



The Devil's Saddle

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WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PREVIOUS PARTS

HARRY MORREL, hellbending son of stern old "Chief" Morrel, ruler of Neutral Saddle, is wounded by "Gentle" Ladley, most despicable gunman in the West, at the ranch of Concha, the saintly witch doctor of the Big Mesas. When Concha convinces Harry that the last two men Ladley is blamed for killing really were shot by the Chief, his father, Harry starts off, wounded, to destroy an old calico pony with the Morrel brand on it, the only evidence against the Chief. In dispatching the pony, Harry inadvertently kills its rider, a Papago Indian, who is stealing it. Harry then cuts the brand off the carcass. Three prospectors, who find Harry, accuse him of the wanton murder of the Papago, and hold him captive at a sheep ranch, while they notify his father. With Moran, his chief deputy, and Larabee, owner of the Bar-L Ranch, the Chief starts for the sheep ranch to try—and probably to hang—his own son!

CHAPTER XVII.

AWAITING DEATH.

THE sheep ranch was situated in a deep box cañon called Trade Rat Gulch. A single old half-breed lived there, and on account of his habit of selling water to passing prospectors for a can of tomatoes or soup he had gained a rather bad name among the muckers of Borax Desert.

Aside from that one little flaw in his character he was a very estimable man. Something of a hermit, something of a religious fanatic, he was not entirely a bad sort of citizen in a desert country where rustlers abound, and where, as the saying goes, "the calf is not safe in the mother cow."

It was at the dead of night that a tall, gaunt, wounded man was brought to his ranch in the custody of two white-haired

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prospectors. The men wanted water for themselves and for their horses, and the flat-nosed, high-cheekboned old breed demurred, suggesting the fact that water had to be toted by mules over a very rough bit of trail, and that he was constantly drained of his supply by passing white gentlemen who had much gold dust.

If, however, the three could understand his position, and make it worth the necessary trip next day with his hide-covered five-gallon cans—

"Speakin' of cans," Simpson the younger interrupted, "we'd admire to have you can them thar suggestions. This outfit ain't payin' for water. We're workin' in the interests of the law. When Chief Morrel comes, you kin dicker with him."

Chief Morrel! Coming to his ranch! The interests of law! Well, that was different. Would the white gentlemen like tamales and cueve and a chuck of beef with coffee?

No, they had eaten their fill a short while before up at Concha's ranch.

"But have breakfast ready for us in the mornin'," Simpson the elder stipulated. "We'll be stoppin' here for a day or two. Our pard, Grannas, is huntin' the sheriff, which he's in the cañons yonder trailin' a outlaw, and we expect him to drop by here sooner or later."

The breed stared out of muddy, tight slits of eyes. He did not like the looks of his three guests—particularly the tall, young one. The fact that the latter was wounded did not in any manner allay the host's fears.

"You got a bunk ready so's this here hombre kin lay down?" Simpson the elder asked. "You kin see he's got a crease in the shoulder, which a little sleep won't do him no hurt."

The half-breed lit a jack lantern, and ushered the three men to a bunk shed in the rear of his main ranch house.

"I'll set here, stayin' on watch till mornin'," the elder said to his brother. "You kin sleep till then."

Simpson the younger was shown another small bunk room in the same long, low shack. The breed went on to the next door with Simpson the younger.

"The young hombre in there," the host said in a low and apprehensive voice, "ees bad hombre?"

"I reckon that's a good way to describe him," said the other.

"What crime, señor, ees this hombre commit?"

"Killed a Injun—back thar on the south slope."

"H'm. Sheriff Morrel, he will hang him pronto, I think so."

"Pronto's the word. Except that this here hellbender is his own son."

"Sangre de Cristo!" the Mexican exclaimed.

"And in order that you won't git too friendly or sympathetic with the young gun-fanner, I'd admire to have you understand just why he's our prisoner. He throwed a Injun over a cliff. Some sort of a quarrel. His only reason is that the victim was a breed. He's given that thar identical reason before—"

"Ah, I remember, señor!" the host said.

"The prospectors which pass by thees cañon have tol' me. The sheriff's son, he mak' big fight in Pedrò's bar. Shoot up everybody very moch. The sheriff mak' the trial in Neutral Saddle—and send his son to the calabozo!"

"That's the facts of the case, Mr. Breed. And we're expectin' another trial—along the same lines. What he'll do this time remains to be seen."

"Madre de Dios, ees a terrible mix-up, I think so!"

"And I'm warnin' you to stay away from that bunk room. If that young hellbender ever gits a gun in his hand, the first one of us he'll plug will be you, because you've got high cheek bones and a brown face. That's all the provocation he needs."

"Por Dios! I stay away for my life!" the half-breed avowed.

"Wake me in the morning at sunrise," said the guest. "And I'll have my eggs done on both sides."

The next day an air of peace and calm resignation settled over Trade Rat Gulch. At least that was the state of mind of three of its inhabitants—the prisoner and his two old captors.

As for the host, the word resignation applies, but the word calm does not. His guests were eating him out of house and home. They ate a big enough breakfast for seven men, and they seemed to insist on their stove-up plugs drinking water as if they were human beings. Only they drank enough to water a whole army of men and mules.

Toward sunset the old breed was pestered by two more guests. They sneaked down from somewhere in the Big Mesa fastnesses as ravenous as wolves, as thirsty as steers, and added to that they were ill-tempered and looking for trouble.

Fortunately they were not a very dangerous-looking pair, merely a Papago Indian, very old, very tall, and with a face like leather that has been badly tanned. The skin was less like a human being's than like the splotchy black and red of a Gila monster.

It was impossible to guess within half a century of the Indian's age, but it was certain he was over eighty. He entered upon the scene like some character resurrected from past ages, a savage, sinister ghost.

With him was a tremendous lummock of a squaw.

The squaw could only speak a word or two of Arizona English, but her companion—who, it appeared later, was her grand-uncle—acted as spokesman for the pair, and delivered his message, which was very disagreeable:

An Indian riding in the desert had found a member of their tribe—this squaw's brother, in fact—lying at the base of a cliff in a gulch on the south slopes of the range. The squaw and her aged relative had come to the gulch in time to chase off a coyote. Their kinsman, in short, was dead.

The bones and hide of his horse were lying near by, pretty well cleaned by coyotes and buzzards. But they had been able to tell by examining the torn strips of hide that a bullet had been put into the critter.

The old Papago herald-priest did not explain why it was he examined that carcass so carefully. But the fact was both

he and the squaw were well aware of their young kinsman's horse-stealing proclivities, and they wished to satisfy themselves just what brand that horse carried. It might explain the mystery.

There was, needless to say, no brand to be found on those bloody strips of calico hide. For this reason the aged Indian and the squaw surmised that their kinsman had not been engaged in horse thievery, but had been murdered through some treachery of an unknown enemy.

They spent the night in tracking down clews, but because of the fine silica of the gulch bed and the pebbly trails threading the breaks of the gulch they had not been able to find any definite tracks. Their search did not lead them to Concha's ranch, although they did ride around the rim of the gulch hunting for tracks of a possible rider. A wind high up there on the rim had obliterated the clearer tracks, and such of those as were left were not easily found at night time.

They arrived finally at the logical conclusion that they better report the whole business to the big white chief, Sheriff Morrel.

Thus it was that in taking the trail which crosses Borax Desert they fell in with a rider who was going on the same errand—in search of the sheriff. It was Grannas.

Grannas told them the whole story—that is to say, he told them as much as he knew of it. Their kinsman, he said sympathetically, had been murdered for no other reason than that he was a Papago. The slayer had confessed his motive in those very words.

