone me, old boy, but it’s good to see your mug ag’in.”

Dickerman kept grinning and pointing to the third place at the table. “I knew that you’d be along,” he declared. “Set down there and feed.”

Reata pulled up his belt a notch. “I’m not hungry,” he declared.

Two or three of the cats began to stalk little Rags. He backed against the feet of his master and looked up. Reata held down his hand and caught the slender body as it jumped. Rags, with great dexterity, ran up the crooked arm of his master and perched himself on the broad shoulder.

“Not hungry?” gasped Harry Quinn. “Hey, you *gotta* be hungry when you take a look at chuck like this here. This is food, old son.”

Reata pulled back the waiting third chair and sat down. It’s a bad job when most of us sit down, bending our bodies, slumping our weight suddenly off the legs. But Reata sat down as a dog might sit—when it is waiting for the start of the race. When he leaned back, no one would be deceived into thinking that this was a lasting inertia. The sleeping wolf is only a second away from the naked fangs and bristling mane of full consciousness. Reata, reclining in the chair, making a cigarette with an idle twist of his fingers, made one think of the same static power. One touch of need could discharge all the danger that was in him.

“Looka here, Reata,” urged Dickerman, “I’m goin’ to take it pretty hard if you don’t join us. These baked beans, they’re prime. Ain’t they, Harry?”

“Yeah, they’ll grow hair on the palm of your hand,” stated Quinn, grinning with much kindness at his rescuer. “How’s every old thing, kid? Dog-gone me, but it’s good to see you again. Pop here, he said that you’d come along, all right. Pull up the old chair and have a shot at this here chicken stew. It’s the goods.”

Reata took from his pocket the snaky handful of his rope, and his unthinking fingers made swift designs with it in the air. The thing seemed alive, as always, under his touch.

“I’m not hungry,” he insisted. “But I want to know something, Dickerman. I don’t think I would have come back, but all at once I remembered that I’d finished one third of the job, and it seemed a shame not to finish the trip. Tell me the next item on the list, and I’ll start again. There were three men. Well, here’s Harry Quinn back with you. What’s the next one?”

“Dave Bates . . . he hangs next month for murder,” said Dickerman.

“Yeah,” murmured Quinn, “and the funny thing is that he didn’t do that job. Am I wrong, Pop?”

"He sure didn't do the job," answered Dickerman. "It's like this, Reata." He looked into the gray eyes and the brown face of Reata for a moment, gathering his thoughts. "It's like this. My big man . . . Gene Salvio . . . he's in a terrible jam. I send out Dave Bates to get him. Dave starts, all right. The next thing I know, Dave is bein' tried for murder. Charge is that he got drunk and killed a rancher by name of Durant. They find Durant dead, Dave asleep and drunk in his chair, and on the floor is Dave's gun with two bullets fired out of it. Looks like a good case, and they sock Dave. He hangs next month, and he's in the pen, waiting for the noose."

"The funny thing," said Harry Quinn, "is that Dave never gets drunk."

"I'm to break open the penitentiary and bring Dave Bates out with me, is that all?" asked Reata ironically.

"No, no. I'm not such a fool," said Dickerman. "All you do is get up there and find out who really *did* kill that rancher. You see? Hang it on the right man so clear and heavy that the law is goin' to turn poor Dave loose. That was what Quinn was riding north for when he snagged himself on those Gypsies."

The eyes of Dickerman burned as he stared at Quinn.

Reata stood up and threw the butt of his cigarette out the window.

"I'll start now," he said.

"Wait for the morning. Harry'll go along with you and show you the way, tell you everything we know," suggested Dickerman.

"I'll go now," insisted Reata. Suddenly his lip curled a little. "I'd rather sleep in the open," he added.

"Yeah, and I told you," remarked Harry Quinn, "that he had the smell of the rats up his nose."

"Take Sue, then, and get started," said Dickerman.

"All right," said Reata. "One more thing. What price do you put on Sue?"

Dickerman frowned.

"He'll never sell Sue," said Quinn.

"You'll sell her at a price," said Reata. Suddenly scorn welled up into his voice. "You'll sell your own hide . . . for a price. What do you want for Sue, Dickerman?"

The contempt of Reata made very slight impact upon Dickerman. He kept squinting his little eyes for a moment and stroking his hairy face. Then he said: "When all three of 'em are back here . . . Harry and Dave and Gene Salvio . . . then I'm goin' to throw in Sue and let you have her free."

A little glint of yellow light came into the gray eyes of Reata as he nodded.

"If you're coming with me, build your pack," Reata told Quinn. "I'm starting now."

He walked out into the open night, leaving Quinn and Dickerman to stare at one another for a long moment.

"Don't seem so dog-gone good-natured as he was on the road," said Quinn regretfully.

"Any sharp knife is goin' to give you a nick now and then," said Pop Dickerman. "But he wouldn't eat none at my table. You notice that?"

“Hey, and how could I help but notice it? And him pinched in the gills, too. He pulls up his belt when he tells you that he ain’t hungry. There’s a kind of a pride about Reata, all right.”

“Pride’s the grindstone that rubs the knife sharp,” said Dickerman.

“Maybe he’s steel,” admitted Quinn, “but how’s he goin’ to cut into that big cheese up there at Boyden Lake? How’s he goin’ to have a chance to cut in and find out who really done the murder? There ain’t a chance in a million, Pop. You oughta know that there ain’t a chance in a million.”

“Sure I know it,” said the junkman. “It ain’t an easy job, and I ain’t offering low pay. Sue . . . if he gets out all three of you . . . Sue is what he gets from me. Go on now and get your pack.”

Harry Quinn rose with a sigh. He went to the stove, picked the iron spoon out of the pot, and loaded a large heap of dripping beans into his mouth thoughtfully. He was still munching these as he left the room.

When he came downstairs again, carrying a roll over his shoulder, he said to Dickerman: “I’m takin’ the big gray.”

“You wanta advertise that you’re a real man, do you?” Dickerson sneered. “You take the same hoss that you rode down here originally. It’s plenty good enough for you. And it won’t draw no attention.”

Harry Quinn looked sullenly at his chief for a moment.

“Aw, all right, then,” he said.

That was the only farewell.

III

“THE DURANT RANCH”

By the time, two days later, that Reata and Harry Quinn had come close to the Durant ranch, Reata knew very little more about the killing of Cleve Durant than Pop Dickerman had told him. All that Quinn knew, in addition, was the testimony of Dave Bates at the trial. Bates had said that he had asked hospitality at the ranch while he was traveling through the country, and that during the evening he had taken a drink of the whiskey that was offered to him after dinner. When he had drunk the stuff, he began to get very sleepy. He was about to go to bed when sleep overwhelmed him in his chair. He awakened to find the deputy sheriff shaking him by the shoulder. On the opposite side of the room lay Cleveland Durant, dead. On the floor beside his chair was Bates's gun, with two chambers of the revolver empty.

Quinn's comment on the story was characteristic. "Think of the poor sucker tellin' a yarn like that," he said. "Long as he was goin' to tell a lie, why didn't he cook up a good one? Dog-gone me, but I was surprised when I read that yarn in the paper. Dave Bates ain't a fool. He's a pretty bright *hombre*. But for a lot of gents, when the law gets hold of 'em, it sort of freezes up their brains, and they can't think none."

"Maybe it was the truth?" suggested Reata.

Quinn stared as he answered: "You mean that Dave was doped? They couldn't dope Dave. He's a bright *hombre* . . . he's real bright, is the facts of the case."

It was a broad, flat-bottomed valley in which the Durant ranch lay. The naked hills surrounded the district with walls of cliffs. Little trails like chalk marks and a few narrow, white streaks that were roads wound through the country and focused on the town of Boyden Lake, that got its name from the little blue patch of water beside it. So the scene appeared to Reata from the top of the southern hills. It was a bare land without a tree. Patches of shrubbery could get rooting in that stubborn soil, but nothing larger. And the grass grew in mere spots, not solidly. The cattle that grazed were hardly ever clustered in spots of color, but were scattered as dots here and there. Two or three creeks trailed lines of light across the landscape—the ranches of that district at least had water.

"It's a tough spot," said Harry Quinn, as he surveyed the broad map. "Yonder . . . that oughta be the ranch house. We'll go down there and take a look. The word is that old Sam Durant will pay high for the right kind of a cowhand, but the right kind for him is hard to find."

They got a cross trail that swung onto a road that ran between fences of barbed wire. Harry Quinn was indignant when he saw the fences.

"Look at a free country," he said, "that's said to be free and all the gents in it equal, and along comes a lot of bums and checks off the free range with fences. Is it right? No, it ain't right! Is it free? Look for yourself. Suppose you was in a hurry. Suppose you had to make a quick break across country, with maybe a deputy sheriff or something

behind you . . . why, what chance would you have? You'd be jammed ag'in' a wire fence in no time, and they'd have you. And what kind of a life is that?"

Reata gave no answer. He had a way of keeping up his end of a conversation merely by smiling and nodding, assuming at the same time a look of such interest that the other fellow was sure to be drawn out. He had had plenty of chance to estimate Harry Quinn on the trip north, and he did not think very highly of his traveling companion. Harry was a good hand with a gun, and probably his nerve was excellent. Otherwise, he was a brawler, a noise maker, and gifted with a very loose mouth. For what important affairs could Pop Dickerman use a man of this sort except actual fighting? And why should Pop Dickerman need fighting men around him?

He asked Harry Quinn bluntly: "What did you and Bates and Gene Salvio do for Dickerman when you were all together?"

Quinn simply answered: "Hey? What didn't we do?" He laughed, but did not offer any more details. It had been crooked work of some sort, that was fairly apparent. Certainly Pop Dickerman was far more than a mere collector of rags and junk.

A sudden lane opened from the battered road, and at the mouth of the lane there was a board tacked across a post, and on the board, roughed in with red paint, were these words:

**\$100 a month for the right man.
Try the Durant Ranch.**

This sign moved Harry Quinn very much.

"A hundred bucks!" he said. "Why, dog-gone me, that had oughta raise every cowpuncher on the whole countryside. How can a sign like that keep stayin' up?"

In fact, they had hardly gone down the long line a quarter of a mile before they saw, coming toward them, a big man on a tough, little mustang. He was gripping the pommel of the saddle with both hands. His body was slouched low. When he came nearer, it was seen that his clothes were badly torn and dust covered, and that his face was decorated with a greatly swollen eye already discoloring from red to black.

Harry Quinn ventured to halt him.

"Are you from the Durant Ranch?" he asked.

The big man did not stop his mustang. He allowed it to jog along as he slued himself around in the saddle and shouted: "It ain't a ranch. It's an Injun massacre. I'm goin' to come back with friends and wipe that place up. I'm goin' to take it apart! I'm goin' to . . . !" Here his rage overcame his vocabulary, and he could merely curse. He began to talk and wave from a distance, but his words could not be made out.

"I'd say that gent was kind of peeved," suggested Harry Quinn. "Looks like he's been in some kind of a ruction. But if that's what they want on the Durant Ranch, you and me oughta get on pretty good there. Gun or knife or hands, I don't mind a fight . . . and when they bump into you, Reata, they're certainly goin' to find themselves tied."

He laughed very cheerfully at this idea, but Reata shook his head a little. Rags, who was riding over the withers of Sue, the roan mare, was now put down on the stirrup leather by Reata, and the dog jumped to the ground and ran happily on ahead.

“Rags might smell out the trouble,” said Reata. “And here’s Sue, cocking her ears. We’ll see what we see.”

“That Rags, now,” said Harry Quinn, “you mind tellin’ me what that dog-gone mongrel pup is good for?”

“He’s not a worker,” answered Reata, chuckling. “He’s a thinker. He’s like me.”

They came out of the lane to the ranch house itself. There was nothing much to it. It was long and low, with an open shed between the kitchen and the rest of the house. This being close to midday, two men were idling in the shade of the house, waiting for the cook’s call. One of them—tall, lean, middle-aged, grizzled—was whittling a stick. The other sat on the ground with his back against the wall of the house. He was a red-headed fellow with a fat, round, good-natured face.

“Howdy, boys,” said the older man as Quinn and Reata swung down to the ground.

“Howdy,” they answered. And Quinn added: “We’re lookin’ for the boss. We seen that sign on the board down the road.”

“I’m Sam Durant,” said the tall man, “and when I put the sign out there, I wanted to get me a real man for the place. How about you?” He looked at Quinn.

“Aw, I can daub a rope on a cow now and then,” said Quinn, “and in this kind of a country I guess that I could stretch a wire, too, if I have to.”

The rancher smiled a little as though in sympathy. And the red-headed fellow sat up and nodded violently.

“We got a lot of snakes and coyotes and what not around here,” said Sam Durant. “How would you be with a gun?”

“Fair. Pretty fair,” said Quinn, brightening.

“There’s a chicken over there that we might use for supper,” said Sam Durant. “Suppose you take a whack at that?”

There were a dozen or so chickens scratching holes here and there, and Durant had indicated a speckled Plymouth Rock twenty yards away.

“We’ll sure eat him, then,” said Harry Quinn, and in a flash he had pulled a gun and fired from the hip. The first bullet knocked a spray of dust into that bird. As it rose into the air with a flop and a squawk, beating its wings as it jumped, the second big bullet smashed into it and through it. It was hurled along the ground, scattering feathers and blood, and lay still without kicking. All the other chickens fled, squawking loudly.

“Hi! That was a good shot!” called the red-headed lad. “That was sure a beauty. You can do it, stranger.” He began to laugh, rather too loudly, and walked over and picked up the dead rooster.

“Give it to the cook,” directed Sam Durant. “Tell him to stew it for supper, Porky. And thanks,” he added to Harry Quinn. “That was a good shot, all right. A fellow that can shoot as straight as that wouldn’t ever go hungry, eh? No, sir, you’d never have to look around very far before you ate. No use in tyin’ you down to life on a ranch and drudgin’ all day long for the sake of three squares. No use at all. And there’s a whole lot of country all around here, partner, and a whole lot of game on it . . . from sparrows to buzzards. You go out and make yourself welcome to anything you can shoot. I’ll have to keep the place here open for a gent that ain’t so sure with his Colt.”

Harry Quinn, who saw that he had overshot his real mark, took in a quick breath in order to make a hot answer, but the hard, cold eye of Reata caught him and stopped him.

Sam Durant said to Reata: "Now, maybe you're the man that I'm goin' to use, but I'll have to try you first. It's a kind of a mean job, too. You see that bay gelding out there in the corral?" He pointed out a well-made mustang in the corner of the corral with dropped head and a pointed rear hoof, taking a noonday nap in the sun.

"That gelding looked so damned good to me," said Sam Durant, "that I bought it from Bill Chester for a hundred and fifty dollars. But after I got it over here, I decided that I didn't like it, and I been meaning to return that mustang to the Chester place and get my money back. Somehow I ain't got around to it. Suppose you just saddle up that hoss and take it over to the Chesters for me. Tell 'em I'm damned sorry to send the hoss back, and that I'd like to have my money."