And who was the slayer—and where was he?

He was at the sheep ranch in Trade Rat Gulch, held prisoner by the two Simpson brothers.

And his name was Harry Morrel.

"Son of big white chief!" the aged Indian exclaimed, without changing any muscle in his deeply corrugated face. "Heap bad hombre. Fight peaceful Indian and breed many years. Hy-yu-skookum. Papagoes go on warpath."

"Don't go talkin' any war talk to me,"

Grannas had said. "Or I'll start a little war myself right here. You two shag back to that thar rancho and wait. I'm goin' to git the sheriff."

That was a good enough suggestion. The old Indian was too feeble to ride across the desert after the nerve racking trailing he had just engaged in. And his grand-niece was too heavy a load for an ordinary plug.

"We trail to Trade Rat barranca," he said. "Our cayuses heap thirsty. Squaw heap hungry. She is plum cultus nuisance on trail. We wait. If Big Chief Morrel don't come, good, I kill 'im son of chief. And my kinsmen at Pueblo scalp all white muckers in desert."

With this threat he rode back to Trade Rat Gulch, taking the squaw with him. Her calf-kneed little cayuse followed in the wake of the old Papago, bearing its mountain of weight like a pack horse laden with a far too heavy outfit of food, grain, water, and mining tools.

On arriving at the sheep ranch, the old Papago repeated the same sentiments he had voiced to Grannas. There would be war. Phineas Morrel was the father of the plum cultus Gila monster, and he would not render justice. He would delay, he would palaver, he would make excuses, he would give his son a horse and six-shooter and water, and let him escape to Mexico.

The little breed posadero reported the arrival of these two unwelcome characters to his other guests.

Harry Morrel and the two prospectors were playing poker on a barrel.

The Simpson brothers were very much alarmed.

"You better git into that thar bunk shed agin, Harry," they said to their prisoner. "The ole Injun's liable to take his own revenge."

But the breed pointed out that there was no danger of this. The ninety or hundred year old redskin had left his sawed-off shotgun slung over his saddle, according to the host's stipulation.

Besides, he was too old to shoot it off anyway. The only menace he had to offer was his promise to get his whole tribe behind him unless justice was rendered.

"How about the squaw?" Simpson the

elder asked. "They're the ones you have to look out for when they's revenge at stake."

The squaw would not fight, the breed assured them. She would wait, hoping that, according to the Papago system, the white chief would turn the condemned prisoner over to her for a treatment of burning splinters.

"Tell 'em my dad will be here sooner or later," the prisoner said. "And he'll give 'em justice gladly. But if they say anything more about going on the warpath he'll collect all the lassos on the range, and the whole damn tribe will find themselves hanging in a row with the crows chawing their ears."

"I'll tell them, señor," the posadero said gratefully.

"And how about supper?" Harry asked.

"Supper, *por Dios!* Supper for you three, which eat more than the horse! And for two Papago Indians besides! *Madre de Dios*, but the justice she are a very expensive commodity!"

"Go ahead, deal the cards, Stew," Harry said.

Hours passed. There were more meals, more sessions of poker, more long sleep. It was a strange household gathered together there with the half-breed at the Trade Rat sheep ranch: an old Indian clamoring for revenge, a fat squaw, biding her time, eating like a horse, sleeping; two white-headed prospectors never without their guns; and finally, a prisoner who slept the most peacefully of all, the sleep of utter physical exhaustion, his soul at peace with the whole world, and the whole of mankind.

And during those dreadful hours the little breed kept scurrying around from one shed to the other; from his main ranch house to the bunk house, then to the chuck house, and the store shed.

Justice was more than expensive; it was disastrous. If the Chief would only come and put an end to this nightmare existence. The breed could not sleep a wink. He was afraid to sleep. He was afraid of being awakened by a gun fight, and finding his house torn down around his ears.

The best he could do was to spend hours at prayer, beseeching the stern but all mer-

ciful *Dios* to put some sort of end to his misery. With a lighted candle before him, and a dog-eared Spanish Bible, he read hours at a time, while the whir of cards and the jingle of silver on the barrel in the next room, kept up a dismal obligato to his worship.

He was afraid to take his eyes off the barn where he had permitted the old Papago and the squaw to sleep. They would sneak over to the store shed and steal some more food. There seemed to be no bottom to that squaw's stomach. She would eat a can of vegetables, thrusting her hands into it like a bear.

And he was afraid to leave that shed where the poker players were installed. The two old men guarding the murderer were entirely too lax in their vigil. He might surprise them when one of them was gathering in a big pot, get their guns, then go out and murder those two Indians, and everybody else. The breed would not be immune.

In a word, he was like the man who had a fox, and a goose, and a bag of grain, and found himself confronted with the problem of crossing a river. He could take one of his possessions at a time, but if he took the fox the goose would eat the grain. If he took the grain the fox would eat the goose.

Thus, if the breed didn't watch the feed-shack and corral, those thieving Indians would make away with something. If he didn't watch Harry Morrel, that gun-shooter would kill the thieving Indians, not to mention the breed.

It was during this state of affairs that, at three o'clock one cool moonlit night, the sound of horses' hoofs came beating rhythmically upon the rock slabs of the gulch bed.

To the distracted breed it came as the gentle sound of rain to a thirst-tortured steer.

To Harry Morrel it came with a somewhat fearful significance.

The rhythm gripped his body. It had a vital message, which he felt beating in his very pulse, as the rhythm of tomtoms in a jungle may transmit some message of devils and death to a lonely savage.

He held a good hand that round, drawing

a deuce to jacks and deuces. It had been a jackpot sweetened several times.

He laid the hand down, for his two captors had arisen.

"I guess the game's over, Harry," Simpson the elder said quietly.

They all knew that the judge had come.

Harry Morrel knew it first, for his ears were the keenest, and he could pick out the particular rhythm of that big blood bay his father rode. Under those circumstances he could have picked it out from a herd.

Harry closed the small fan of cards he held in his hands; then tossed them in the discard.

He went out with old Swig Simpson to the corral, Simpson the younger following behind.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AT THE BREAKING POINT.

FATHER and son met out under the gleam of moonlight in the ramshackle corral. All that could be seen of their faces as they looked at each other were the two jaws under the jet black shadows of the sombrero brims.

But that was enough. They were two jaws exactly alike, both adamant, unyielding.

Old Phineas Morrel saw that his son had no fear of him. But the engaging grin that ordinarily was there had forsaken the hard lips of the youth. He seemed old.

There were lines, which his ride into the fierce heat of the barranca south of Concha's ranch had deepened in his face, making him look as old as Phineas himself. There was nothing in that countenance inviting the father's sympathy. It was resolute, challenging.

And that same sternness—and pain—was reflected in the father's face, as if it had been reflected in a perfect mirror.

"You did what you said you'd do," was the chief's greeting. He referred to Harry's parting words with him in the desert when he had promised to raise hell. "You've raised hell once too often."

Harry did not answer this. As a matter of fact, he had no answer. He had no state-

ment to make of any kind. What his father had to do must be done—and Harry would not prevent it.

The two deputies who had ridden into the gulch with Phineas—the stalwart, bearded Larabee, and the little man with the walrus mustache, stood behind the chief, waiting for his orders.

A moment of indecision seemed to have weakened the old man. He was waiting, with the fervent hope that his son would speak. But it was very apparent to every one that Harry was going to leave the whole ceremony up to his father.