"All right," agreed Reata. "But why shouldn't I lead him over, instead of riding him?"

"Well, son," said the rancher, "it's just an idea that I had . . . that Chester would be a lot more pleased, sort of, if you rode that hoss over there today. I think he'd be a pile more likely to take the mustang back and gimme the money that I spent."

Reata nodded. Something, of course, was in the air. But he obediently pulled the saddle and bridle off Sue, leaving her with only a lead rope that he tied up around her neck. She would follow, unguided, even as she followed her master now to the gate of the corral and remained there, stretching her ugly neck and scrawny head between the bars to see what was going on.

Porky had come out of the house and stood by with a brightly cheerful smile to watch the proceedings, while Reata, leaving his saddle near the gate, took the rope that he carried from his pocket and crossed the corral. There were a dozen other horses in the big enclosure. They herded up around the big bay colt that watched impassively until Reata was near. Then, as the other horses spilled to one side, the bay flashed to the right.

He ran fast, head down, as though he knew what might be the target, but the thin, heavy line of Reata's rope shot like a bullet from his hand. A small noose opened in the head of the rope and snagged the mustang fairly and squarely. He came up gently on the rope, far too trained to risk a burn.

Moreover, he stood with perfect calm while Reata saddled him. Even when the leg of Reata swung over the saddle, the gelding stood with pricking ears, as though delighted. But at the last instant he shifted with a cat-like spring to the side and let Reata drop in the dust of the corral.

IV

“HANDLING THE OUTLAW”

A loud, howling cry of glee came from Porky, who now sat on top of the corral fence. Reata, on one knee as he had fallen, watched the bay colt fly into a fine frenzy, racing around that corral and pitching in every style Reata could remember. A fine, free-hand improviser was the bay, and his object was to buck that saddle off his back. In fact, the saddle presently was loosened and began to twist to the side. At this point Reata intervened with another perfect cast of his rope. The forty feet of that lithe and sinewy lariat went out like a shadowy extension of Reata's will, and at the touch of it around his neck the bay was instantly still again.

He stood with head up and the red blaze of deviltry in his eye—the perfect picture of the untamable outlaw. The cloud of dust that he had raised slowly blew away and left his beauty and his deviltry both unveiled. From the fence boomed the loud, looney laughter of Porky, the red-headed cowpuncher. Harry Quinn was grinning by the fence also, but the rancher remained seated on the chopping block near the kitchen door, whittling his stick, and apparently unimpressed and indifferent to what was happening in the corral.

The mouth of Reata jerked a little to one side as he came up to the bay. This time, when he loosened the rope from the neck of the horse, the mustang stood as still as before, and now Reata tied the slender thong under the fetlock joint of the off foreleg and passed it with a single half hitch over the horn of the saddle. He tightened the cinches once more and mounted. It was not the leisurely effort he had made before. This time it was the spring of a cat that clapped him on the back of the bay, and his two feet instantly slammed into the stirrups.

The mustang, at the same instant, shot up into the air. As he rose, Reata pulled up by a few inches the length of the rope that was fastened to the leg of the horse and secured the slack with a jerk on the half hitch. The result was that the bay landed on three feet instead of four, staggered, and almost fell. He tried to buck, but he could only hobble with the right forefoot lifted. And, presently, he stopped and crouched a little, shuddering, unable to realize what had happened to paralyze his strength.

Reata, at this, let out the rope once more, until the gelding had four feet on the ground. The bucking started again; and again it was stopped after the first flourish. Here, deliberately, slowly, the bay put down his head and sniffed at the rope that imprisoned his foot. After that, lifting his head, he calmly submitted to the bridle and was content to jog quietly to the corral gate.

Porky, standing up on the fence, whooped with amazement, holding up both hands in a rather feminine gesture of astonishment.

“That's a good one, kid,” said Harry Quinn, opening the gate for his companion. He added in a low voice: “But where do I get in on this show?”

"You don't get in," answered Reata. "Ride down the road with me. We can talk there."

He guided the bay across to the rancher, whose head was still bowed over his work.

The gelding went on calmly and smoothly, except that there was a slight limp in his right foreleg, where the reata flapped and snapped tight with every stride, just measuring the length of that limb.

"You tell me where the Chester place is," said Reata, "and I'll take this broncho over there. But why do you want to send him back? He looks like a right good one to me."

"You don't see anything wrong with him?" asked Sam Durant gravely.

"No. Got four good legs under him, and he's sound in mind and body. He can jump like a wildcat, and he looks as tough as rawhide."

"He's got a good eye, too," said Durant. "Now that I notice it, he's got a nice red eye. I never seen a redder. But what I don't like is the color of the rest of him. I dunno why. It just doesn't fit into my eye. You take him down the road east and turn off on the first north trail. It'll take you bang into the Chester place. Just leave the colt there, and, when you come back here with the hundred and fifty bucks, you'll find some hot lunch waitin' for you."

"Thanks," said Reata. "I can see you're the sort of a boss that does everything for your cowhands. See you later, Durant."

He jogged the bay gelding down the lane with Sue following and Rags running out in front. And every minute or two a start ran through the bay, and his whole steel spring of a body flexed and trembled a little. He was not tamed; he would never be tamed. The instant the vise-like grip of the reata on his leg was relaxed, he would be at his deviltry once more. That was the comment of Harry Quinn as he rode at the side of Reata.

"He's all one grain, and it's bad all the way through," said Quinn. "But how you gonna get a hundred and fifty bucks out of this here Chester *hombre*?"

"I'll know when I see him," answered Reata. "Maybe I can talk him out of it."

"And what about me in the rest of this game at the ranch?" asked Quinn.

"You lie low, off the place," said Reata. "You can come in at night, and I'll tell you what's happening. There's going to be plenty for you to do from the outside, I think. It's a queer layout, Quinn. What do you think about it?"

"The gent called Porky is a kind of a loud-mouthed half-wit," said Harry Quinn. "And this here Sam Durant is as sour as they make 'em. I wouldn't blame anybody for socking a dose of lead into him. He needs it for softening."

"There's a lot more in the air than I can make out," said Reata. "I'll have to see this place by day and night. There's a lot you can see by night that never shows in the daylight."

"Like what?" Harry Quinn frowned.

"Ghosts and things." Reata smiled. "Here's the north trail, and I'll follow it. You cut off wherever you please, and come in after dark. I might have something more to tell you by that time."

“You know what I think, Reata?” declared Quinn. “I think there’s goin’ to be hell popping around that place before the finish.”

“I think that there’s hell popping now,” answered Reata. “So long, Harry.”

He kept the gelding at a jog. He loosened the rope so that the horse could gallop freely. And it was at a gallop that he came up to the Chester house. Here, too, the hands were in for lunch, and, as Reata drew near, he saw the cook come to the kitchen door and howl through cupped hands—although the men were not five steps away.

“Come and get it! Hi! Come and get it!”

The men did not troop instantly in for their food, however. They began to stare and point at the bay gelding and at the mare that cantered softly in the rear, stretching out in a long and perfect stride that made her standing ugliness disappear. Little Rags, running at his best, fell well behind those long legs.

Reata, as he came up, decided to trust the bay for the last few strides. Therefore, he shook loose the noose that bound the gelding under the fetlock and jerked the lariat up into his hand. The mustang ran on, unheeding. Perhaps for a moment he could not tell that the pressure was gone. At any rate, he allowed Reata to bring him up in fine style to a sliding halt in front of the hitch rack. There Reata dismounted, tied the gelding to the rack, and shifted saddle and bridle onto the roan mare. The whole group of six men crowded about him.

“Hey, brother,” said one, “you ain’t found this bay a spooky devil, have you?”

“Me? Not a bit,” said Reata. “He just takes a little handling.”

“Aye,” said the man, rubbing his right shoulder absently. “He takes a little handling, all right. A fifth chain is all that he needs to be handled with.”

“Bill Chester here?” asked Reata.

“Yeah, he’s inside the house somewhere. He’ll be coming out to lunch in a minute. Here he is now.”

Bill Chester came out of the house with a mighty stride, slamming the door heavily behind him. He was not a tall man, and his legs were too long. They seemed to hitch onto the bulge of his chest and leave no space for a stomach. On this singular underpinning there was mounted such a pair of shoulders as one seldom sees in this world and vast, dangling arms. He was an ugly but a perfect machine, and he had the brute look of one who has used nothing but strength all the way through life.

He came up to the bay gelding and called out: “Is that there a saddle mark that I see on the broncho?”

“This *hombre* rode him over as easy as you please,” said one of the men. “They’ve gone and busted him, all right. He runs right along like a dog on a lead.”

“They never busted him. Nothin’ ever busted him,” said Bill Chester. “Who’s been lyin’ to you about it, eh?” He strode up to Reata. “You been sayin’ that you broke that gelding?” he demanded.

“I rode him over,” said Reata modestly.

“You don’t look to me like you could break nothing,” declared Bill Chester.

“No,” said Reata, smiling at him, “but sometimes I can bend things a little.”

“What could you bend?” asked Chester.

“Something worthwhile,” answered Reata.

“You could, could you? Well, unbend the rope that’s holding that gelding to that hitch rack and take him off this place, will you?” He added: “What does that mossy, old fool of a Durant mean by sendin’ back the gelding?”

“What would you guess, partner?” asked Reata.

“Guess? I don’t want to guess. It ain’t any business of mine to guess,” said the rancher. “Get this hoss off my place, and get him off quick. You hear me talk?”

“The fact is,” said Reata, lowering his eyes so that the little yellow light might not be seen, usurping the place of the gray, “that Mister Durant wants to make a deal with you, and he thinks it would be to the advantage of both of you. Can I talk to you inside the house?”

“Deal with me?” said Bill Chester. “I’ll deal with anybody. And I ain’t seen the man yet that’s ever got the best of me in a hoss trade. Come in here with me.”

V

“REATA’S BARGAINING”

He led the way into a bunk room, long, low ceilinged, with two rows of bunks built into the walls on two sides and windows and a door at either end. A dozen men could sleep in these quarters. The stale smell of tobacco and old clothes oozed constantly into the air. A thousand odds and ends of apparel and horse gear lay in corners or hung down from pegs in the walls.

“Now,” said the rancher, turning sharply around and planting his huge fists on his hips, “now, what you want, kid? What’s Durant’s idea? Make it quick, because I got a hot lunch waitin’ for me.”

“Mister Durant,” said Reata, “had in mind making another exchange with you.”

“What kind of an exchange?”

“He thought he’d give you the bay gelding back and take a hundred and fifty dollars in exchange.”

“Hey? He what? He thought what?” demanded Bill Chester. “He thought he’d make another exchange, did he? The moldy, old fool . . . I took and trimmed him good and proper, and he thinks he can talk me out of the bargain now. He can rot first!”

“Oh,” said Reata, “seeing that he’s had a lot of trouble gentling the mustang, he thinks that you might be glad to throw in an extra ten dollars or so for the work he’s done on the horse and call it a bargain price at a hundred and sixty dollars.”

“A hundred and . . . ! Say, kid, are you tryin’ to make me laugh or cry? Or are you just wastin’ my time? Get out of here before I throw you out!”

“The more you argue, Chester,” said Reata, “the higher the price goes. You’ll have to pay twenty dollars to boot to take that horse back now.”

“Who’ll make me?” asked Chester.

“I’ll make you,” said Reata.

“You? You make me?” shouted Chester.

He opened his mouth, his eyes, his hands, and then he charged, speechless with rage, words too large for his great mouth making it work big and small as he rushed, hitting out with his mighty right hand.

Reata staggered, or seemed to stagger. The huge fist missed him. Chester, checking himself with both hands against the wall, thrust around and charged again at the reeling, unbalanced form that seemed to have been unsteadied by the very wind of Chester’s passing. A savage glow of joy worked into Chester’s eyes. He was a man who loved fighting, and, more than fighting, he loved punishing. The biggest Spanish curb was not too big for his use. The longest Spanish rowels were just right for his spurs. And when he had a chance to manhandle a human victim, it was the supreme moment of his life. He could not be called a brutal man. He was simply a brute with some small smack of humanity in his features.

So he raced at full speed at that staggering, retreating, helpless Reata. With the full length of his arm, all his weight behind it, all the thrust of his massive charge, he struck at the head of the smaller man. But Reata had swayed—bowed with fear, as it were—under the drive of the blow. He had dropped almost to one knee. It seemed the sheerest accident that, when the weight of Chester hurled against him, the lean, rubbery arms of Reata locked around the legs of the big man just above the knees. But the truth was that, as Reata straightened, lifting with all his might, Bill Chester hurtled on through the empty air, making vain passes at nothingness, and crashed head and shoulders against the wall of the building. He fell in a heap.

Reata took a pair of revolvers from him and hung the guns on two pegs against the wall. Then he sat down on the central table, all littered with the carved initials of cowpunchers, and made a cigarette. He was smoking it at leisure when Bill Chester got to his feet with one hand clasped against his bruised head.

Vaguely he saw the slim figure of Reata, seated on the edge of the table with feet crossed. Only by degrees the truth dawned on Chester. He made a vague, moaning sound deep in his throat, like the first noise a bull utters before it begins to bellow. Then he started forward to resume the fight.

Something checked him. It was the negligent attitude of Reata in part, and in part it was the little yellow point of fire that had turned the eyes of Reata from pale gray to hazel. So Bill Chester paused—and reached for his guns. His hands came away empty. His face, at the same time, emptied of all meaning also. Gradually, very gradually, fear began to occupy the big void.

“Now that we’ve had a chance to talk things over,” said Reata, “you can realize that the bargain’s made. But the price is a little higher. Mister Durant is a little queer about that. The longer people bargain with him, the more the price goes up. He’ll have to have two hundred dollars for that first-rate gelding, Chester.”

Such anger raged in Bill Chester that he balled his fists and started to bellow an answer. The bellow turned into a groan. He stood swaying from head to foot, wanting to lay his grasp on this will-o’-the-wisp, but was checked by a mystery. He had confronted at last, he dimly knew, a being of an order superior to his, and more dangerous by far.

“I’ll go . . . and I’ll get some cash,” he said. “It’s . . . I’ll go and get some money.”

“You don’t need to go,” said Reata. “You’ve forgotten about it. I know how a fellow is when his mind is full of cows and horses and business, the way yours is, Chester. But now, if you’ll feel in your upper left-hand vest pocket, you’ll find a little roll of bills that ought to have all the money I want in it.”

Chester stared. His glance gradually fell to the little dog, Rags, who sat in front of the feet of his master, looking up with bright eyes and canting his head to one side.

Even to kill the dog—even to wring the head off that small neck—would have been a delightful consummation to Bill Chester. But, instead, his huge brown hand pulled out the money. He could not believe the thing that he found himself doing as he counted out the money and threw it on the table. Two hundred honest dollars—or more or less honest—he had abandoned to this slender wildcat of a man.

“There’s law . . . there’s a law for robbery,” said Bill Chester.

“And there’s a laugh for bullies and fools,” answered Reata. “So long, Chester. Treat that gelding well. He’s worth a lot of treatment. And when you want the sheriff to arrest me, he can find me at the Durant place. I’ll tell him exactly how I got this money.”