Behind the two deputies was the spikey-bearded Grannas, talking to the elder Simpson. Simpson the younger was behind Harry. And a little behind him were two furtive, slinking men, deep in a massive shadow. The massive shadow was cast over them by the shapeless bulk of blanket and fat—the squaw.

"Who are them hombres?" the chief asked. "And that thar squaw?"

"The little breed is the sheepherder who owns this joint," Simpson the younger said. "The two injuns is relatives of the deceased."

"Relatives of which?"

"Of the Papago which Harry dumped."

The sheriff straightened up. But it was not an indication that he had taken on strength. It was rather the opposite. The news took him by surprise. He did not know that the trial of his son, which he had hoped would be a very secret affair out here in the bad lands, would be intensified by the presence of unwelcome witnesses.

"Take 'em into the main shack," the chief said. "I want to talk to 'em there." He then turned to the shrinking breed.

"You say this button owns the joint? All right, then, breed; see to it that our nags are watered."

The breed bowed humbly. Phineas Morrel was the savior who had come to put an end to his hours of misery.

"I am Miguel Hidalgo, *señor*," he said, rubbing his brown little hands. "I am sheepherder by grace of God in thees cañon. For long time I feed everybody tamales, chicken, canned milk, water—which are very precious—"

"Well, I don't want none of your water," the chief interrupted. "I want a good slug of liquor, which same I'd admire to have you serve up in a hurry."

He turned to his two deputies. "Larabee, and you, too, Moran, stay out here with the boy. I'll call you directly." He then went into the ranch house with the rest of the company.

The main room was a low-ceilinged hall with a kitchen table, and barrel or two, and a long bench. Saddles, old bridles, riatas, saw-bucks, littered the place. A single smoky lantern offered the only light except for the band of moonbeams filtering through the cobwebs of a window.

The chief sat down at the table, and the others stood, waiting respectfully for him to have his necessary drink.

He took the bottle from the servile half-breed, pouring out a stiff swig in a tin cup. Then he passed the bottle to the man standing nearest him, Simpson the elder. It passed through all hands, and was finally drained by one who could outdrink both the junior and senior Morrel in their palmiest days. I mean the aged Papago.

He belched loudly, then stood, his coarse, sun-bleached hair falling in tangled strands across red eyes. His head nodded in palsy as he glowered at the man sitting at the table.

"How the hell did this seedwart happen to show up?" the chief asked.

Grannas explained how he had met the old fellow and the squaw on the trail in search of the chief.

"I come for justice, Big Chief Sheriff!" the Papago said.

"Well, who said you weren't goin' to get it?" Phineas roared angrily. "That's the old story with you Injuns. Always howlin' around me for justice, and you always get same, don't you? And you'll get it this time, even if my son was at fault." He turned to the squaw. "What-alls inside this blanket?"

"She's the Injun's sister. I mean the Injun Harry croaked," said Simpson the elder. "Been hangin' around here ever since she first found out we'd took Harry prisoner. She's give' us all nervous prostration."

"Never said nothin'. Just watched us out'n the corner of her eyes while we was playin' poker. Every couple hours she'd go and eat a chuck of beef and a laig of lamb, sleep off the effects, then come back and watch Harry out'n the corner of her eyes some more."

The sheriff was evidently very much displeased with the presence of both of these desert characters. It brought all the issues of that trial to a very disagreeable head.

He looked again at the tall Indian, whose shaking parchment hands were fumbling with a tattered felt hat. "Now, then, you," the judge said. "I suppose you figure that bein' I'm the sheriff of this here country, and that the prisoner out thar is my own son, you're goin' to be cheated of what you want—which is his life?"

"Big Chief Sheriff is just chief," the Indian said. "Papagoes trust Big Chief Sheriff. For many years he right 'im wrongs. Heap good man. Our Papago chieftain always punish his sons for crime. White man do so—some time. This time I think so."

"And if you get cheated of the revenge you're hankerin' for," the old judge said caustically, "I suppose you'll go back to your tribe and get 'em all het up so's no white man prospectin' in this here desert will be safe from now on?"

The tall savage shook his matted hair. "You no cheat poor Papago of revenge."

"As a matter of honest-to-God fact, chief," Grannas put in at a rather delicate moment, "this sore-eyed coyote made that thar very same statement to me. He'll git his tribe worked up, all righto. That's one reason I wanted to be sure you straightened this business out agreeable-like to all concerned."

The judge put up a hand in interruption. He was going to straighten it out. He always straightened such things out. He would follow the business through step by step with an inexorable and merciless logic.

But there was one point he wanted these Indians to understand. He looked up at them scowling. They were disarmed, helpless waifs of the desert, but they symbolized a very fatal danger. Blood had been

shed. The horde of desert Indians, the tribesmen, would shed much blood in just reprisal.

"You coyote-livered Injuns," he said, "have an ornery habit of mixin' up the word revenge with justice. If my son killed your kinsman in some just cause, and I declared him not guilty, would you still be hankerin' for blood?"

"Big Chief's son did not kill in just cause," the gaunt old shaman said.

"That's what we're here to find out," the other shot back, indulging the ancient, palsied man his misuse of logic. "I said 'if,' and you disregard that thar little word. Well, I ain't disregardin' it."

"I think they's an 'if' to this business. I never blew around any too loud about my son's good points, because I don't think he's got any. But still and all I got a sort of feelin' in my ole bones that he ain't guilty of this thing. And that feelin' ain't just rheumatism, either."

"In that case, chief," Simpson the elder said, "might we've made a mistake in takin' your son into custody?"

"If he's innocent," the aged Papago said in a cracked but proud voice, "I, Bill Gopher, seek no revenge for death of Tom Gopher, my kinsman. I am old herald-priest. Heap old. I dream only of happy hunting grounds, and of burial fire. Soon my face, paint 'im red, and my tribesmen will turn my face to west. What does Bill Gopher care for revenge on white youth?"

"Well, I take that as a bona fide speech, Mr. Gopher," the judge said. "If my son killed your kinsman in a just cause, you will forget?"

The matted white hair nodded, and kept nodding in a lesser degree in palsy for the rest of the ceremony.

"But how about that thing in the blanket over there?" the sheriff said, indicating the huge squaw. "Is she thinkin' of goin' soon to the happy hunting grounds, too? 'Pears to me like she's still pretty healthy."

"Explain to her, hombre, what the judge said," Simpson the elder commanded. "They's to be no feud between us whites and you Papagos from Borax River. After this trial, if Harry is innocent, he goes free. If he's guilty, he pays the just penalty."

The old Indian interpreted these sentiments to the squaw. She listened attentively without any change in her fat, round countenance except the habitual snuffle. Finally she made some reply.

"Interpret what she says to us, hombre."

"She say big chief is just man."

"We know that," the big chief remarked laconically.

"She say his son is plum cultus."

"We know that likewise. Tell us if she said yes or no to our question. We ain't interested in no Injun compliments."

"She says her brother who is dead was heap good Papago. Support his old sister. Now he is dead Papago, she have no food to fill belly, except cornmeal doughnuts and piki bread."

"If my son killed her means of support, whether in the right or wrong, I'll make it good."

The Indian repeated this news, and it brought a slight change of countenance on the redwood features of the squaw.

"She says she will forget," the interpreter divulged, "if the white chief hang bad hombre." He added in a more deferential tone: "If white son innocent, she like 'im gift of friendship."

The judge squinted an eye. These desert Indians very often took advantage of the fact that he was a rich and generous man. But he had no time now for puny bargains. He was bargaining with a far higher power than two sore-eyed Indians. He was bargaining with fate for the life of his son.