He left Chester swaying from foot to foot, stunned, and went out to the mare. Little Rags bounded up to the stirrup and, under the steady hand of his master, gained the pommel of the saddle. So, in a moment, the roan mare was stretching in her long canter down the trail that led back to the main road. Seven pairs of eyes followed him agape. For strange sounds had been heard issuing from the bunkhouse—and if there were any bruises, it seemed plain that the stranger was not wearing them.

Reata went straight back to Durant’s and found that tall, lean rider in the act of mounting a mustang for the afternoon’s riding of the range. Durant pulled his foot out of the stirrup, hooked the reins over his arm, and turned with his hands on his hips.

“You left that colt . . . and then you got out, eh?” he demanded.

“That’s what I did,” said Reata, nodding.

“It won’t do, son,” said Durant, shaking his head. “You got a brain in your head, and I know it. But I gotta have more than brains working on this ranch just now. I gotta have *men*. I told you to bring back a hundred and fifty dollars in trade for the colt.”

“Bill Chester wouldn’t have it that way,” said Reata.

“Sure he wouldn’t,” said Durant. “I kind of had an idea when you started over, that he wouldn’t have it that way.”

“He wouldn’t have it that way,” repeated Reata. “He thought that, considering all the time you’d put in taming that bay, he ought to add something to the price. A hundred and fifty wasn’t enough. He gave me two hundred, and here it is.” He held out the money.

Durant counted it, one bill at a time. When he reached a hundred and fifty dollars, he handed the rest back to Reata.

“What’s this for, anyway?” asked Reata.

“Why,” said Durant, looking earnestly at Reata, “when I hire a good man, I like to give him a bonus to start with. It’s something that makes him want to keep living up to his reputation.”

“Am I hired?” asked Reata.

“You knew that before, son,” said Durant. “Go pile your pack on a bunk and come out here again.”

VI

“DURANT TALKS”

In the kitchen Reata found Porky seated at one end of the long table, still consuming food with the waning of an enormous appetite. The cook was also at the table. He was an old man, so old that the wrinkles on the back of his neck were criss-crossed by deep, vertical incisions that looked as though they must give pain. But his face was ennobled and lengthened by a pointed, white beard. It was a severe face, full of dignity and repose, with a magnificent forehead. One could not help wondering how such a man came to be cramped in by the labors of a ranch cook.

Porky, when he saw Reata standing in the doorway, gaped at him widely enough to show the mouthful of beans he was eating. Then he ran his hand over his head and made his red hair stand up in confusion.

“Look, Doc. He’s got back. He must ’a’ collected the coin from Bill Chester.”

“Nobody collects nothing from Bill Chester,” said the cook. He turned aside toward Reata.

“Durant sent me here to eat,” said Reata.

He had washed his face and hands at the pump outside the house. Now he took the place that Doc indicated.

“Set down here,” said the cook. “I’m going to feed you fine if you got anything out of Bill Chester except kicks.”

Porky stopped eating, and, picking up his coffee cup, he moved over opposite Reata and sat down.

“I ain’t met you proper,” he said. “I’m Sam Durant’s nephew. Porky’s my name.”

He held out his hand. It was damp and soft to the grip of Reata’s lean fingers.

“I’m Reata,” he said.

“Damned glad to know you, Reata,” said Porky. “This here is Doc. He’s a bang-up cook, too.”

Reata stood up and shook hands with the cook. No head boss or straw boss is so dreaded a tyrant as the cook at a ranch. Doc accepted the hand of Reata with dignity and composure. He began to heap a large portion on a plate.

“You tell us what you done to Bill Chester to collect that hundred and fifty,” said Porky. “I wish I’d been there. That’s what I wish. Hey, Doc, suppose we’d been there?”

Porky leaned back in his chair and laughed till his eyes wrinkled almost shut. He was not an altogether displeasing sight; there seemed to be so much brute simplicity in him. Now he was choking his laughter for fear of losing a word of the narrative to come. The cook also, having put the liberal plateful in front of Reata, came to the end of the table and rested his knuckles on the board, all attention.

“Well, there was an argument,” said Reata. “You see, Bill Chester seems to be the sort of a fellow who likes to argue a little.”

“Yeah. With his fists he likes to argue . . . or with a gun,” said Porky. “Go on.”

“And he took a run at me,” went on Reata, “when I said that Durant wanted the money back. He scared me so that I dodged, and he sort of tripped over me and slammed his head against the wall. After he came to, he seemed to be thinking about everything in a different way. He seemed to think that he owed not only a hundred and fifty bucks, but a bonus, too. So he gave me fifty more for a bonus, and Durant, who seems to be a pretty big handed sort of a boss, handed that fifty dollars on to me. It’s a lucky day for me, I should say.”

Even if he had had more to say, which he did not, he would have been drowned out by Porky, who was howling with delight.

“Listen to him!” shouted Porky. “Ain’t he a wonder, Doc? Bill Chester tripped over him, eh? I bet he picked Chester up and slammed him. I bet he knows *how* to slam. Look at him, Doc. He ain’t so big all over, but he’s got it in the shoulders, ain’t he? He sort of fines down around the hips, but he’s got it in the shoulders, ain’t he? By jiminy, Reata, I’m glad you’re on the place. We’re goin’ to have some larks now.”

The cook continued, all during this speech, to rest his knuckles on the board and look steadily at Reata. Now, as though he had made up his mind about something, he turned away to his duties of cleaning up the dishes.

Porky remained at the table, drinking coffee, spreading his elbows wide, admiring Reata, and talking busily. He wanted to know all about everything. Every man who has been long in the West knows that personal questions are rarely advisable. But Porky, with the license of one who never can know better, poured a shower on Reata.

“Where you from, Reata?” he asked. “And where you been that we ain’t heard about you a whole long time before this? You been around wearin’ another name? Because I bet you been in the newspapers a lot before this.”

“Maybe I have been,” said Reata, “but I never recognized my name. They must have spelled it differently.”

The cook began to chuckle. “Shut up, Porky,” he said. “He’s just kidding you, and you don’t know enough to see through it all.”

Porky stopped his happy chuckling and looked sad. “Aw, are you makin’ fun of me?” he asked, with his eyes big.

“No, no,” answered Reata. “You just don’t want to judge a man by his lucky day. That’s all.”

When he had finished the meal, he asked for food for Rags and fed that small warrior a bite or two before he carried the dog to Sue, mounted the saddle, and joined Sam Durant, who appeared suddenly, riding around from behind a feed shed.

“I’ll show you the layout,” said Durant, and led the way straight up a big swale of ground that was almost a hill to the charred and brush-grown ruins of a building that must have been very large when it was standing.

“This is the old house,” said Durant. “The folks used to live up here when I was a kid. You see the stumps of them trees? They were the only stumps anywheres around

Boyden Lake. You could see 'em on the hill here for miles and miles, and the roof of the house stickin' up over them all."

"What happened? Accident?" asked Reata.

"I suppose so. One day it caught fire and burned down. There's the grave of my father. You see back there in that berry tangle? My mother's there beside him and my brother, Cleve, too. That's where I'll be planted."

"Your brother, Cleve? I've heard something about a Cleve Durant," said Reata.

"Yeah, he got into the papers by being murdered," stated Sam Durant. "That's the only way that he could 'a' got up to headlines. He was a simple sort of an *hombre*, was Cleve, and never done much good. What for would they take and kill old Cleve for? Unless they were just tryin' to keep their hands in."

"I heard it was a stranger that came along to the ranch," said Reata.

"Maybe it was him. A fellow with half a face, twisted a little. Dave Bates, he's called, and they're going to hang him for that job. But I dunno, Reata. It wasn't Dave Bates that killed Big Ben. He's planted back there in the berry patch, too."

"Who was Big Ben?" asked Reata.

He could not help feeling that there was a distinct, though obscure, point about the manner in which Sam Durant was opening up and talking with such frankness.

"Big Ben was my dog," said Durant. "Kind of a cross between a greyhound and a mastiff and a bull moose, if you know what I mean. He wasn't handsome, but he had a brain and a big lot of teeth in his head. And one day, not long after Cleve was killed, we were all out on the range, even the cook, and we'd made up some coffee, and I'd just finished pouring a lot of canned milk into my cup. And a mountain grouse busted out of some brush near us, and we all took a shot and missed.

"Well, when I turned around, I saw that Big Ben had lapped up my coffee for the sake of the milk that was loaded into it. I swore at him and washed out the cup, and we were all settling down again when Big Ben began to act sort of queer. He pretty quick was acting queerer and queerer, until it looked to us like the best thing we could do was to try to find out what was wrong. But there was nothing we could do. He died right there, *pronto*."

"Poison?" asked Reata, feeling his flesh crawl at the thought.

"We gave some of that tinned milk to a chicken afterward," said Sam Durant, "and the chicken died *pronto*, too."

"But how could they get the poison into a can of milk?"

"Stick a needle into it and work a drop of solder into the hole afterward."

"You think that they did that?"

"I don't think. I know. We had to do some looking, but we found the place, all right."

"Poison?" said Reata breathlessly.

"Poison enough in that can of milk to kill a team of horses. They would 'a' wiped us all out . . . the cook and poor Porky and me."

"But who's after you?" urged Reata.

“How would I know, old son? I’m just telling you things so maybe you’ll see why I want a real man on the place.”

“A man good enough to drink poison?”

“Yeah, and it might come down to pretty nigh that, for all that I know.”

Afterward, he led the way all around the ranch. The soil was not very good, the stand of grass small, but the dimensions of that place were surprising, and the number of cattle. Two creeks crossed its boundaries. They came by the shelving banks that were the favorite ways of the cattle down to the streams, and they saw how the myriad of hoof prints drew out from the central blur into uncountable little trails that led away toward the dry pastures in the distance. The ranch was so big that, as Sam Durant pointed out, some of the cows had to trot for the greater part of a day to get from their outermost posts to the nearest of the creeks. This was wealth spread out very thin, but, gathered into one heap, it would make a very big pile, indeed.

“Now you know the lay of the land,” said Sam Durant, “tell me just how good you are with a gun.”

“Give me plenty of time and a rifle, and I can knock over a deer now and then,” said Reata.

“Give you a Colt and no time at all and you can knock over a man?” asked Durant.

“I never shot at one,” answered Reata.

Durant jerked up his head. His jaw set. There was a grim glittering in his eyes.

“You didn’t pull a gun on Bill Chester?”

“No,” said Reata.

“You used your hands on him, eh?” asked Sam Durant.

“Yes,” said Reata.

At this reiteration, Durant stared more keenly than ever at his new man.

“What else do you use?” he asked. “Just brains?”

Reata shrugged his shoulders.

“All right, all right,” muttered Durant. “If you don’t want to tell me about yourself, you don’t have to. I’ve got to be thankful for a small blessing, it seems. I thought I might be getting a man that I could lean on. But . . . well, have *you* any questions to ask?”

“You’re convinced that Dave Bates didn’t kill your brother?”

“I’m not convinced. I’m only convinced that there was something behind Bates. That was what put poison into the milk later on.”

“There’s nobody on the ranch you could suspect?”

“My honest nephew,” said Sam Durant, “he ain’t much better than a half-wit. Nobody would try to buy that kind of a fool for any sort of a real job. And the cook’s too old. He’s too old to be taking chances. These things have been done by people from the outside. It’s not an inside job.”

They started riding home. Durant said: “You take your blankets out of the bunkhouse. Bring them up and bed down in the room next to mine. Even if you can’t use a gun, you’re going to be better than nothing, I suppose.”

“If you wanted a good man with a gun, why didn’t you take that fellow who showed up along with me?” asked Reata.

“Because he’s a crook. He’s got the face of a crook,” said the rancher. “And if he shoots straight, he’ll be bought up by the others behind the scenes to use his gun on me. Nobody can help me except an honest man. That’s all I know about it.”

“That’s all you know, but how much do you guess?” asked Reata.

“I guess,” said the rancher, “that I’ll be dead inside of forty-eight hours.”

VII

“THE STRANGER”

The limited section of the house that was given up to the family was two stories high, and the bedrooms were not a great improvement over the comforts of the bunkhouse. They gave a bit of privacy, to be sure, but not a great deal, because the partitions everywhere were paper-thin, and a footfall in any part of the place was sufficient to send a squeaky tremor to the farthest limits of the building. Reata rather regretted that he had been put into the room next to that of his employer. Yet it gave him a chance to sit down and think things over undisturbed.

He was by no means certain that he could accomplish anything in this case. He put Rags on the table that stood in the center of his bedroom and sat down to consider the problem, because the bright little eyes of Rags encouraged optimism and seemed to suggest that light was about to fall upon the most obscure details of the mystery. He stroked the fuzzy head and the strange, sleek body of the little dog and added up what he knew. The mere knowledge was not much. But there is a feeling about things that should give to the strong mind the extra sense that leads to far-cast hints and guesses at a buried truth.

Sam Durant, by leading him up to the ruins of the old house, had seemed to suggest a number of things. One was that he, Durant, was the last of his family except the half-witted Porky. Another was that the same source of malice that had caused the death of Cleve Durant might be that which had destroyed the dog, Big Ben, and burned the old house in the first place. The idea seemed to be simply that the Durants would be wiped off the face of the earth, and then the total possession of the property would pass—to whom? That was a point to be discovered.

Inside the house, the agents that could have been employed to murder Cleve Durant and poison the dog were the cook, who seemed less trustworthy to Reata than Sam Durant considered him, and Porky, whose extreme simplicity ought to remove him from all shadow of a doubt, and finally Sam Durant himself.

Brothers have murdered brothers in this world. Yes, and they have afterward gone many years undetected, suspicion diverted by the very enormity of the crime and the ghastly unnaturalness of it. Sam Durant might be the man for such a job. His sour dryness might cover the most honest of hearts. It might also be the face of a fiend. As for the poison story—perhaps that poison was directed at poor Porky, who, rubbed off the slate, would limit the inheritance to the hands of Sam Durant alone. The dog's part in the affair would have been equally inopportune in any case.

As for suspicions, therefore, Reata was inclined to place them against Sam Durant, unless there proved to be some other relative in the world. He determined to ask that question as soon as possible.

So, when he saw Sam Durant that evening, after they had all come in from the range, he took the first chance of saying to him: “Got any relatives anywhere?”

“No,” said Durant. “So far’s I know, there ain’t a soul outside of my sister’s boy, Porky. There ain’t even so much as the first cousin of an uncle’s sister’s aunt. I don’t know of anybody in the world that would ever have a claim to this here place except me and Porky, if that’s what you’re driving at.” And his keen eyes held fixedly upon the face of Reata, obviously reading his mind with ease.

“All right,” said Reata cheerfully. “We’ll have to tackle a different angle, then.”

But in spite of the keen, steady glance Sam Durant had given him, Reata determined on the spot that Sam himself must be the guilty man.

He carried that conviction with him through supper. He held it while he was smoking his after-supper cigarette in the gloom of the evening. Then, putting out the cigarette, he looked up at the house and saw that Durant already had gone to bed and put out his light. Porky still manipulated a mouth organ, wheezing out foolish tunes with a great lustiness, until the cook thrust out a head from the bunkhouse and shouted for silence. Porky’s music was instantly still. That was the amiable quality in the poor fellow. He might be simple, but he was willing to be checked and rated into his proper place by anyone.

Now that the house was black and silent, Reata went out for a walk. He did not go very far from the house, and his course led him from one patch of brush to another. At each one he paused and whistled softly. He could not help thinking how very strange, to say the least, this proceeding would have seemed to anyone who crawled after him through the darkness. He had come to the fourth of those small clusters before a stocky form rose up to meet him.

“Back up, Harry,” he said. “You’re up here on the top of a hill, where you’d show as clear as a light against the stars if anybody looked at you from the house.”

“Yeah, and I didn’t think about that,” said Harry Quinn, hurrying back into the shallow hollow behind the swale. Rags followed him, sniffing suspiciously at his heels, and Reata joined him.

They sat on the ground. Quinn would have smoked, but Reata would not permit it. The scent of the smoke might reach to any passerby, he said.

“Who’d be passing?” asked Quinn. “Ain’t everybody else in the house asleep?”

“They may all be asleep, and they may all be awake,” answered Reata. “You never can tell in a house where there’s been a murder.”

“Hey,” muttered Harry Quinn, “are you trying to give me a chill up the spine?”

“I’m not trying to give you a chill up the spine,” answered Reata. “I couldn’t give you that unless you caught it from me, and I’ve had gooseflesh right in the middle of the afternoon.”

“What’s the matter?” asked Quinn.

“An old cook they all trust, with an eye that might do murder as soon as look at a sheep. And a half-wit that could be a tool, but never a good one, and Sam Durant himself, who could be anything you want.”

“Him,” said Harry Quinn. “I been thinkin’ all day, while I was roasted back there in the brush. I been thinkin’ all the day that it might be Sam Durant himself. I ain’t seen him much, but I hate the heart of him already.”

“Because he gave you a run,” answered Reata. “But there’s something else for you to pay attention to. I want you to do the rounds about the house tonight, Harry.”

“Keep a long watch, you mean?”

“Yes, till the sky gets a little gray. If there’s outside work taking a hand in this, it may show up this same night, the first night a new man comes on the job. If there’s a murderer inside of the house, and a tool outside of it, or vice versa, it may be that they’ll get together tonight and talk things over. They may want me out of the way and choose tonight to talk it over. They can’t find a time any sooner than this.”

“So I’m to walk the rounds?” groaned Harry Quinn. He broke off, lamenting: “Why do I stick with Pop Dickerman? I never get a real easy job from him, and even if I get good pay now and then, I sweat blood for it in the long run. Why do I stick with him?”

“Because you’re afraid to leave,” suggested Reata.

“You know that much, do you?” said Quinn. “Then you know a whole lot.”

“You start the rounds,” said Reata. “My job is to be there in the house, asleep in my bed, not suspecting anything. They may want to try their hands on me this same night.”

“Great thunder, man,” said Quinn, “are you goin’ to go in there and lie like the bait in a trap and sleep?”

“I’ll lie there. I may not sleep,” said Reata. “Keep out at a distance. Stop and squat and look along the ground now and then. That’s the way to spot things at night.”

“I know it, and I’ll do it. When do I see you again?”

“I don’t know. Maybe not till tomorrow night. If I want you, I’ll make a cross at my window with a lighted lamp. You see? Like this.”

“Which is your window?”

“The second one from this end. Up there in the second story. I’m moved in to be bodyguard.”

“And him you guard is the one that may stick a knife in you, eh?”

“That’s the idea exactly.”

“Well,” said Quinn, “so long. It’s a rotten job. I never had a worse one. Good luck to you, Reata. I hope you’re goin’ to be alive to throw me the flash tomorrow night, but . . . I got a chill out of the air, now. You’ve passed it to me. Maybe you’ll be so cold you’ll be stiff by tomorrow night.”

Harry Quinn got up and moved away through the night, disappearing at the next cluster of shrubs and remaining permanently out of sight.

Reata remained for a moment, looking away from the blackness of the earth to the white and scattered fields of the stars overhead. Little Rags gave him the alarm at last. The dog jumped from the knee of his master, ran to the top of the little swale that sheltered Reata from spying eyes, and then whisked quickly back to the man.

It was too plain a signal to be overlooked. Reata, crouching to keep his body from outlining against the stars of the horizon, went cautiously up the little slope and instantly saw a shadowy figure coming toward him from the direction of the house.

The cook, half-witted Porky, or Sam Durant himself? All three of them had pretended to be silent in sleep a long time ago. If he could catch one of them, the result

might be the solution of the entire mystery—or, at least, it would be a long-pointing arm down the road of correct suspicion.

Crouched almost flat on the ground, he stared at the advancing figure. It was not Porky. There were too many inches to him for that. It was not the cook, unless Doc had been able to put strange suppleness into his knees and step out like a youth and an athlete. Was it Sam Durant? Even he could hardly have a step like that, swift and rising lightly on the toes. No, the whole outline of the head and shoulders was different from that of Durant. It was, in fact, a man who had not been seen at the house during the day. Had he been hidden there, then? Had he come in from the outer night long before this and was just now departing? The latter alternative did not seem very plausible. It had not been long after twilight when Reata himself began his vigil. If the man were leaving in this direction, he probably had approached the house in the same line. Instinct would make him do that. At any rate, it was certainly an unnamed stranger. If he had been at the house in this manner, perhaps it was he who was responsible for the murder of poor Cleve Durant?

The stranger went by, stepping lightly, easily still, his feet almost soundless on the ground, for the very good reason that he was carrying his boots in his hand. Reata could see them, now that the man had gone by. He half rose, shook out the noose of his reata, and cast it with that sudden, subtle movement that he had learned south of the Rio Grande. The thin coil opened in the air with the softest of whispers. It fell true, and with one jerk Reata had pinioned the arms of the stranger to his hips. The pull on the line made the fellow stagger backward, but he uttered not a sound. And that, strange to say, completely convinced Reata of the guilt of his prisoner. He advanced, throwing over the other two rapid coils of the lariat that secured him as well as ever the sticky silk of a spider secured an insect in its web.

“Who are you?” asked Reata.

He got no answer. So he scratched a match on his trousers and moved the dim blue light of it across the face of the other. What he saw was the handsome features of Anton, the Gypsy.

VIII

“THE GYPSY’S STORY”

Reata dropped the match to the ground. It made only a dim streak of light and a glowing spot, on which he stepped. He was seeing many things out of the immediate past—the round of the Gypsy wagons, and the masculine bulk of Maggie, the queen, and Anton himself, riding his horse and swinging his bright saber, and Miriam, whom Anton loved, dancing on the bare back of her gelding. It seemed to him that Miriam was the happiness of that past moment, and Anton was the poison point of the evil.

“Do you know me, Anton?” he asked softly.

Anton hissed like an angry cat. But he spoke the Gypsy dialect, and his words were unintelligible to Reata.

“Say it in English, Anton,” he suggested.

“Sure, I’ll say it in English,” went on Anton, getting easily into range vernacular. “I’m sent here to find you, Reata. And when I get to you, you throw a rope around me. Well?”

“Ah, you’re sent here to find me? By whom?”

“By Queen Maggie.”

“What does she want with me?”

“She says that she wants to see the fellow who made a fool of her and walked off with Harry Quinn. But that’s not the main reason.”

“Tell me the whole thing, Anton.”

“Miriam wants you to come back because Miriam is no good since you left. She sits and moons. We went to a town two days ago, and Miriam couldn’t do her tricks on the horse. She slipped and fell, and wouldn’t try again. Maggie came sashayin’ into her tent. Maggie had a quirt in her hand, and she swore that she’d give Miriam a beating, and, Miriam, she pulled out a knife and waited for the fun to start. Hi,” breathed the Gypsy softly. “That was a thing worth seeing, Reata! But Maggie wants you back, and Miriam wants you back.”

“And so do you, I suppose?” said Reata. “The whole tribe of you want me back, eh?”

“Why should I want you?” asked Anton. “You made a howlin’ fool of me. You tied me up and pulled me off my hoss and dragged me in front of the tribe. You took my girl away from me. Why should I want you back? But I come on the errand when Maggie sends me.”

“Why should she have picked you out unless she wanted to have a knife dug into my back?” asked Reata.

“Because if I came to you, you’d know that the whole tribe really wants you. I hated you more’n the rest of ’em. If I came to ask you back, it’d show that we all

wanted you to come.”

“You think that I should come, Anton?”

“Why not?” asked Anton. “There ain’t a better job in the world than doin’ nothin’ and eatin’ fat, is there? You can lay in the shade all day if you want to. Miriam’ll be there to keep you happy. She gets plenty of dollars thrown at her when she rides bareback at the shows. And you can do your rope tricks, if you want.”

“How did you know you’d find me here?” asked Reata.

“That I can’t tell. Maggie knows pretty nigh everything. She’s always got her ear to the ground.”

“What room do I have in the house?”

“The one next to Durant’s.”

Reata was amazed.

“Did you go in?”

“Yes.”

“Through the window?”

“I picked the lock of the door. A Gypsy in Maggie’s outfit . . . well, we gotta know how to do all kinds of things.”

“Anton,” said Reata, “you’ve told good lies, standing here. A lot of ’em, and good ones, too. Maggie didn’t send you at all. Miriam didn’t send you. If you came for me, you’d only come with a knife in your hand.”

“All right, all right,” said Anton. “You tell me why I came, then, eh?”

“For the sort of work a Gypsy would be hired for. Murder, Anton, or stealing.”

“Murder! Hi!” cried the Gypsy softly.

“We’ll go back to the house and have some light on you,” said Reata.

“All right,” said Anton.

Reata was amazed again by the calm of the Gypsy. He could see his shoulders shrug up.

“Nobody knows me there,” said Anton. “And you won’t believe me. I go back to Maggie and tell her. Well, she’ll see that it’s better to keep to the pure Gypsy blood, eh? Or if she takes another man in, swear him in blood first. Come on, Reata. We’ll go back to the house.”

Reata was of half a mind not to fulfill his threat, but he knew that Gypsy tongues can lie faster than a clock ticks, so he marched Anton back to the front of the house and then, under the windows, called out: “Hey, Durant!”

There was an answer so instant that it proved Sam Durant had not been asleep so far during the night.

“Who’s there?” he called a moment later, leaning shadowy from the window.

“Reata and a friend of his on a rope. Come downstairs and light a lamp, and we’ll come in for a chat.”

Suppose, thought Reata, that Sam Durant had actually worked with this handsome scoundrel in planning the death of his brother, and then shifted the blame for that act

upon the innocent shoulders of Dave Bates? Well, if that were the case, it would be strange if he failed to surprise some flash of a glance as it passed between the two allies.

As he waited, he could hear the rancher's steps as the latter moved about his room, dressing, no doubt. A light had bloomed behind the window of Sam Durant's room. Now his footfalls came down the stairs, and their squeaking was accompanied by the deep, bass snore of Porky. A bit of pity entered the soul of Reata as he thought of that poor fellow of the deficient mind, closed up here to rub elbows with murder that was in the air. The light entered the lower part of the house. It shone through the windows of the kitchen.

"All right," said Durant, opening the kitchen door.

"Walk in," Reata invited Anton, and, again to his surprise, Anton walked jauntily forward, as though there were not a care in the world on his mind.

As he passed through the doorway, Sam Durant drew back, his eyes working keenly, deeply on the handsome face of the young Gypsy. Reality like this could hardly be counterfeited. Reata was instantly sure that the eyes of Durant had never rested on the Gypsy before this moment.

IX

“THE SILENT DEATH”

When they were in the kitchen, the young Gypsy showed perfect unconcern. His eyes were bright; his color was clear; he even seemed to be enjoying his position at the center of the stage.

“Where’d you get this?” asked Sam Durant, sleeking his long face with one hand.

“He was coming out of the house. He’s somewhere in the game that we want to find out about,” answered Reata. “Name is Anton. He belongs to a gang of Gypsies that drifts around under a woman called Queen Maggie.”

“I’ve seen ’em do their show,” said Durant.

“This is the fellow who rides the horse and swings the sword,” explained Reata.

“Have you frisked him?”

“I’ll go through him now,” said Reata.

He got from Anton one compact little .32-caliber revolver and a slim bit of a knife, a stiletto with a weighted handle, evidently meant more for throwing than for stabbing. Reata took it across the palm of his hand and smiled down at it.

“You see this?” he said to Durant. “He can hit a patch as big as your hand at ten steps with this knife. It’s better than a gun, in some ways. There’s no sound except a whisper in the air, and then you’re dead with a needle jabbed right through your heart, so to speak.”

“He’s got a good, sleek look about him,” said Durant. “I sort of remember him from that show. A fine bit of riding was what he done. Anton, what brought you here?”

“I come along for Reata,” said Anton. “He was in our band, and Queen Maggie wants him back. I came here. I looked in his room. He was gone. So I left to go away, and he stood up out of the ground and roped me like this.”

“Queen Maggie wants me? She wants me dead,” said Reata. “The point is . . . how did he know which room was mine? He says that he got up there and picked the lock and looked in. But I was away. If I’d been asleep there, he would have slid that knife through my back, I suppose.”

“Who told you which was Reata’s room?” asked Durant.

“Maggie told me.”

“Where did she find out?”

“I don’t know. Maggie finds out anything she wants to know.”

“You were goin’ to bring back Reata to your gang, were you?” said the rancher. “How were you goin’ to bring him?”

“By telling him that a girl in the tribe . . . she is waiting for him. You have seen the show, Mister Durant. Maybe you remember the bareback rider? She told me to talk to him.”

“That’s a loud lie,” answered Reata. “She’s a wild little devil, Durant. But she’s a proud little devil, too. She wouldn’t send for any man and ask him to come back.”

“I kind of remember her, all right,” said Durant. “She danced on a gallopin’ hoss like she was on a big floor. I can remember the sleek and slim of her, all right. If she called a man, he’d foller.”

“She sent for Reata,” insisted Anton.

“She’d never do it in the world. She’d rather choke first,” declared Reata.

“Reach into the inside pocket of my coat,” said Anton. “There’s something to see, Reata.”

Reata dipped his swift fingers inside the coat and drew out a small brown envelope. From the envelope he took a picture of Miriam, the bareback rider. There was only the face and the slender round of the throat smiling at him. Under the picture, written in a small, swift hand, like that of a man who uses his pen a great deal, had been scribbled:

Reata, it’s a long, long time.

He stared at the snapshot for a while, and then passed the picture into his pocket.

“You see him?” said Anton to Durant. “You see how she put her hand on him from a long ways off? Now . . . is it true that I came from Queen Maggie to call in Reata?”

“I dunno,” remarked Durant. “What good would a fellow like Reata be to your group?”

“If they can pull me away from this house, they’ll have a freer hand to tackle you, Durant,” suggested Reata.