"You say the murdered man supported her? What was his business?"

"Horse trader."

The judge stroked his jaw. "I see."

He looked up at the two Simpsons, at Grannas, at the breed posadero. "Horse trader! Blooey!" Without another word to the two plaintiffs he took the empty red-eye bottle and knocked on the table—a gesture which he customarily employed to call his court to order.

Every one in the hot little room stiffened to attention. Time enough had been wasted, the chief had given them to understand by that one rap.

"Go and call the prisoner in here," he said in a changed voice.

Grannas turned to the door, and three men came in response to his call. The wounded prisoner, with a tall, bearded man on one side of him, on the other the little deputy with the walrus mustache.

Swig Moran seemed frightened at the imminence of tragedy that hung over that dreadful little room. The man with the knotted beard was frowning with a set, savage scowl. He was one man, being a big ranch owner, who wanted uncompromising justice.

The prisoner had changed somewhat in those few moments. All evidence of his nonchalance and exuberance was gone. He could plainly see that he was in a bad fix. And he could not help reacting to it. A man in full possession of his senses can't just laugh at a promise of death.

He could laugh when he believed it problematical. He could revel in his own innocence. But as the scene approached its climax Harry's innocence was no longer of sufficient importance to enthuse him. It had dwindled to something ridiculous, something pitiful.

"I want to make a statement to all you folks in here," the judge began in a tone of resolution that was clearly forced. "This here little shack is holdin' just the folks which are concerned with this affair. These here desert Injuns are the plaintiffs. They belong here."

"You three muckers who took my son into custody, yqu're witnesses, and you belong here likewise. Larabee is my deputy, and he kind of represents all the ranchers in this country who've been able to make their livin' because of peace bein' kept on the range."

"Swig Moran, he's my chief deputy, and bein' he's the only one of this gang who ever had any sympathy with the hell-bustin' my son has done ever since he has been big enough to straddle a cayuse, why, I'm glad he's here too, to see that justice takes its course."

This included the whole company except the half-breed posadero. But as the house belonged to him, he was suffered to remain, but treated as if he did not exist.

"Now, the statement I want to make to you folks is just this: I'm set up to judge this here boy. I've been set up to judge my fellow man for nigh onto forty years. It's a long time—and in that time I've condemned a lot of poor unfortunate hombres, lynched same, and no man ever questioned my right. No man, I aim to make clear to you-all, exceptin' only one. That one is myself."

The little company stood in silence as the judge was making these preliminary remarks. Larabee nodded his grizzled head, agreeing with everything the old sheriff announced.

The old Papago nodded his head perpetually and gently in palsy. The squaw was immovable, mountainous, as solid and lifeless as if carved out of a giant redwood trunk. The only life in her was the quivering of flat nostrils as she sniffed—like something back in the shadows of a cave sniffing at a tempting bit of meat.

The judge was going on in a forcibly modulated voice: "Whenever I lynched some cattle thief, I would go home, feelin' a dead weight on my chest, like I'd committed a crime. Who was I to judge my fellow man? A cattle thief was built in my image—ain't I right?"

"Hell, no, chief—you're stretchin' a point, there!" the bearded giant Larabee objected.

"Now, wait—wait till I finish. I mean that under the skin we're all brothers, as you might say—all alike. Am I better than any one else? Ain't I got the same weakness, passions, affections, hate, hunger?"

"Yes, but you've bridled 'em," Gran-nas said.

"Not always. They's times when they won't be bridled, like some of these outlaw stallions my puncher boys have rounded up and tried to bust. I've been throwed, as you might say—not often, but wunst in awhile, by some hell-divin' buckner of a passion—"

"Not that we know of, chief," Simpson the younger said ingratiatingly.

"And when a prisoner is brought to me that ain't quite able to set in the saddle because of some specially ornery bronc

which he was told to ride, why, I say to myself, 'I hang this man for law and order; an' yet it's because I kin ride a hoss better 'n he that it ain't goin' to be me swingin' up in the wind to dry.'"

The chief thought that there was no one in that room who could understand the underlying meaning of his words. They were merely a few perfunctory sentences which any judge might make to a court for the sake of creating an impressive atmosphere—necessary to passing the sentence of death.

But there was one man who understood what he was saying. That was the prisoner. The father who had but recently killed two men was trying his son for killing a renegade "horse trader" of an Indian.

The knowledge of the devastating conflict that was taking place in the old war horse of a pioneer struck a chord of intense sympathy in Harry's breast. The man who was suffering most in that room was not Harry Morrel. It was old Phineas Morrel—and Harry knew it.

"I said whenever I sentenced a horse thief or killer in the past I felt like I was sentencin' my own flesh and blood," the judge went on. "Think what I'm feelin' now—sentencin' this boy—"

"It's all right, chief. Forget that," the stern, iron-willed Larabee interrupted. "You've disowned him. He's disowned you. He's bucked you for years. You're the ruler of this here range—exceptin' for him. Remember these here Injuns. Their flesh and blood was destroyed, weren't it?"

This irrefutable bit of logic took its toll. The old man sitting at the table reached for the empty bottle—and tapped the table with it uncertainly. He was dry, burning with a thirst inside. His piercing eagle eyes glanced up at the giant Larabee as if in a helpless sort of fury.

"You don't need to remind me, Larabee. Justice is what all you men want. I know justice. You know I know it."

"But if you're falterin'—if you're too soft-hearted to do the same to this boy as you've done many a time in the past—leave us pass judgment on him. Swig and me and these muckers.

"You've always tried and hanged a man right out there in the desert. Totin' him to a trial outside never works here on the frontier; every one knows that. And a trial ain't goin' to help him anyways. It 'll make everybody talk, sayin' that you couldn't go through with it."

"I'll ask your opinion of my justice when this here trial is finished, Larabee," the judge said, whitening with anger. "Until then I don't want to hear no more argurin' from you. This ain't a Injun palaver. It's a trial. It's the same trial I've been holdin' for many years past. It's a sinful man judgin' his flesh and blood for sin."

"That's right," Swig said. "Don't nobody argur while the chief's talkin'. He'll manage this right. And we'll take a chanst on the sins you've committed, chief."

"Big Chief Sheriff make 'im delay," the Papago said, nodding excitedly. "Who cares if Big Chief Sheriff is guilty? Who has found him out? No one? But his son heap guilty. His son must be hanged."

"Who the hell asked you to talk?" little Swig broke in, thrusting his mustache up toward the herald-priest.

But the chief stopped this by-play. Now that he had unburdened himself, he seemed infinitely weary of it all—of the word justice, of the whole world and its miseries. He questioned his son in an exhausted, colorless voice:

"You're charged with killing a Papago Injun in a cowardly way. He was found at the base of a cliff—dyin' and all smashed up. And to these—here muckers he said that you'd throwed him down that cliff. Just what was the circumstances?"

"There weren't any," Harry Morrel replied firmly. Since his father's speech he was adamant in his resolve now to protect the tragic and broken old man.

"What I mean is, how come a man and a horse was found at the base of a cliff? How did you throw 'em over? I kin understand your shovin' a Injun over—but how about that horse?"

Harry turned color somewhat at this. Did his father suspect?

But before he could make up his mind to answer, the Papago interrupted.

"He shoot 'im cayuse. Not the man. We find 'im carcass of cayuse. Hole in hide—make 'im bullet."

"Is that true?" the judge asked, facing the prisoner.

"I reckon so."

"You shot the horse—and it rolled over the cliff edge, takin' its rider?"

"That's what happened," Harry said.

The chief thought a moment, then came out abruptly with the question, the answer to which he hoped would set his son free. Whatever his son said would be believed. The only refutation possible would have to come from a renegade Indian—a dead Indian at that. Harry could say anything he wanted, and his father would make every one believe.

"What defense have you to make for to clear yourself from this cowardly act?"

"Nothing that will clear me," Harry said quietly.

The father pierced him with his savage eagle eyes.

"What motive did you have, son? Tell us that," he asked in a trembling voice.

"He told us his motive already, chief," Simpson the younger interrupted respectfully. "We found Harry wounded and lyin' in a daze near by. The first thing we axed him was that same question you're asking now. And he didn't have no time to think up any story either."

"He just blurted out, as he come outen his daze," Grannas added, "that he killed the man because he was a Injun."

The palsied old Indian shook with excitement. "It is enough. Plumb cultus white man kill my kinsman. I am Injun—my tribesmen are Injuns. We go on war-path, unless I take 'im scalp back to pueblo."

"Somebody 'll be takin' your scalp out to the coyote," Swig Moran said, his mustache twitching in rage.

"Is that your only defense, son?" the judge asked finally. "How come you can't tell us more? What started it? Did the Injun have a gun? Was he shootin' at you?"

"He was," Harry said. There was no need to hide this. But he could not explain that the Indian was shooting at him,

prompted by a guilty conscience because of that rustled horse. The horse must not be mentioned.

"Just why was he shootin' at you?" the father asked eagerly.

"We had a scrap."

"What about?"

Harry thought a moment. The stern-faced Larabee grew restless. It was quite obvious that the old chief wanted to find some loophole to crawl out of.

Harry was thinking fast. Perhaps he could cook up some tale about the Indian frightening the girl up on the mesa top. No, that would not do. The chief would call a halt to the whole proceedings and ride up to the girl's cabin, which was not very far away. She would tell the whole truth—in order to save Harry.

Perhaps he could say that the Indian was a thief. For instance, why not accuse him of stealing some canned goods from Harry's pack? That in itself was not enough to shoot a man for, but it would give a motive for a quarrel.

But Harry reflected in time: they would want to know what happened to the stolen goods. The sheriff would ride to the scene of the crime. They would all see the horse's hide. The sheriff would recognize it. He would confess in order to save his son.

"I can make up excuses," Harry said. "But none of you will believe. Any of you would take the word of a Papago Indian above mine. I'll say no more. My original story is good enough."

"They're all thieves and cowards. We quarreled. He threw on me. I went for my rifle and trailed him. I told you why I killed him; because he was a Injun. That's the only story you'll believe."

"Well, we all believe that," Larabee said, fingering his grizzled beard, "judgin' from your past reputation."

Simpson the younger, peering like an excited terrier at the gaunt prisoner, cried impatiently: "It's from his own lips, chief. He's condemned himself. What's the use of any more of this palaverin'?"

The chief could not help but realize the truth of this statement. Palaverin would not rectify a great wrong. A peroration from the lips of a father will not expiate

the sins of his son. Old Morrel looked at the prisoner with a look of infinite pity, defeat, pain. His blood was bad blood.

Miguel, the wisp of a half-breed, had read certain words in his dog-eared Bible but a few hours before, and he thought of them now that he saw the old sheriff's face: "Like as a father pitieth his children—"

"My son, after all," the chief was saying to himself, whispering half audibly as if unable to stiffen his lips. "After all; he is bad." And up until now Phineas Morrel had been firm in his conviction that his son must have been in the right.

"Are you goin' to let it go at that, son?" he asked.

"It's my last card, chief. I'll let it go at that."

"You know what it means?"

"I know what it means to you. I can take my medicine. I reckon you can take yours. You always said I'd hang. That means you win."

The father put up a trembling fist. "Don't make it harder than it is, by the Eternal. Don't taunt me now! Pray for your soul—don't laugh at God! You're a murderer—and by your face it looks kind of like you're gloryin' in it."

"Yes, damn you all, I am gloryin' in it!" the youth cried hotly.

The bearded old Larabee stepped between the prisoner and the table. "Give us your verdict, chief, and put an end to this."

But they all saw that the chief's lips were trembling visibly now. He could speak only with difficulty. The realization that the scene had broken the old man's spirit came suddenly to every one in that room. They all kept silence before the tragedy.

He did not speak. His massive chest heaved. His hand went to the star on his chest, a rusty, speckled piece of metal, a glorious relic of that frontier history.

He unpinning it—an operation that took some time, for his powerful hand had turned feeble, and the pin was rusted. He had kept it on that leather vest for many a long day.

He looked up at the giant Larabee, the man with the grizzled beard knotted under

a bulldog chin. The big rancher winced somewhat.

"Larabee," the sheriff said, "it takes a hard man to rule over this here desert range. A man with a hard hand—an iron hand, an unforgivin' heart. Next to me, you're the man on this range which fits those specifications. Wear this star."

"You mean you're resignin', chief?"

"You don't mean that, chief," Swig Moran said gently. "Don't take this so hard. It ain't nothin' of your doin's. Tell us what's to be done with Harry—and we'll do same. Tell us to free him—"

"If I free him, there'll be fightin' on this range and bloodshed for days to come," the chief said. "Them bloodthirsty Papagoes will go after your sons and your wives and your daughters. I haven't the power to free him. And I haven't the power to condemn him either."

"I'm gettin' out, gents, that's the long and short of it. I'm responsible for Harry's crime. I made him. I created him. I gave him my passions—my love for the six-gun, my yearnin' for liquor, my delight in lynchin' men."

"Now, do you think I could tell you gents to go out and hang him? I guess damn well not! Larabee, pin that star on you. From this moment on you're the sheriff of this range."

Larabee, as well as every one else there, saw what was happening. The sheriff could not condemn his son to death. It was humanly impossible. But he was doing the right thing just the same, turning him over to the law. The big rancher, who had been long schooled in the Morrel code, accepted the responsibility.

"I reckon I understand, chief," he said. "For the first time in your long career you've bumped up ag'in' a job which is too much for you, which would be too much for any man."

"You're his dad. Well, I ain't. I can do this job. Me and Swig Moran here—and the three muckers who seen the Injun when he was dyin'—we can do this work. For one night," he said, pinning the star on his bearskin vest, "I'll be sheriff."

"For always," old Phineas Morrel corrected. "I'm through."

The others stared; but no one questioned. It was like questioning a badly wounded man about every detail of an accident, without any mercy for his feelings.

As the old chief went out, Harry Morrel looked at him, and for a brief moment their eyes met. It was only a glance. But Harry saw that the eyes of the old man were eagle eyes no longer—unless perhaps they might be likened to those of an eagle that has been fatally winged and is lying broken and shapeless on the ground after falling from a great height.

CHAPTER XIX.

MOONLIT PERIL.

THE old sheriff had done his work well. Even though he was no longer superintending it, the machinery which he had put into operation to trail down the gunman Gentle Ladley went on working inexorably.

Immediately upon starting out on the man hunt the sheriff had ordered posses to organize at the various ranches near the border.

He had ordered a big bunch of riders to patrol the border, while Gentle Ladley was threading his way through the deep arroyos of Borax Desert, trying to shake off the pursuers who had set out from Neutral Saddle.

Gentle Ladley's adventures up to the time he wounded Harry Morrel have already been set down in this chronicle. As the sheriff had estimated, Ladley spent much valuable time in crossing Borax Desert. By the time he came out of the desert on the south side of the Big Mesas the sheriff's net had already been cast.