“Aye, that’s straight,” agreed Durant. “But would that tribe really get anything out of Reata, Anton?”

“More cash than for anything, except Miriam’s riding. He can do more tricks. He can snatch the hat off your head and the gun out of your hand. Well, people like to see such things. Besides, he’s a very good pickpocket. He could take your watch and your wallet while you watch his rope jump like a snake in the air. Gypsies need people with quick fingers.”

He laughed, not without malice, as he said this. Reata merely shrugged his shoulders.

“Well,” said Durant, “it looks as though he might be telling part of the truth. Not that I care a crack what you do with your fingers, Reata. Hadn’t we better turn this *hombre* loose?”

“No,” said Reata. “We’ll keep him here. He hasn’t told the whole truth. Before morning, maybe I’ll be able to make him talk. Maybe he’ll say something that’ll interest us a whole lot. Maybe it’ll even interest the sheriff, eh?”

“You think that he’s in it?”

“I know that he’s in it. Maybe he was hidden away in the house all day, and that’s why he knows about my room. But wait a minute. What did you find on the table in my room?”

“Matches, a sack of tobacco, and an old magazine,” said Anton.

“That’s right,” agreed Reata, shaking his head.

“Let him go,” urged Durant. “I believe what he’s said, mostly. He came to take you back to the Gypsies.”

“I’ll try working on him tonight,” said Reata. “I may not get anything out of him, but I’ll try. The Gypsies are the best liars in the world, because they have the most practice at the game. Anton, you’re going up to my room with me.”

Anton chuckled. “You want to know more about Miriam, is that it?”

“It’s no good,” insisted Durant. “You ain’t goin’ to get a thing out of him. He don’t know a thing about what’s happened here.”

“Because you haven’t seen him, that doesn’t mean that he hasn’t been around. You’ll see, Durant. Up this way, Anton.”

He made the Gypsy climb the stairs in front of him to the room on the second floor. There Reata, in fact, found that the door was unlocked. He pushed it open, entered, and kept taut the rope that held Anton while he lighted the lamp on the little center table. After that, he set Anton free, shut the hall door, and locked it.

The Gypsy sat down by the table and picked up the makings of a cigarette, that he manufactured with quick, skillful fingers. He had an air of suppressed smiling about him, and it was plain that in some way he considered that he held powerful cards up his sleeve.

Reata walked the floor with an irregular step, trying to think his way to a conclusion. His hand in his coat pocket presently found the picture of the girl, and that suggested something to him. However, he would try other measures first. He paused and leaned against the wall, partly facing Anton. The Gypsy was a bigger man and a dangerous fighter, but he had tried combat once before with Reata, and he would not attempt to fight him again. Of that Reata was certain, and for this reason he had taken the rope from the arms of his prisoner.

“Anton,” he said, “the fact is that I’ve got you, and you know it.”

“So?” said Anton, smiling and blowing a cloud of cigarette smoke toward the open window that he faced.

“But it’s going to be better to talk to me than to talk to a sheriff. Durant is slow in the head. He doesn’t fully understand what you’re up against.”

“You tell me,” Anton grinned with the utmost insolence.

“There’s a burglary charge,” said Reata. “You’ve broken into a house and picked a lock. That’s burglary, Anton, and they send ’em up for a long time for that. Eight or ten years for you.”

Anton shook his head. “I took nothing. There ain’t a way to railroad a man for taking nothing. It’s too far west for that, Reata.” Then, still grinning, he added: “Try another way to scare me.”

“I’ve got a mind to beat it out of you,” said Reata. “I’ve got a good mind to beat it right out of you.”

Anton said nothing. But he shook his head in silence, as though to indicate that he knew perfectly well that there was not enough brute in his captor to permit Reata to use cruel measures.

Reata took a deep breath and controlled himself.

“There’s another way to look at it,” he said. “There’s money, Anton. You could make a good bit of hard cash out of talking to us.”

“So?” said Anton again. “What do you want me to say?”

“Who killed Cleve Durant?”

“That other Durant? How could I know that?”

“You could know it if you thought for a minute.”

“Well, I can’t think.”

Reata wanted to smash a fist into that smiling face. But he held himself in check. “You could make enough, Anton, to buy yourself the finest horse ever seen in the tribe.”

“I have the finest horse already,” said Anton.

“You could have a gold watch, jewels in your ears, diamonds on the hilt of your knife. You could have a thousand dollars, Anton, for telling what I want to know.”

Anton shook his head. “Let Bates hang,” he said.

At this sneering remark, that proved how completely Anton understood the reason for the presence of Reata on the place, the latter felt like giving up the task on the spot. However, he persisted grimly. There was one last chance for him.

“Anton,” he said, putting the picture of Miriam on the table, “suppose that you knew I’d never come back to the tribe?”

Anton sat straight, suddenly interested. His bright eyes narrowed.

“To stay away,” he said huskily, rapidly, “all the time? *Never* to come back?”

“Never,” said Reata.

“Aye, but she’d come to you,” said Anton. “She says that she belongs to you.”

“She’ll forget me quick enough,” said Reata. “She’s not meant for me. I never could marry her. My trail hasn’t stopped winding uphill. And . . . suppose I say that I’ll never come back even so much as to see her? You understand that, Anton? Would there be any other man in the tribe for her except you?”

“No,” said Anton, leaning forward from his chair. “But if you promise never to see her again . . . then how could I trust your promise?”

“Because you know I’d stick to it,” said Reata.

Anton, staring at him with feverish eyes, at length nodded. “Yes,” he said, “I could believe you.”

“Then talk,” said Reata. “You’ll have to say enough to make it worth my while. I want to know who killed Cleve Durant, and I want to be able to hang it on him. Can you tell me enough for that?”

“Yes,” said Anton.

Reata sighed. “All right,” he said. “It wasn’t Dave Bates, to start with?”

“No, no. It was the last man you would think of.” Anton began to chuckle a little. Then he leaned forward from his chair. “I whisper it, Reata,” he said. “His name was. . . .”

Something flashed in the air. There was a soft, thudding sound as a weapon penetrated the throat of Anton. He leaped up, trying to scream, but was only able to bubble blood and, tearing the knife from his throat, he dropped on the floor the weighted hilt and the slender blade of the same knife that Reata had taken from him only a few minutes before.

X

“THE MURDERER’S NAME”

Reata got to the window in a single leap, the lariat in his hand, but only in time to hear the thud of feet on the ground beneath. As he leaned out, he saw a dark form scud around the corner of the building. He slithered over the sill of the window, hung a second by the tips of his fingers, and dropped cat-like. In his turn he sprinted around the corner of the house, scanning all the while the ground beyond. But he completed the entire circle of the house without seeing the fugitive. He dropped to one knee, controlled his breathing, listening either for the beating hoofs of a horse or for the pounding feet of a running man. But it seemed that the fugitive had dissolved into nothingness.

There was no use in hurrying back to Anton in that bedroom. He was dead before this, stifled by his own blood. So Reata stepped out into the night and whistled until he heard a faint response. And Harry Quinn came quickly up to him.

“You saw somebody come out of the house. Why didn’t you stop him?” demanded Reata.

“Because I didn’t see nobody,” said Quinn.

“Harry, you were asleep. Tell me the truth. It’s important.”

“Nobody left that house, and I certainly wasn’t asleep,” vowed Quinn. “That’s the straight of it.”

Reata was stunned. For the only other explanation was that the murderer had simply circled the corner of the house and run back into the dwelling.

He merely said: “There’s a lot of queer stuff in the air, Harry. Stay out here. I’m going to see if I can call you in tonight and tell Durant that you’re on the job. But I have to go easy with him, because he’s a hard man.”

“Aye, and maybe he’ll be softened before a long time,” said Harry Quinn.

Reata returned to the house straightway. He moved slowly. In that house, he felt sure, was the murderer of Anton. In that house, as far as he knew, there were only three people—Sam Durant, Doc, and Porky Durant. Perhaps the cook was not too old to have clambered up the side of the house and dropped again to the ground. Porky had probably been asleep through the whole affair. In fact, now that Reata listened, he could hear the deep, soft snoring of Porky, making a mournful sound through the house. And as for Sam Durant—well, of course, if it were he, then the murderer of Cleve had been found.

It was Sam Durant also who had been present to see the knife and the other things taken from the clothes of the Gypsy. It was Sam who had heard the remark about the excellence of that knife as a missile weapon. And still it would be very strange if the big, horny, labor-hardened hands of Sam Durant were able to use a knife in this fashion, for knife throwing is an art that can only be mastered by indefatigable practice.

In the door of the house, Reata paused. The obvious answer was that the crime had not been committed by any of the three inhabitants of the place. It had been done by another man who might still be lurking inside the premises. If that were true, then he could search the place in the morning, when daylight shrank the dimensions and dismissed the mysteries of the house.

He went to Porky's room and, standing outside the door, listened for a moment to the snoring. He felt equal parts of disgust and reassurance as he heard that deep, regular sound. Then he went to his own room and set his teeth hard before he entered.

He hated blood, and there was plenty of it. It was streaked and smeared on the floor in a great circle where Anton had writhed around and around. Now he lay face down, his head doubled under his shoulder. One hand was still fixed in his hair. The other arm was thrown out to the side.

And, leaning against the wall with folded arms, calmly looking down at this spectacle, was Durant.

The rancher lifted his eyes grimly from that picture on the floor and stared at Reata. He said nothing. He simply kept watching and waiting for some sort of an explanation. Driven inches deep into the floor was the small stiletto that Anton, in his last agony, had drawn from his throat and plunged into the wood as he stifled in his own blood.

"I was talking to him," explained Reata curtly. "Someone threw that knife from the window and caught him in the throat. I dropped out the window and chased the fellow. I saw him dodge around the corner of the house, but I didn't come up with him. Whoever threw that knife is now in the house. He must have run back into the house. The reason the knife was thrown was that Anton was about to give me the name of the man who killed Cleve Durant."

He brought out these facts slowly, dryly, watching Sam Durant with a merciless eye, ready, in fact, to see the rancher pull a gun. But Durant was motionless.

"He didn't get out no part of the name?" asked Durant.

"No part of it," said Reata.

"It was somebody from the outside," said Sam Durant. "He managed to sneak away across the open ground. You missed him, was all."

"I wasn't very far behind his heels. Besides, I've got another man out there watching the open," confessed Reata. And again he narrowed his eyes at the rancher. This time he saw the big man start.

"You've got a sidekicker out there?" said Sam Durant.

"Yes," said Reata.

"The gent that rode up to the house with you?" asked the rancher.

"That's the one."

"What's your game, you two?"

"Dave Bates is going to hang for a job he didn't do," said Reata. "I'm here to discover the real crook."

He rather wondered to find himself speaking so frankly to the rancher. But as he looked at the big fellow, it seemed certain to him that Sam Durant could not have killed this man, dropped from the window, circled the house, and then, stealing back, come to

the very room of the murder to look silently down at his handiwork. Besides, trying to remember how the shadowy fugitive had seemed as he ran around the corner of the house, it appeared to the memory of Reata that the figure had been rather shorter and stockier. However, that would be hard to make sure of, since he had been looking down at an angle that foreshortened the outline of the silhouette very considerably.

“You know that Bates didn’t do the job?” queried Durant harshly.

“Dave Bates never got drunk,” said Reata, equally terse.

“Turn your friend over and we’ll have a look at his face,” said Durant.

Reata nodded and leaned to lift Anton’s outthrown arm and, by that leverage, twisted the body over. As he raised that arm, he saw red letters scrawled on the floor beneath the shelter of it. Hastily he moved his foot in and obliterated the writing, making a red smudge of it, but what he had seen written on the floor by Anton as the Gypsy choked was the name of the murderer whose face at the window had been glimpsed while the knife, perhaps, was still in the air. And, as he lay gasping, Anton had written on the boards: **Durant**.

XI

“THE SHERIFF”

Durant had, after all, killed the man. Durant had dropped from the window. Durant, on soundless feet, had stolen back into the house and come to stand and look down at his victim. The rancher had on socks, and no boots. That would explain the silence with which he was able to move. Durant it must have been who, in the first place, had bought the help of the Gypsies. He had used them while he planned the murder of his brother, determined finally to have the whole property of the ranch in his own hands. No doubt Anton had returned to the place to extract another cash payment, or to levy a little additional blackmail.

The story began to straighten out in the mind of Reata, and he felt a powerful physical sense of loathing and repulsion. It was hard for him to remain in the same room with this perfect hypocrite. So great was his mental preoccupation with the rancher that he hardly was aware of the face of the Gypsy as he turned the body on its back. However, gradually, he saw it clearly. The handsomeness of Anton had departed in the agony of his death, and the mask that last looked on life contained all the vicious facts about the Gypsy's nature. A sleek and evil fellow he had been, and like a contorted snake he looked now.

Perhaps out of the murder of the Gypsy more events would follow than big Sam Durant bargained for. Queen Maggie would strike for her band. She would battle to avenge her fallen man.

Reata straightened the limbs of the dead man. He closed the staring eyes. He tried to smooth and compose the features, but they kept pulling back faintly into the lines of the death agony.

“A lot of people might do some talking about you and this job,” said the rancher. “Reata, there's a lot of gents that might think that maybe *you* jammed that knife into him and then dropped out the window and run around the house.”

“A lot of people might think that,” said Reata.

“You didn't make no holler. You just jumped through the window, according to what you say.”

“That's what I did,” said Reata. He kept looking down at the dead body. If he looked up, the rancher would plainly see the yellow devil in his eyes.

“Or, leavin' you out of it, suppose that your friend outside the house . . . what's his name?”

“Harry Quinn.”

“Suppose that Quinn crossed you all up and done this murder, partner?”

Reata started a little. The thing was not totally impossible. If there was enough money to buy Gypsy help, there was enough money to bribe Harry Quinn, of course. The flaw in this argument was that Harry Quinn certainly had been too far away to take

part in the first crime—the destruction of Cleve Durant. The second and greater flaw was that the name written on the floor by Anton was Durant.

The rancher was saying: “Go saddle a hoss and ride to Boyden Lake. Get the sheriff up. Bring him out here, so’s he can see things. Maybe we shouldn’t ‘a’ turned this feller on his back.”

“I don’t want him lying on his face . . . on the floor,” said Reata.

“His face is dead.”

“Aye, but I don’t want it.”

The rancher snarled something. Then he said aloud: “Go, get on your way. Call in your friend, Quinn, first. As long as he’s here, we’ll have to try to use him.”

They went down the stairs. The snoring of Porky Durant followed them, and at one point Sam Durant actually paused and growled: “Fat, half-witted fool!”

He went on. The heart of Reata suddenly warmed toward the fat fellow and the round, soft, good-natured face. Far better a half-wit, than the iron cruelty of the rancher.

From the front door he whistled in Harry Quinn, who came out of the darkness quickly.

“Here you are, eh?” said Sam Durant. “Quinn, your partner thinks that the killer of the Gypsy is still somewhere in this house. We’ve got to pull out away from the place and keep a guard over it. Reata is going to ride into town and get Sheriff Greely. He’ll be out here about sunrise or before, and, when it’s daylight, we’ll search the house. Meantime, you and I’ll keep a close watch. Reata, get going!”

Reata nodded. He went by Quinn and muttered rapidly, softly: “Watch Durant.”

Then he went to the corral, snagged a mustang, saddled the horse, and rode up the lane. The low, black silhouette of the house pointed after him like the barrel of a clumsy gun. He was glad to get on the main road and start the mustang away toward Boyden Lake. There was no weariness in him. He possessed one of those bodies that can defy fatigue as long as there remains a well of nervous strength to draw upon.

Now he walked, now he trotted, now he loped the tough little horse. And all the way, until he had sight of the dark smudge of the town, rising against the dim sparkling of the water of the lake, he kept thinking of Harry Quinn left alone on the ranch with the grim rancher. Poor Harry Quinn. In many ways he was as low a fellow as one could find, but, after all, he was above murdering Sam Durant.

He remembered, also, the total silence in which the crime had been committed and the quiet that had followed it. Fat-faced Porky Durant had continued to snore. Cook had not been roused. And this soft-footed quiet made the death of Anton even more strange and horrible.

When he came into the town of Boyden Lake, it was dead, silent. He had to rouse a household to learn where he could find Sheriff Greely’s house. Then down by the starlit lake he was presently tapping at a door. A window pulled up with a groan humanly deep.

“Who’s there?” asked a man’s gruff voice.

“News from the Durant Ranch. A Gypsy’s been stabbed. He’s lying dead out there. Want to have a look?”

There was an answering, wordless growl. He heard the man moving about inside the house. Lamplight glistened across a couple of windows. Then the door was opened, and he looked in on a half-dressed man of thirty-five, a range type, wind burned and sun blackened, fleshless, tough as rawhide. He had pale-blue eyes, very bright and steady, and always taking aim with a slight puckering of the lids.

Reata took a chair. He told, very briefly, the facts as they had happened. Then he slid out of the chair and stretched himself on the floor.

“When you’re saddling up, saddle two broncs instead of one,” he said. “I’ve got a spent horse out there. And I’m tuckered out. I’m going to rest here for a minute.”

The sheriff said nothing. He rolled a cigarette, lighted it, and went silently out of the house. In the distance, Reata presently heard the racing of hoofs on the hard-beaten ground of a corral. He closed his eyes and drew in deep, regular breaths. The weariness began to flow out of his body into the coolness of the floor. Sleep, always at his command, stepped close to him. Wavering dimness of the senses soothed his mind. He was almost unconscious when he heard the bumping of hoofs and the squeaking of saddle leather coming around to the side of the house. Then he got up and went out to change the saddle from his tired mustang to a new mount. Instead, he discovered that the sheriff already had made the change and put the spent horse in the corral.

They were off together, the sheriff keeping to a continual, sharp trot. He was a man of iron in the saddle, and Reata accommodated himself quickly to this most trying of gaits. They rattled out of Boyden Lake onto the long road.

Only when the horses were pulled back to a walk, as they went up a very sharp, steep ditch, did Reata speak. “What sort of a fellow was Cleve Durant?”

“Best you ever seen,” said the sheriff. “Always smilin’. The kind of a man it was good to hunt with, work with, drink with. You knew where he’d be all the while. Him and Sam was too different cuts. They was always wranglin’. Sam’s a great worker, but Cleve was mighty fine.”

After a moment he added: “Why d’you ask?”

“Because Sam killed the Gypsy . . . that means he killed his brother.”

“That’s a bit of news,” said the sheriff.

“Maybe I’m wrong,” said Reata. “But it’s my guess. When I lifted that Gypsy’s arm, I saw the name Durant scrawled out in his blood. He’d written that while he lay there, choking.”

The sheriff whistled. “What did you do?”

“I rubbed the letters out with my foot.”

“You fool,” said the sheriff, “that spoils the case for us.”

“Maybe not,” said Reata, “and maybe so. But how could you hang a man just because his name’s been written on the floor, even if it was written in blood? All that would have happened, if Sam Durant had seen that writing, would have been to put him on his guard. You can’t catch a smart man when he’s on his guard.”

“That’s right,” admitted the sheriff. “But you sure thought fast when you were turning that body.”

“I thought fast, all right,” said Reata. “I thought just fast enough, I guess. He thinks that I believe somebody else did the job.”

“We’ll lay our heads together,” answered the sheriff. “If Sam killed his brother, Cleve, he’s the meanest skunk that ever rode a hoss. What’s your name?”

“Reata.”

“Reata, you’re a bright feller. We’re goin’ to make something together out of this here case.”

They jogged on into the gray of the morning before they saw the house looming. The dawn was brightening when they came up and found Sam Durant on one side of the building with a rifle across his knees as he sat on a rock and Harry Quinn, walking up and down, on the other side of the building. They had kept to their posts all the night.

“He’s keeping up the bluff . . . that Durant,” said Reata. “You’ve got to do your part now. Don’t let him think you suspect him. Give him an extra hard handshake.”

“I’d like to shake him into a hangman’s rope!” snarled the sheriff.

He went straight up to the rancher, however, and grasped his hand.

“Reata’s told me everything,” said the sheriff. “You two fellows stay out here, will you? And Reata and me, we’ll go inside and search the place.”

That was the program. They went into the narrow, low cellar. There were only two small, empty rooms in it. Not even a rat could have hidden away from the first glance.

They climbed up to Doc’s room. He sat up suddenly and blinked at them, his old face wrinkling with surprise as he stared at the lantern light.

They went through every room in the house, and finally into Porky’s.

Porky rolled over in bed. “All right,” he groaned. “I’m goin’ to get up . . . in a minute I’ll be up.” And he relaxed and began to snore again. He had slept all night with his window closed. The room smelled like a kennel.

“Bah!” said the sheriff as he stepped back into the hall with Reata. “There ought to be a way to get rid of the half-wits. They oughta be put off somewhere in an asylum where they can’t do no harm.”

“Get the murderers first and the half-wits will take care of themselves,” said Reata.

They went up at last to Reata’s own room. He had left Rags behind him. The little dog jumped down from his master’s bed and bounded across the dead man. He began to whine and leap around Reata’s knees until he was picked up and put on the shoulder of his master. From that vantage point he looked down on all that happened.

The sheriff said to Reata when he had completed his examination: “There’s nothing to it. If you saw that name written on the floor, then it’s a fact that Sam Durant killed the Gypsy, and that makes it ten to one that he murdered poor old Cleve. Ah, Reata, there was a man for you. One of the best in the world. And that sour-faced devil murdered his own brother! There’s going to be some way of grabbing him and pinning it on him. If we can’t prove it by the law, maybe a lynching mob is goin’ to turn out to be a right thing for once in a lifetime.”

Reata nodded.

“What’ll we do with the body?” asked the sheriff.

“Leave it here,” said Reata. “The Gypsies’ll come for it likely.”

“Shall we send word to ’em?”

“Why send word to ’em? They’ll know. They know when one of their kind dies, almost the way a buzzard knows and comes a hundred miles to have a whack at a dead rabbit. The Gypsies are the same way. They always seem to know.”

“You’ve been a lot with ’em?”

“I was with ’em a day, but it was a lot,” answered Reata.

At that the sheriff smiled. He took out a bandanna, unfolded it, and laid it across the face of the dead man.

“If Anton was hired by Sam Durant, then what Anton knows is dead with him. Would any of the other Gypsies know anything?”

“Queen Maggie knows everything, of course.”

“Can you make her talk?”

“Sure. String her up by the thumbs and light a fire under her feet. She may say something before her feet burn off . . . but it’s not likely to be what you want to know.”

The sheriff considered for some time. “What d’you think we ought to do?” he asked.

“Pretend that you think it was an outside job . . . go back to town . . . but be ready to come pelting out here the minute you get word. Something is going to break around here before long. I feel it in my bones. Aye, and in my throat, too, just where the knife sank into Anton.”

XII

“VISITORS”

The sheriff left. He told Sam Durant that he had to get back to Boyden Lake, but that he would not let the case drop. There might be some connection, he remarked, between this murder and the unfortunate death of Cleve Durant. With a perfectly calm face, the sheriff shook hands with Sam Durant, begged him to keep looking for clues, and to send the first word of any importance to him at once. Then he rode away.

Reata saw him go, entered the bunkhouse, and promptly stretched himself on a bunk and fell asleep. Rags, curled up at his feet, would be his guard. There Reata remained until noon, when Porky Durant came in and shook him by the shoulder to wake him up.

“Hey, wake up, Reata!” Porky said. “Y’oughta see what’s out here to see you. Hey, you just oughta see.”

Reata wakened and saw Porky slapping his thigh and doubling over with mirth. The mouth of Porky was opened wide by laughter, but the cheeks of Porky were so fat that his mouth could not stretch very far. In that it was actually like the mouth of a pig. He seemed one who would have to take small bites.

“There’s a man out there in a covered wagon,” said Porky, “and he’s askin’ for you. He’s got that dead Gypsy loaded into his wagon already. And you’d laugh to see the mules that are pullin’ the wagon, and the way he rolled his cigar in his mouth. And the funny part is that he ain’t no man at all. He’s a woman! Come on and see, Reata.”

Reata knew well enough that it must be Queen Maggie who had come for the dead. He went out at once and found her sitting slued around in the driver’s seat, resting one booted foot on the top of the right wheel. She had on her man’s sombrero and coat, as usual, and the long, fat Havana stuck up at an angle in a corner of her great mouth. It always seemed to Reata as though coffee and tobacco, working together, had dyed her complexion to its present color. It looked like the sort of skin that would keep water out for a long time. The oil of the good tobacco seemed to have soaked through and through her body. She looked to Reata more like a big Indian than ever. And now she rolled the cigar across her huge mouth with a motion of her lips and said: “Hello, Reata. How’s things?”

“Pretty good,” he answered. “How’s things with you?”

“Fair,” she replied. “Pretty fair, I’d say. Except this fool goes and gets himself bumped off. He used to bring in a good pile of money to the tribe when we put on a show. You seen him ride. You know how good he was.”

“Yeah, he was good on a horse,” said Reata.

“You’re right,” said Queen Maggie. “He wasn’t no good no place else. He was a lyn’, sneakin’, thievin’, worthless hound, even for a Gypsy.”

This frankness of hers did not surprise Reata. Nothing about her ever surprised him since their first meeting not so very long before.

“Well, I got him laid out in the wagon here and lashed down,” she said. “And that makes me remember that things would be pretty good for you, if you wanted to join up with us now, Reata.”

“You want me back?” he asked her curiously.

“Aye, we want you back bad,” she stated.

“I’ll bet you do,” agreed Reata. “Every knife in the tribe would be good and sharp for me.”

She shook her head, and the long ash at the end of her cigar broke off and rolled down into the wrinkles of her coat.

“You don’t understand,” she answered. “We know when we lose a man . . . we know when we want a man to take his place. Your rope tricks, they’d make a lot of money for you and for us. It’s an easy life, Reata. Besides, I need you. I ain’t as young as I used to be, and I need a gent that I can kind of lean on. I could lean on you. Because you’re a right man.”

“Thanks,” said Reata. “But I’m pretty busy.”

“Where’s Miriam in that hard head of yours?” asked Queen Maggie. “Ain’t she got a place in it?”

“Sure she has,” agreed Reata. “You don’t forget a girl that’s brought you as close to murder as she brought me.”

“Now, now, now,” murmured Maggie. “You wouldn’t go and hold that ag’in’ her, would you? And there she is, yearnin’ and mournin’ for you. There’ll never be no man for her except you, Reata.”

“No?” said Reata. He tried to smile, but a sigh was rising in his throat as he remembered.

“Chuck this ranch job, and hop up here with me,” said Queen Maggie. “We sure need you, and we sure want you. There won’t be any knives out for you. Now that Anton’s dead, there ain’t anybody that hates you enough to count.”

“No, you wouldn’t use knives. Guns would do just as well,” said Reata. “And the tribe has plenty of guns.”

“Is that the way you figger us?” asked Queen Maggie.

“That’s the way,” said Reata.

“So long, then, and the devil with you,” answered Maggie, and whacked the mules with a long stick that she pulled out of the back of the wagon.

The mules lurched ahead. At a little dog trot that carried them hardly faster than a walk, they pulled the wagon bumping over the irregularities of the lane, and so drew off onto the main road.

Porky was standing beside Reata, shading his eyes with his plump hand as he stared after the wagon.

“She wanted you to come back, eh? You been with ’em, Reata? I guess you been pretty nigh every place in the world. That’s the way you look. Like you been around a

lot of places. Who's Miriam?"

"She's a gal the Gypsies stole . . . I don't know where. And they're taking her . . . I don't know where. To hell, I suppose."

He went back into the bunkhouse and stretched himself on the same bunk, for he was still very tired. Rags, as before, sat up at the feet of his master and guarded him. It was the whining of Rags that wakened Reata from a doze. Big Sam Durant stood beside him, his keen, hard eyes drilling into the younger man.

"Are you all petered out, or up to riding range with me?" asked Durant.

"Petered out," said Reata.

"Me and Quinn and Porky are goin' to do some work down the line. There's a stretch of fence that needs some work on it. Reata, I wanta know how long you'll keep on here at the ranch?"

"D'you want me to go?" asked Reata.

"You've brought me no luck," said the rancher bluntly.

"I'll go tomorrow, if you want me out of the way."

"I'll pay you for your full month," said Sam Durant. "But I'd rather have you gone. Tomorrow will be all right."

"Thanks," said Reata tersely. He closed his eyes again and heard the boots of the rancher thumping noisily out of the bunkhouse. *It was a little too patent, this speech of the rancher's*, thought Reata. He might have waited a few days before trying to elbow Reata off the place. If, in fact, he was to pretend that the Gypsy had been murdered by outside agencies, then he ought to pretend that he needed more protection than ever before. But even in the best criminal mind there are bound to be flaws. It was clear that the removal of the Gypsy had been a great gain for Sam Durant. Perhaps he had now removed the one man who could intimately have been witness to the process by which Cleve Durant had been destroyed.

So Reata closed his eyes tighter and summoned sleep from a distance. It came gradually closer. Finally unconsciousness came. His dreams were not good. He thought that he lay in a powerful furnace, scorched by the heat, and that Miriam sat by the open door of the furnace, laughing, throwing in bits of fuel to increase the blaze. The heat was not actually burning his flesh, but he was stifling for the lack of air to breathe. Finally he heard the whining of Rags, and he awakened.

The brilliance of a burning furnace was around him. The sun was far in the west, and the slant tide of its golden light washed through the room and painted and gilded the wall at the farther end. Rags stood on the chest of his master, and, with his rat-like tail straight and one little paw lifted, he was pointing like a hunting dog toward the doorway.

A shadow now fell obscurely on the end wall of the room, and Reata, turning and lifting on one elbow, saw that Miriam was there on the threshold.