Ladley found this out sooner than he had anticipated. The discovery came at what seemed a time of complete triumph. He had made good time heading south, after leaving the Big Mesas. His greatest fear had been that Harry Morrel, whom he had wounded, would be revived in time to take up the pursuit again.

As in the case of many fugitives, the fear Ladley had of all mankind in general was focused upon one man, the eagle-eyed,

black-haired, raw-boned rider who had hunted him all the way through Borax Desert and the Big Mesas.

But something happened which very effectually wiped out this fear: Gentle Ladley stopped at a breed's xacalli outfit out on the sage-plain between the Big Mesas and the border, and there he heard the comforting news that his most dreaded pursuer had gotten into very serious trouble.

The Papago tribesmen who had found the body of Tom Gopher had spread the news everywhere. Harry Morrel, son of the sheriff, had committed a dastardly murder. Three prospectors had found him exhausted from a wound, and had arrested him!

Exhilarated by this delightful bit of news, Gentle Ladley had filled up his canteen, purchased a small grub-stake, and resumed his trail.

There was, to be exact, no trail through that sage plain. It was merely a limitless expanse of flat, sandy country, dotted with brush, and extending to a horizon as flat and unbroken as the sea. Far away, above, a strata of heated air, the purple mesa of Sonora County, Mexico, appeared remote and detached from the earth like tables of rock hanging in the blue sky.

But in between Ladley and the haven for which he was trailing there presently appeared signs of life. Smirches of dun-colored mist appeared on the horizon, discoloring the white strata of heat at the bases of the mesas of Sonora.

They might have been small bunches of drags, wandering from the ranches. They might have been the smoke from cook fires of the line camps thrown out by stockmen to keep their cattle from drifting too far south.

But it was already too far south for line camps. There was no stock raising anywhere in that wide sweep of sage-dotted desert. As Ladley advanced he surmised with a constantly growing fear that those dust clouds were caused by bunches of riders.

His own horse kicked up a little cloud of alkali which trailed behind him like steam. It made enough of a signal to at-

tract the attention of the widely deployed riders off there toward the southern horizon.

Ladley had no doubt but that those little smirches of cloud funneling out from dark specks on the horizon were riders. On the other hand, he had no proof that they were in search of him. They might be Indians heading off to the Sangre de Cristo Range. They might be breeds, cowboys—anybody, riding anywhere.

But the axiom that "a thief fears every bush an officer" was true in Ladley's case. The chances were pretty strong that a posse was down there combing the brush for a fugitive. And as Ladley was the most famous fugitive in that part of Arizona he had a very reasonable conviction that they were hunting for him.

There was one way to find out. His dust, he estimated, was conspicuous enough to have been seen by them. If he turned and headed back for the Big Mesa, they would chase him, and that would at least satisfy the grave doubts that were fermenting in his mind.

He resolved to take this course, primarily because he was no longer pressed by that overwhelming fear of Harry Morrel.

He turned his horse and at an easy canter started north for the red table lands on the horizon, which were the beginning of the Big Mesa.

It was some time before he could notice any appreciable change in the clouds of dust on the southern horizon behind him. It was some time, in fact, before his own dust cloud, moving north instead of south, indicated to those riders that Ladley had changed his mind.

But he had not ridden many miles before his fears were justified. The widely deployed line of riders was narrowing. The separate little smirches of mist were joining together like cirrus clouds in the sky gathering into one fog.

That was all he could be certain of. There was no appreciable lessening of the distance between him and the riders. He kept his horse at a good canter, carefully choosing the hard-packed sand so as to make the best time, and likewise to lessen that fatal mist of alkali.

This last precaution, however, availed

him little. They had his trail, and they were going to stick to it. It would take hours to get back to the lower mesas, which was the nearest hope he had of getting under cover.

But sunset came, long before the pursuers had made any appreciable gain. Then for a short space of darkness the fugitive slowed down, giving his horse a long-needed breathing space.

The old nag needed water and food. But there were no water pockets in that sage plain, and there was no time to give the mount a chance to forage. The only course was to press on toward the foothills of the Big Mesas.

Ladley had visions of playing hide and seek in the Big Mesa arroyos with a posse, and with a sick horse to carry him. It was paramount to get food, and water.

He passed the xacalli where a long time before he had stopped to replenish his canteen, and buy a grub outfit. The grub pack would last him a day or two. But he had bought no grain for the horse. The horse's stomach, he realized now, was of considerably more importance than his own.

The old creature had some hard trailing in front of it. Ladley did not dare to stop at the xacalli again. He must press doggedly on until he got to the mountains. There he could feed his horse. And he could get water and food for himself. He knew just the place to get it.

Concha's little ranch came vividly to his mind. He had had a strong desire to see her again, after that incident with Harry Morrel. Evidently she had been very much impressed with Harry Morrel; for she had saved his life. She would not be so impressed now, knowing that he was as much of a gunman as Ladley himself.

Ladley recalled how she had sent him off at the point of a six-gun. But that did not signify anything. A girl hates the thought of cold-blooded murder. She had saved Harry Morrel, through a sheer feminine instinct, which prompted her to side at the last moment with the man who was down and out. Well, Ladley was down and out now. He would take a chance on her showing another outburst of mercy.

He would go to her as a man with a

posse hounding him to his death. He had always had success with women under conditions of that sort. In fact, even that slim, black-haired, gray-eyed girl of the Big Mesas had been very sympathetic when Ladley first went to her. He recalled how readily she had believed his protestations of innocence.

That was the one hope he had of getting food and water. She would at least give food and water for his horse. There was no doubt about that part of her character. It was an idiosyncrasy which Ladley had discovered. He would take advantage of it now.

Besides, that girl was the only one in the Big Mesas he could possibly go to. He was afraid of taking a chance on any of the prospector's shacks or diggings. And it was getting more and more dangerous to approach any of the Indians.

The first thing he knew, he would meet one who had heard of the man hunt. The hope of a reward would prompt one of them to plug Ladley in the back. He was afraid of all men—white men and breeds. But of women he was not afraid. You could always argue with them, plead, beg. And the last thing they would do would be to shoot you in the back.

He reached the foothills of the Big Mesas, and had started on the long, upward ascent when the moon glared up over the eastern rim of the world. Its rays struck the mesa cliffs while the face of the desert below and the vast horizon of sage and sand was still in darkness.

The Big Mesas flashed into view abruptly as if brought down miraculously out of the sky. Ladley looked down into the shadows below him, and presently the plain was revealed in the light.

As he gazed, the whole scene began to take shape and outline, every detail focusing sharply, the patches of sage, the alluvial fans of detritus that came down out of the cañons of the foothills, the red boulders. To the eyes of the fugitive, dilated by riding so long in the dark, the scene was as bright as day.

Presently he saw among the black dots of sage patches, tinier, blacker dots moving along. They were like ants.

But their microscopic size, and the fact that they seemed to be moving so slowly, did not fool Gentle Ladley.

He realized that his pursuers had gained on him—halving the distance. He realized also that they rode horses that were not gaunt from hunger, or weakened by thirst.

On each-stage of that journey up into the higher mesas, Ladley knew that those riders would gain on him. It was impossible to keep out of their sight—except for short intervals. It might have been day; for the quartz of the mesa cliffs, and the alkali of the plains and level spaces reflected the moon's rays, magnifying the light, and serving as a background against which any rider was sharply silhouetted.

Ladley urged his horse up the steep zig-zag trails. His only hope now was to get to the girl's ranch before he was caught.

After that—well, it depended on her.

And Ladley prided himself upon his knowledge of feminine psychology. He had banked on them before, good women and bad women alike. And he had always found that under the skin they were the same; a man hounded to the death could expect help.