She was not as he had seen her last. There was not a single slash of color in her outfit. She was all olive-drab in her loose riding clothes. There were fringed gloves on her hands, and a quirt hung from her wrist by its loop. She might have stood as the regular image of the typical range girl out on a long ride, but the roughest of clothes

could not diminish the grace of her carriage. Under the deep shadow of her Stetson he probed for the blue of her eyes and found it.

She waved to him, saying: "Am I coming in or staying out?"

"Staying out," he said.

XIII

“THE TRAP”

He lay down again quickly. He wanted to wink her out of his memory and clear his eyes of her, because far down in his heart there was a region of pain and dizzy joy that she occupied. He had to forget her. He had to cut her out of his thoughts. Because even if her blood was white, her life and soul were Gypsy.

“All right,” said her voice from the doorway. “I’m coming.”

Rags began to wag his tail and whine an eager welcome. Her heels tapped on the floor.

“I told you to stay out,” said Reata brutally.

She came up to the bunk and looked down at him. “You only said it twice,” she said. “Three times would have made it true.”

He could smell the dust on her clothes and see it in the wrinkles. He could smell the horse sweat, but also he found in the air a thin scent of lavender. It reminded Reata of riding over a white, summer road at the end of a day and having the first breeze of the evening carry down from the uplands a breath of coolness and of sweetness.

“Move over there a little,” said Miriam.

He closed his eyes and waved his hand. “You ought not to be here,” he said.

Although he kept his eyes closed, he could see her and more clearly. He decided that it would be better to look at the reality than at the thought. So he opened his eyes again.

She sat down on the mere edge of the bunk.

“It’s no use our talking to each other,” said Reata. “You’d better go away.”

She pulled off her gloves, folded her arms, and held her chin between a thumb and forefinger.

“How does it feel,” she said, “all at once having a girl that you like so close to you?”

He stroked the head of Rags and said nothing.

“I thought you were bigger,” went on the girl. “But you’re not such a big fellow, after all.”

In spite of himself, he found that he was taking a big breath.

“When you’re on your feet, then you’re big enough,” she said.

He kept patting Rags. He wanted to smile, so he made himself frown.

“It’s pretty good to be like this, isn’t it?” said Miriam. “The other things stop.”

He did not see, but he could feel the shadow of her gesture.

“The Gypsies just turn into shadows,” she told him. “All the years of my life flicker and go out. It’s so nice to be here, Reata, that I even like this rotten old bunkhouse.

What do you say? Isn't it pretty good to have me here?"

"Quit it."

"Aw, open up and be honest. Some of the chills that are wriggling inside me, they're working in you, too."

He groaned.

"Sit up and talk, will you?" she pleaded.

He sat up. After that, rising, he walked over to the long table and sat down on the end of it, swinging one leg and watching her. "It's no good, Miriam," he said.

"Why isn't it any good?"

"We know each other too well to be silly about the old game."

She stood up in her turn and smiled at him. In the slouchy clothes she was more exquisitely feminine than Gypsy finery could ever make her.

"All right," admitted Reata. "I feel trapped when I see you, but, believe me, I'm going to get out of the trap."

She kept her silence. He felt her eyes travel on him, half amused and half contented.

"You say that if a fellow struggles against the trap he just tears himself up," he went on.

She shook her head. "I'm not saying anything," she answered.

The fact is, he thought, that she does not have to say very much, because to look at her is enough, and to keep waiting and listening for her to speak again. "What sort of a sap do you think I am, Miriam?" he asked her. "I can see the facts, can't I? I can see you, can't I?"

"I hope so."

"What would it turn out? Suppose we marry . . . there's Miriam and Reata. Reata, the pickpocket, with his rope tricks . . . and Miriam, the bareback rider and Gypsy. Would it be a bust? Of course, it would be a bust. You want your own sweet way, and I simply wouldn't have it."

"Of course, you wouldn't."

"There'd have to be a master in my house," he declared.

"I've always wanted to find a master."

"The fact is that it wouldn't work. There's something fine about you . . . there's something in you that the right sort of a man could bring out. By Jove, Miriam, how clearly I can see you fixed up in a fine place with everything that a woman could want, from servants to blood horses. You could be happy like that, with nothing but velvet ever to come under your hands. But the way you'd have to live with me, starting at nothing in a shack, eating beans twice a day, roughening up your hands on a scrubbing board, wearing calico, getting down at the heels, would that be a life? No, you'd hate it. I'd hate it, too, when I saw you begin to change. You see how it is?"

She said nothing, but watched him, and he felt the gentle traveling of her eyes.

"Well, say what you think," he finally snapped.

"I'm not thinking."

"I mean, about what I was just telling you. Don't you admit that it's all true?"

“I don’t know.”

“Why don’t you know? It was all English, wasn’t it? Or do I have to talk Gypsy gibberish to you?”

“I wasn’t hearing you.”

“Now, you look here, Miriam!” exclaimed Reata. “I want to tell you one thing.”

“I want you to tell me,” she said gravely.

He snapped his fingers in the air, scowling.

She snapped her fingers in the air, smiling.

“Quit it, will you?”

“All right,” she said.

He started to stride around the room, taking bigger and bigger steps. “I’m making a fool of myself,” said Reata.

“Yes, but it’s sort of nice,” said the girl.

At that he walked straight up to her and stood so close that he could look down into her face, which, in fact, she made easy by tilting back her head.

“You make me so mad that I’d like to put my hands on you,” he told her.

“I wish you would.”

He did throw out his arms at that, until they almost closed on her, but by degrees he fought himself away from that tiptoe attitude of expectancy, got back on his heels, and forced his arms away and clasped his hands behind his back.

“You’d better go on home,” said Reata.

“I’ll go if you’ll go part of the way.”

“What’s the idea of that?”

“I’ve got what you want. I’ve got the answer to all of this riddle.”

“What riddle? This one here on the ranch, you mean? About Anton . . . and Sam Durant, you mean?”

“I don’t care about Anton. I don’t bother with dead rats. But I’ve got the answer to the rest of it.”

“Go ahead and tell me, then.”

“I’m going to do better than tell you. I’m going to show you.”

“Show me, then. Where?”

“Up in the hills.”

“What sort of bunk is this?” he demanded.

“It isn’t bunk. When Maggie admitted that she couldn’t get you any other way, I begged her to let you in on the inside about all of this. I don’t know what it is, but *she* knows, all right. She told me that if I could get you up into the hills, then she’d let you in on the inside.”

He was frozen with amazement, with excitement, too. “Wait a minute. What would Maggie get out of this?”

“She hopes that she can get you back into the tribe for good and all.”

This chimed so perfectly with the way that Maggie had talked to him that noon that he could not help being impressed. For a long moment he kept in a balance, tempted, striving against temptation, wondering if he would not be acting the part of a fool unless he accepted this invitation to learn the heart of the mystery.

All that time he felt the blue of her eyes like something unseen, but under the hand. At last he said: "All right. That goes with me. I'll saddle Sue and go along."

She had been under such a strain, in spite of her smiling, that the breath of relief she exhaled had a faint moan in it.

Reata went out to the corral, saddled Sue, and tossed Rags up before him. Then he rode out and joined the girl. She was on one of those half dozen little silken stallions, little gems of the range, that the Gypsies always had in their string. With glaring, red eyes and nostrils showing their crimson lining, he could do nothing but dance and prance while the long, low-g geared mare traveled smoothly over the trail. Reata wondered at the ability of the girl to keep the steady pull that the little stallion needed. But her slender arm seemed tireless.

It was sunset before they came to the rim of the foothills; it was dark before they had been long among them, and then a moon came up and showed them the rolling hill forms around them and the dark solemnity of the pines as the woods began.

She took off her hat and tied it behind the saddle. He knew that was because she wanted him to see her, and he was glad. Their horses had learned to travel side by side, nose to nose, while Rags scurried up the trail ahead of them, hunting here and there, always busy, whipping his tail from side to side so fast that it disappeared from the eye. And he could see her leaving the watching of the trail to him, while she kept her head turned up to him, smiling. And he was smiling, too. They spoke hardly at all.

Once he said: "It ought to be always like this."

She answered: "It's *going* to be always like this."

The moon was well up when they came to a narrowing of the trail among big rocks, the trail passing in a straight line uphill.

"How much farther?" he asked.

"Do you care?"

"No, I don't care."

They laughed together. All at once he heard Rags's shrill yipping of fear and anger, and saw the little dog come streaking down the trail toward him. The clang of a rifle and the waspish hum of a bullet past his ear followed instantly. He saw figures leaping up among the rocks and heard the outlandish voices of the Gypsies crying out to one another. This was the way Queen Maggie intended to let him into the mystery. Aye, into the greatest of all mysteries.

He was done—he was finished. He had hardly the sense to pull the mare around. Automatically he caught up Rags as the little dog leaped for him. Had the girl known? Had it been all acting on the part of Miriam? No, he saw her ride straight forward up the trail above him, throwing out her arms to either side as though that empty embrace of hers would shield her lover better from the bullets. He heard her crying out in the Gypsy lingo, her voice like a shrill, mournful song.

Well, they would not risk putting bullets into the jewel of their tribe. They would spread out to either side to shoot past her into their chosen target.

He had loosed the good mare. She was running down the hillside like a bounding stone with terrible, unmatched speed.

XIV

“OUT OF THE DARK”

When the three came in that evening and found that the cook had seen Reata ride away with a girl just before sunset time, the rancher said nothing, merely shrugging his shoulders. But when Harry Quinn swore that Reata was not the sort of a fellow to leave in the middle of a job, the cook said: “He ain’t comin’ back. I seen the girl.”

“What did she look like?” asked Harry Quinn.

“I didn’t see her face. I just seen the back of her, and that was enough. Reata, he ain’t comin’ back till that girl wants to let him go.”

Harry Quinn argued, but rather vaguely. He wondered at the emphatic way in which the rancher exclaimed: “What would a girl have to do with this here?”

Then the loud mouth of Porky Durant was saying: “Hi! I heard the Gypsy woman this noon talkin’ about Miriam, that wanted Reata back. I heard her talkin’. Maybe it was Miriam that got Reata.”

“Miriam?” cried Harry Quinn. Then he was silent in his turn.

“Who is Miriam?” asked Durant.

“Miriam? She’s poison, that’s all,” said Harry Quinn.

For he remembered her from the time he had been held prisoner by the tribe. He felt her name as one feels the scar of a vital wound. It was always somewhere deep in his life that he had to look to find her image.

Afterward, they had supper in a silence imposed on them by the scowling face of Sam Durant. When Porky Durant started to carry on with rambling words about the Gypsy woman and her cigar, his uncle said to him briefly: “If you can’t talk sense like a man, shut up and give us a few minutes of peace, will you?”

At that Porky hung his head, sulking, and it seemed to Quinn that there were tears in the eyes of the young fellow. He got out of the way quickly after supper and could be heard moving about in his room. There was the sound of the squeaking bed springs as he turned in. The uncle, hearing this, merely muttered: “A swine from the day he was born to the day he’ll go into his grave. So much pork. *Bah!*”

Having expressed himself in this manner, Sam Durant rose. He said good night, and then, at the door of the room, added: “Reata’s leaving tomorrow. I won’t be needing you after that, Quinn.” Then he went up the stairs that creaked steadily beneath him.

Quinn was so angered by this curt dismissal that he stamped across the room and threw open the door leading to the stairs. However, the sound of the squeaking, mounting steps checked his shout in some manner. He closed the door with a slam and listened to the echo go walking through the place. He turned about, growling in his throat that the place was a tomb, where everybody went to bed at the end of the day. No talk. No sitting around. Nothing to drink.

When he had said that to himself, he realized he could be wrong on that count and proceeded to look around the kitchen for a jug. He couldn't find a jug, but he discovered a pint bottle, half empty, then got himself a glass—a big one—and carried the bottle and the glass to the side of the kitchen, where he poured out his drink and set down the glass.

Here he settled down in some comfort. A good breeze came through the window and cooled his body. He rolled a cigarette, postponing the first taste of the whiskey until he should have finished half his smoke. That was the best way, in the opinion of Harry Quinn, to get the full relish out of whiskey. In the distance, thunder began to speak in a full, solemn voice. Quinn lighted his cigarette and drew two or three strong whiffs of the smoke into his lungs. Then, still breathing out smoke, he slowly lifted the glass.

At the good aroma of the whiskey, the dry gripping of a mighty thirst passed through him. He felt that the contents of that pint would never reach the roots of dusty dryness at the base of his throat. He lifted the glass, tasted one small swallow, and felt that the stuff was extraordinarily bitter. However, one meets all sorts of acrid stuff among the bar whiskies of the West. He merely shrugged his shoulders a little and then tossed off the dram. Bitter? Yes, it was so decidedly bitter that he hastily poured out another drink to wash from his mouth the memory of the first. Perhaps, thought Harry Quinn, something had gathered at the top of the pint of whiskey. Something alkaline, puckering the tongue and the inside of the mouth. He took another sip and, although the bitterness was still there, he settled back in his chair to enjoy a good evening.

In fact, he did not require a great deal of company, for on occasion he was able to let his memory wander through the dim forest of the past and find many a pleasant spot. He began to daydream over the times that had been in this manner, puffing leisurely at his second cigarette, when he found himself nodding, almost overcome by a great sleepiness. It was such a surprise that he jerked up his head, wondering. Only the moment before he had been feeling fresh, ready to put in a good time. Now he was dull, drowsy, full of yawning. He shook his head again, but that gesture did not serve to clear his wits. Instead, there was a strong and gripping numbness that settled across his eyes. It was like the pressure of a hot hand.

He regarded this sensation with bewilderment until something hot prickled between his fingers. He looked down and saw that his cigarette had burned up to the skin. He dropped it. Between his fingers there was a large white blister, and he had actually been almost insensitive to the pain. Sleep was charging over him. The soft beating of many feet was trampling over his brain, and in his ears, more and more audible, he heard the loud roaring of his pulse. Thunder rolled outside the house, but it was dim and befogged.

Harry Quinn had come to his feet, and there reeled back and forth like a hopeless drunkard. But terror that was springing ice-cold in his breast helped to give to his mind an instant of clearness. This was the way the thing had been done before.

The entire testimony that Dave Bates had given to the jury now swept back over the mind of Harry Quinn. Dave had said that he had sat down and had a drink—one drink. And then he had grown sleepy, very sleepy. It was strange that a single drink could overcome the steel nerves and the hard, grim mind of Dave Bates. But, then, perhaps

there had been in that first drink—if only Dave had remembered to speak about that—a strange bitterness?

The terror ran wild in Harry Quinn. He knew that a criminal is likely to use the same method in successive crimes. If a man kills with a knife once, he'll use the same tool again. If he kills with a hammer, he'll murder with a hammer the next time. And now the murderer of the Durant Ranch was commencing his work again.

Quinn had to get out of the place. But as he turned toward the door, he realized that he would not be able to take more than a few steps. He would be found and dragged back and put into position by the murderer, and his gun would be found, the next day, with at least one chamber discharged—and a dead man would be sitting in the chair opposite him. What man would that be?