Concha's ranch was in a lonely fastness.

For days at a time she received no visitor. Prospectors from Neutral Saddle generally took trails that threaded the lower cañons. Papago hunters knew of more accessible water holes.

The few shepherders that had outfits in that wilderness grazed their flocks on bottomlands. They never went up to Concha's mesa—except when they took her some sick animal for healing.

On this particular night, however, Concha's bleak little domain was visited by many men. And they came in rapid succession.

It is always a temptation to attribute vague fears and restlessness to that unexplained and undefined sense called intuition. Concha, in her hermitlike life, her communion with the vast and silent wilderness, had developed a side of her nature which, it must be admitted, had little to do with the five ordinary senses.

It was more like the instinct of the deer

that knows where water is, or of the bird that knows the speckled scales of a snake are something to be greatly abhorred.

Suffice it to say that while Harry Morrel was being tried down there in that ramshackle sheep ranch, not far away from Concha's mesa, the girl was awakened in the dead of night by an indescribable premonition of disaster. Some people believe in telepathy, and they would very readily recognize this instance as a manifestation of it.

There is no doubt that Harry Morrel was thinking of the girl at the time. He was thinking intently, hoping with a desperate hope that she had not failed to burn that bit of rawhide with the Morrel brand which he had given to her. It meant everything; it meant the honor of his father's name. It meant that the son would not have died in vain.

And Concha was thinking of the gray-faced, wounded youth who had come to her shack with those three prospectors a few nights before.

This would look like a clear case of telepathy. But it is not necessary to cite any such problematical phenomenon of psychology. The dramatic crisis was coming just the same. Concha lay in bed, with the full moon shining upon her face. This alone might have awakened her.

She tossed about for a long time, unable to set her mind at rest. It was tortured with vivid pictures, the picture of a ragged man with childlike blue eyes, and a smile that revealed two buck teeth; the picture of a tall, eagle-eyed youth falling to his knees with a bullet in his arm; the picture of three desert muckers sitting about her table eating hungrily, casting furtive glances about, their red faces perspiring in the hot glare of the oil lamp; the picture of a shift-eyed Papago Indian leading a lame calico; and finally the picture and the smell of a bit of horse hide burning in a fire of piñon knots.

Those were the glimpses she had had of the tragedy that was now moving to its climax. The tragedy had started long before those few scenes crossed her life; it had gone on toward an inevitable conclusion—after the curtain was brought down upon

the scattered moments which she had been allowed to witness.

It is little wonder that for hours—ever since the last departure of Harry Morrel—she had been brooding over every aspect, every detail, every word, every look and gesture.

There was one point which had seemed to her a discrepancy in the logical unfolding of events. Harry Morrel had given her that precious bit of hide to burn. It was natural enough for him to trust her with that duty. She already knew everything. He held no secrets from her regarding his father's guilt in the death of Calibers and Trommer.

But why hadn't he burned the hide himself? Or why didn't he keep it, and burn it later? It was certain that the most vital thing in his life was the necessity of burning that brand. Why did he trust such a duty to some one else?

There were many answers to these questions. There were, in fact, so many answers that it kept the girl worrying for hours at a time, until it became actually an obsession.

He had fainted from his wound, and the prospectors had found him—before he had a chance to burn it. That much was very easily understood. But why did he not burn it afterward? Why had he not left the supper table at her ranch that night, and burned it while the hungry muckers were gorging themselves?

This point suggested another, which she immediately rejected: *the prospectors would not let him out of the room*. She recalled that whereas Grannas had gone out alone to take care of the thirsty nags, and one of the Simpson brothers had gone out to saddle them, and the other Simpson to get a pail of water, that Harry had always remained in the room—and that one of the three muckers had always remained at the same time.

But this was natural enough; Harry was wounded, and naturally the others attended to any chores that had to be done. He could not have been a prisoner. It was too ridiculous.

The whole tone of bantering good will which he had displayed to the three muckers

contradicted this possibility. Besides, if he had been a prisoner, he was enough of a fighter to escape. He would not have submitted so easily to three old men guarding him.

But this led to another train of thought: It concerned that horse thief, the Papago, Tom Gopher, who had brought the lame calico to her ranch. Just what had become of him? Just how had Harry Morrel got the horse?

Again there were many possible answers to this. But it was a question to which her mind returned repeatedly, like a squirrel whirling about in a cage.

Inasmuch as Harry had made no mention of the Indian, she had assumed immediately that the Papago was of no importance in the situation; the horse could have been taken away from him—perhaps while Tom Gopher was gathering sage sticks for a fire. It could have been taken from him under his very nose; Tom Gopher would not have palavered about it.

The girl had dismissed the point at first as being of little significance. She had had no chance to ask Morrel about the Indian, because there was always one of those three muckers in the room. And that led her back to the first quandary: were they purposely in that room, guarding Harry as a prisoner?

One detail which bolstered up this fear was the fact that she could not for the life of her remember that Harry was carrying his six-gun. That in itself may not have been very significant. He was a pretty sick man, after riding into the furnace heat of the cañon, when he trailed the Papago.

The muckers had found him unconscious. What more natural, then, but that he discard his holster and six-gun—which made a pretty heavy load for a sick man? Furthermore, he had no need of it, now that these three muckers were taking care of him.

Just the same, it would have dispelled a very insistent fear if the girl could have remembered that gun. If she had only gone out into the corral and examined Harry's saddle pack, she would have noticed that the Winchester which he carried in a scabbard, slung across the side of his horse, was no longer there.

But none of these fears entered her mind when the four men came to her that night. Her one concern was for Harry's wound. It was long after he had left that she began to have a premonition that something was wrong.

The band of moonlight shining through her window passed by her face, leaving her in the dark again. She lapsed into a fitful moment of sleep. And then she was awakened by a vague feeling that she had heard something out there in the corral. Or else, while deeper in that nap of sleep, she had been warned subconsciously that a horse was clipcopping up the trail from the cañon to the south.

Travelers passed by that way, as I have said, very rarely. But there had been times when in the dead of night some rider had led his horse to her water hole, and ridden on. She was never alarmed. Her own horses, wandering about the corral, might have awakened her at this particular time.

But because of the uneasy state of her mind, she was brought sharp awake. And this time, her first thought upon awakening was an illuminating one: Harry Morrel's one aim in life now was to save his father. Perhaps he was sacrificing himself.

Perhaps he had enacted a part when he came to her that night with the three prospectors. Perhaps he was acting in some hideous tragedy which he—as well as the three old prospectors—were hiding from the girl.

The prospectors had told her that they were going to take Harry down to a breed sheep ranch in Trade Rat Gulch, and leave him there until he was strong enough to cross the desert. If he had need of her, they had promised, they would send some one for her.

She had heard no further word from them, and had, of course, assumed that Harry's wound was healing. She had inferred from Harry's youthful strength and spirits that the wound would give him little further trouble.

But now—in the death-like silence of the night, on top of that mesa—all the questions that had been troubling her mind began to take definite form. Harry was in trouble. He had been in trouble when he came to her that night.

What had happened to the Papago? Why did Harry give her that brand, instead of keeping it to burn? Why couldn't she remember whether or not he had a six-gun? In nursing his wound she had had plenty of chance to find out. Why did Harry let those muckers stay in the room when he had so many serious matters to discuss with her?

All these questions were magnified suddenly to gigantic and fearful problems. In the morning she might have dismissed them all—but not now. She was in a veritable torture.