He had to get rid of his gun, then. He pulled it out of the holster and tried to throw it through the window, but it merely struck the sill and fell heavily to the floor. It was strange. There was no force in his arm. It was limp. He leaned and picked up the weapon. He raised it as high as the window sill, when it fell from his nerveless fingers. He tried to pick it up again, but his body collapsed to the floor. He could not lift the revolver now. It was as impossible as though the little Colt weighed a ton.

He might cry out, though who could hear him except Porky Durant? The good-natured, foolish Porky seemed to Harry Quinn the one base and resting point of his salvation. He parted his lips. His own voice sounded like the roar of a sea lion on a rock, a noise submerged by the noise of the sea. Then all at once the body of Harry Quinn went limp along the floor.

XV

“THE WHISPERER”

The sleep of Sam Durant was generally very sound, but since the death of his brother there had been a tension on his nerves that rarely would relax. Because of that tension, the mere whistling of a draft through his room caused him to waken on this night. He listened for a moment and then heard the dull booming of thunder in the distance and the murmur of the wind around the edges of the house. A storm was coming up, and that would explain the whistling draft through his window.

Suddenly the draft ceased almost entirely. This was a trifle strange, he thought, for the wind was still murmuring around the corners of the building. It was as though the door of his room had been shut softly. Gradually he relaxed, thinking again about that which had occupied his mind before he fell asleep—the disappearance of Reata. The man was too dangerous to be entirely safe. The manner in which he had handled formidable Bill Chester was proof enough of that. Above all, it was strange that Chester had not tried to retaliate in some manner, but perhaps the explanation was not only in the things that Reata had done to Chester, but also in the faint yellow gleam that came into Reata’s eyes when he was excited. A fellow who had seen that light once might not care to see it again.

Just as the body of the rancher grew slack again, and his thoughts were growing obscure, he distinctly heard the fall of some metal body in the lower part of the house, from the direction of the kitchen. This puzzled him, since the cook was already in bed. But perhaps Harry Quinn was rummaging around in the kitchen for food, though he had eaten plenty for supper. A moment later the sound came again. The same pan, perhaps, had slipped from the hand of the clumsy forager. The rancher frowned, but, while he was still frowning, he heard a cry so bestial, yet so human, so filled with despair and with horror, so unlike anything he had ever heard before in his life, that Durant sprang out of his bed. So doing, it seemed to him that he saw, very vaguely outlined near the door, the form of another man.

“Who’s there?” he demanded.

But the form was not near the door. That was an illusion caused by the faintness of the light. Something rushed in the air. A crushing blow fell on the side of Sam Durant’s head and knocked him to his knees. He was still stunned and helpless as the noose of a rope was tightened around his wrists. Then a gag was crammed between his teeth.

A whispering voice said at his ear: “Stand up, Durant.”

He rose.

“It’s your turn,” said the whispering voice. “You remember Cleve? You’re going to sit in the same kind of chair, dead as hell. You’ll like that, Durant. You’re going to be wiped out. There’s going to be nobody left but the fat-faced half-wit, Porky. He’ll have the Durant Ranch and the Durant money. Understand what I say?”

He nodded.

The thing was clear to him. Reata had been the outside agent who had killed Cleve Durant. Reata was also the fellow who came looking for a job in order that he might find his chance to destroy Cleve's brother. This shadowy form was about the height of Reata and must, in fact, be he.

What devilish malevolence was behind the thing? Perhaps the desire was simply to wipe out the two older Durants, knowing that Porky could easily be handled in whatever way shrewd, hard men desired. This explanation was enough. The only strange thing was that he, Sam Durant, with all his experience of men in this world had not realized that in his new hired hand he had a man too dangerous to be used on a ranch. Well, he would pay for that blindness now, and he would pay in full.

The whisper at his ear said: "Come on now, Durant. Walk straight through the door. Don't try to bolt. Don't even try to stomp or make a noise, or I'll bash your brains out here. Besides, noise won't help you. Poor Porky's snoring, I suppose, and Doc is half deaf. That's why I didn't have to get rid of Doc . . . because he's half deaf."

Durant obeyed orders. As beaten men will do, he moved steadily on according to command. The door was opened for him from behind. He went down the stairs toward the kitchen, and the rope was kept taut about his wrists from behind.

"Wait a minute," said the whisper at his ear.

He paused, and a bit of cloth was wrapped about his head. When he was so blinded, the door in front of him was pushed open, and he knew that he was entering into the presence of light. He was guided across the room, both his elbows being held in a powerful grasp. Then he was made to sit in a chair, and at once a long length of rope was wound around him. A man cannot be more helpless than he is when he's tied into a chair. There is nothing that he can do, no way in which he can move. But Sam Durant was tired of this life, anyway, he told himself. It was far, far better to relax and let the thing be ended for him by the hand of another man.

The whisper at his ear was saying: "Now you see the idea, Durant? Harry Quinn is lying on the floor by the window. He's been drugged with stuff in his whiskey. The fool! I drugged him. As the drug began to take hold, he realized what was happening. He tried to throw his gun away. That's what you heard fall on the floor twice, but you lay there in your bed like a swine. You had no brain to work with.

"Then Quinn tried again to throw out the gun, so that you couldn't be shot with his Colt. But he failed again. The dope was working in him. He couldn't do it. Then he yelled, and that yell was what got you out of bed and in position to get a sock on the side of the head. You see!"

The whisperer chuckled. Durant sat rigid, waiting.

"Now," said the whisperer, "I've got you sitting pretty good, and all I have to do is to cross the floor and get hold of that gun. Understand? And after I have it, I come up close to you and shoot. And where would you rather have it, Durant? In the head? Or in the heart? Nod once for the head and twice for the heart. I'm a kind fellow, Durant, and I give dead men anything they ask for." He chuckled again.

Durant nodded his head once.

“You want it quick and sweet, eh?” said the whisperer. “All right. I’ll aim the slug right at your mouth. I’ve wanted to smash a bullet through that mug of yours many a time before this. Because I know you, Durant, and you know me. You know me, but not as well as you think. Are you ready to die, Durant?”

Durant nodded. For it seemed to him, just then, that there was nothing in the world he wanted so much as the cessation of that frightful whispering. He heard the footfall cross the floor. The thunder was rolling loudly again, but he heard the rasping of metal against wood as the fallen gun was picked up. As they had found Cleve, so in the morning they would find his body sitting freely in the chair, the ropes removed, a bullet through his head.

XVI

“REATA RETURNS”

Reata, as the mare fled like a falling stone down the slope, was brought to safety by a sweep of the trail to the side, so that a crowd of vast boulders projected between him and his pursuers. He heard their frantic voices, screeching behind him, tearing through the air, and then the pelting hoofs of horses. Well, Sue had traveled a good distance this day, but she would travel still farther, and at a rate that would make the best horses among the Gypsies dizzy before long.

The way flattened out, running in a shallow valley with hills to either side, and behind him he heard the tumult of the horses and the shrill cries of the Gypsies to one another. He could see the dark of their faces and the brightness of their eyes without turning his head to look. They saw him, and a few bullets rattled among the rocks, but now he was around a farther bend, and every stride of the racing mare would put a safer distance between him and his hunters.

And the girl? They would curse her and rage against her, no doubt, but they would not touch her. She meant too much to them. It was savagely in his mind to suspect that she had known the trap into which she was leading him, but in his heart he knew that she had been innocent. And never would he see, in all his days, a braver thing than that picture of her riding before him toward the guns to cover his retreat, her arms thrown out wide.

In the white of the moon or the thick black shadow of the hills, he wove a way out of the highlands and into the flat of the valley of Boyden Lake below. For half a mile he kept waiting for the pursuit to appear. Then he realized that they had surrendered their chase. They knew Sue of old, and that they could not keep pace with her long, easy stride.

So he rated her back to an easy lope that she could continue forever, it seemed, without fatigue, flowing smoothly along over the ground. She was still at that gait, with hardly a break, when he came to the Durant Ranch. Half the sky was now adrift with thunderheads, and the noise of the storm was blowing up louder and louder out of the west. Still, he had moonlight to guide him, but that moon was almost hidden by the clouds as he approached the ranch house.

He pulled off the saddle and bridle and turned the mare into the shed, where he fed her. He was barely through giving her grain when he heard, or thought he heard, a strange cry from the direction of the house. No doubt it was an error of his mind. For the wind, when it is howling, can make strange sounds. And yet, as he finished giving the mare grain and then rubbed her down with some twists of hay, he was seriously troubled. He hardly knew by what, and he had to turn back the pages of his memory for a few moments before striking again on the voice that he thought he had heard. At once he gave up his work on Sue and strode from the barn without so much as closing the door behind him.

There was a light in the kitchen, that he had noticed as he came in and attributed to Doc, doing some late work—making bread, perhaps. But when he came closer, he saw, even from the near distance, a man bending down behind the window to the floor, lifting something, and against the opposite wall, lashed firmly into a chair, was a masked man. The rope went around and around his body and limbs, so that he could not stir.

Now the burden that was being raised behind the window appeared as Reata drew near, and he saw that it was Quinn, looking like a dead man. His head was hanging. His arms flopped down. His mouth hung senselessly open.

He who lifted that burden could not be seen for a moment. And Reata exclaimed, not loudly, but in intense horror and surprise. Harry Quinn was dropped like a sack to the floor, and now, staring out the window, his red hair bristling it seemed, and his face working like the face of a beast, young Porky Durant glared from the yellow lamplight into the dull white of the moonshine in which Reata stood.

A gun flashed in Porky's hand. Reata was already racing, not away—distance would do him no good—but straight for the wall of the house. As he ran, the subtle coils of his lariat were in his hand, and he cast full for the window. The noose gripped at the flash of the gun. Reata jerked back. He heard a yell. The gun exploded. He saw the Colt fall outside the window, and the loosening noose come off the extended hand of Porky. Instead of running to the side, Reata dashed straight on at the window itself.

Porky had sprung aside, and, as Reata came up, he saw the chunky fellow standing with legs spread out, as though to receive a shock and withstand it—but he was facing now the open door, instead of the window. It had not occurred to him that any man would choose to enter the room by the window. There he stood, braced, and with another Colt balanced in his hand. The whole thing was perfectly clear.

As Cleve Durant had died, so was Sam to go. *Durant* was the name that Anton had written as he died. Durant . . . with Porky in mind. It was Porky who had planned, so simply, to wipe out his two uncles and possess himself of the entire property without loss of time. It was Porky, again, who had made the bargain with the Gypsies when he first needed help. It was Porky who, on this day, had twice tried to get Reata away from the ranch as a man too dangerous to have around when he was working out the last half of his schemes.

These things Reata saw clearly as he rushed for the window. He could not get through it before Porky had a chance to turn and fire into him. He could not enter the guarded door. And he carried no gun. It was not the first time in his life that he had had occasion to curse his fixed resolution never to wear a gun. But he had that agent which could enter the room for him.

It was not easy. He had to build a noose so small that it would pass through the narrow of the window, so broad that it would drop over the shoulders of Porky. One gesture made that noose. One gesture threw it through the window, making a soft, slithering whisper through the air.

And Porky, crouched a little, wavering a bit from side to side in the animal intensity of his hunger to kill, heard that whisper in the air. He seemed to know what it meant, and that it was too late for him to side-step. Instead, he twisted about as the rope

descended above him, and with a bullet from his gun knocked the sombrero from Reata's head. It was good shooting. But the next moment a powerful tug on the lariat had jerked Porky forward.

Reata went through that window like a cat. The gun was still in Porky's hand. He tried to twist around and use it, till Reata stamped on his wrist. The bones crunched softly inside the fat of the flesh, and Porky lay still. A few twists of the little reata tied the fat fellow hand and foot. Then Reata stepped to the rancher and made him free.

Big Sam Durant leaned from his chair, staring, staring. Reata, working busily over the inert body of Harry Quinn, would never forget how Durant said slowly: "I only thought he was a pig. I forgot . . . that swine eat meat."

But Porky said nothing. He did not even nurse his crushed wrist. All the life of his body and of his soul was concentrated in the red stain of fire in his eyes.

It seemed to Reata afterward that there was no regret in Porky for what he had done. He had saved himself all his life, realizing his own vicious capacities, masking them under his affectation of simplicity that gave him idle days, saving himself for the great moment when he could strike to kill. There was only one real folly in his plan, and that was the exactitude with which he had copied the first crime in preparing for the second.

"When I seen you the first time," said Porky to Reata, later on, "I knew that you might make things go wrong. I knew it by the damn' cool look of you. I seen the yaller in your eyes the first shot out of the box. How I wish that I'd cut your throat while you were asleep!"

That was all he would say. They could not make him speak even at his trial. In silence he was to go to the end of his life, as far as legal answers went. But the proof that was gathered about him was too complete and too exact for him to wriggle out of the net.

Harry Quinn went to the penitentiary to get Dave Bates. He wanted Reata to do it because, as he said, Dave would think a lot of the first friend he saw when he was freed from prison. But Reata wanted to go back to Rusty Gulch alone, slowly. He wanted to pass under long leagues of the blue of the Western sky, and to let the honest sun burn out of him some of the memories of the Durant Ranch.

Sam Durant did not beg him to stay. He did not insist, even when Reata refused the thick sheaf of bank notes that he offered to his rescuer. Durant said: "I know what it means to you. It's been like a lot of bad weather. On top of timberline. No sun to see. You wanta forget. Well, you'll never forget, Reata. No more'n we'll ever forget you."

Then Reata rode south, leisurely. He had Rags for company. In that company, he felt more than secure, because for the second time, the little scrap of a dog had given him the warning that enabled him to save his life. And there was only one shadow on the soul of Reata all the way, and that was the thought of the girl. But it was better that he should not try to find her. There was too much Gypsy in her soul. She would be irreclaimable to the last moment of her life. One could not be in her company without finding the bright face of danger too often at hand. And yet the thought of her was always near him like a presence on the farther side of a door, like someone whispering on the other side of a corner.

When he came down into Rusty Gulch, he came by twilight, ten days after he had left the house of Durant. After he had put up Sue in the box stall that was her special place in the establishment of Pop Dickerman, Reata knew, as he patted her head, that she was two-thirds his own.

From the house, as he approached it, he heard only one voice sounding, loudly, and that was the voice of Harry Quinn. So Reata came up stealthily and peered through the window. What he saw was Pop Dickerman waiting on his two men at supper, filling their plates and their coffee cups, stepping here and there in soundless slippers, with a cat curled securely on his shoulder, a scrawny, yellow-eyed tomcat.

Harry Quinn was enlarging himself over a glass of whiskey that stood beside his plate of food. But his words had no meaning to the mind of Reata, who was staring fixedly at the little man who sat at the table. The face of Dave Bates was so thin that, in fact, it looked like only half of a normal face. It was twisted and crooked. The brow alone was noble and wide, and the eyes were as cold as stones. Never in his life had Reata seen a thing so evil. And it was for this that he had rubbed elbows with that whispering death on the Durant Ranch.

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Whisperer: A Reata Story* by Frederick Schiller Faust (as George Owen Baxter)]