Getting up from her bunk, she lit the jack-lantern and dressed. Under the moonlight it would be an easy ride to Trade Rat Gulch. It would be much more pleasant than trailing down there under the blazing desert sun. Anyway she could not wait until morning. She must go to that sheep ranch and find out just what had happened.

It was a matter of but a few moments before she had laced up her riding boots and pulled on her gloves. Outside the scene was dazzlingly bright, the moon glittering on vast surfaces of quartz and sandstone and alkali. Yonder across the deep shadows of a cañon another mesa was lifted up, massive and glorious, as if its strata were of gold and platinum.

In the corral a burro was standing with head hanging low in sleep. Near the water hole were two, milk-white saddle horses, transformed to fairylike steeds in that light. She took a saddle from the peg on the side of the main shack, and whistled, in response to which one of the white broncs came to her.

She was about to swing the saddle to its back, when she saw the elongated shadow of a man fall across the ground of the corral, casting the silhouette of a shapeless hat upon the white horse.

She wheeled about, dropped the saddle, and reached for her gun. It was rarely that she ever went out in those cañons armed. And then it was never in fear of men, but of wild stallions. To-night she had her gun. It might have been the anticipation that she would be called upon to use it in Harry Morrel's defense. It

might have been because she had a subconscious fear that Gentle Ladley had not crossed the border, but was lurking about, cornered by a posse.

The dark form that had leaped from behind a shed was now kneeling before her. A viselike hand had reached across the saddle on the ground, and was gripping her wrist, the wrist of her gun hand.

"I'm on my knees before you, señorita. I'm begging you to save me—as you did before."

The moonlight shining full upon the upturned face revealed two buck-teeth and a grin.

She dropped the gun—a sacrifice that was necessary in order to free herself from that dreaded grip. Then leaping back, she turned and raced to her little shanty.

She put all her weight against the door in an attempt to slam it shut. But the intruder, racing with her, had reached the threshold in time to insert his foot between the door and the warped jamb.

She was unable to slide the crossbar into place.

CHAPTER XX.

MORREL PRIDE.

OUT of the littered, weedy corral of Miguel, the shepherd, there rode a tall, dejected scarecrow of a man. His scrawny hands rested one on top of the other, on the saddle-horn, his head was bent forward so that the tilted lop-brimmed sombrero revealed a mane of silvery white hair.

Old Phineas Morrel let his horse take the trail—apparently any trail the creature had a fancy to.

The broken chief had nothing more to do with that tragedy in the sheep ranch. His son was in there, now at the mercy of the flint-hearted old pioneer, Larabee. What Larabee's next move would be was not at all problematical in Morrel's mind. Larabee was an uncompromising man. He had fought long under the old leader and had learned his ways, the ways of the Western sheriff. Hang a man when caught—that was the code. The red tape of law

that entangled justice was not bothered with on the Western plains. Sheriff Morrel had taught his henchman that code.

Of course, this would be Larabee's first experience at giving the out-and-out order for a lynching. It might give some men pause, but not this man. Two men stopping at his ranch had been murdered—one in the bunk shack, another in a gully some distance away. The murderer had not been caught.

The whole range was up in arms, clamoring for justice. And here was another murderer, caught and convicted on his own word. What mercy did he deserve, particularly at a time like this? The "new sheriff" must start in on his career with a firm hand.

But Phineas Morrel would not be a witness to that scene. Already the series of events leading up to that palaver in the sheep ranch had broken old Morrel's spirit. The palaver itself was a lurid, hideous scene that he remembered as if in a fit of delirium tremens.

He rode away. He was escaping a corner of hell.

Now, the well-established law of human psychology, that the criminal goes back to the scene of his crime, has certain curious manifestations. It was dominating the distracted and broken old chief when he left that ranch.

But it was manifesting itself in a very complex and strange way. He had killed two men, Calibers and Trommer, but he did not revisit the scenes of those two crimes. The particular crime which obsessed him at this moment was the murder of that Papago Indian.

Although this murder had been committed by his son, Phineas Morrel had an insistent illusion that he himself was responsible. Harry Morrel was his own flesh and blood. The old chief had bequeathed him a legacy of hot-headed passions, of hatred for the tricky breeds of the desert, of a love for hard drinking, and combat. His son's acts were upon his head; he was his son's keeper. But he had not fulfilled the duties of his stewardship.

He led his horse to the trail that skirted Concha's mesa toward the gulch where the

Papago had been found. Once the bronc was on the trail, the rider let it jog along, choosing its own gait, choosing its own course around boulder or mesquite clump or barrel cactus.

The rider just sat there with hands on pommel, reins hanging, as though he were a prisoner with manacled wrists going to his doom.

How much happier he would have been if the giant Larabee and Swig Moran and those three muckers back there would lynch him in his son's stead!

Just what he would do when he reached the gulch he did not know. He did not care about future acts. He had forgotten all about that gunman Ladley. He had forgotten all about the riders that were strung along the border.

He was thinking only of his son Harry, who, after all, was bad. He was thinking of the murdered Papago. The body would not be there in the gulch; for other tribesmen had taken it away while the aged herald-priest and the victim's sister had gone in search of revenge.

The horse would be there—or at least what the coyotes and buzzards had left of it. The cliff would be there. Phineas Morrel had a morbid curiosity to see just how high that cliff was, and how horrible the death had been.

Now, the riders that had come up from the border trailing Gentle Ladley back to Concha's mesa had spread out in a wide defile when darkness came, so that their fugitive would have no chance of doubling back on his tracks and escaping to the border again.

When moonlight came they again sighted their man high up on the clearly illumined cliffs of the mesa side. They had gathered together again and started the ascent of the mesa, choosing the trail that had led through the nearest gulch.

As they rode up the dry stream bed into the narrowing gorge they came upon a strange figure standing out in the middle of a boulder wash, his sombrero in his hand, his head bowed, the moon shining brilliantly upon a mane of long, silvery hair.

"It's the chief!" one of the riders cried,

galloping his horse up to where old Morrel was standing.

"What-all are you doin' here, chief?" another asked. "Git to your mount and ride along with us. We're hot on the hellbender's trail."

"I ain't your chief any more," Morrel said, still standing irresolute, gaunt, his shoulders bowed. "Larabee—he's your chief now."

"What and the hell's happened?" another cried, dismounting and going to the old man.

"Been ridin' too hard, chief," said another gently. "The country down here's like hell with the blower off."

"They've got him back there," the old man said tonelessly. "Larabee's got him. They're goin' to lynch him. If Larabee takes the advice I always give him in the past, he'll have lynched him by now, I reckon."

"You hear that, men?" the first rider called out to the others as they gathered around and dismounted. "The hellbender is caught."

"Where did he get caught?" asked another of the riders.

"Right here—right here, where I'm standin'," Morrel said.

The men looked around at each other. Something was wrong. Their leader, who was also their protector, their god, was confused. His keen, steel-like mind was faltering.

"Tain't possible, chief. We seen him just a little while ago halfway up that thar mesa cliff. We seen him to-day ridin' hellbent down toward us when we was patrolin' the border; then he rode back, and we been racin' with him all afternoon and all evenin' up till now."

"Racin' with who?" the old man asked, turning a bewildered face upon them. The silence that answered this gave the distracted old fellow time to think. He had sent these riders down to the border to prevent the escape of a gunman, a fugitive from a Nevada jail. He remembered now. But how insignificant that gunman was—in comparison to Morrel's own dearly loved gunman, his son!

"I wasn't speakin' about him, gents."

he said in a different voice. "I was speakin' about my boy."

The deputies again stood there, silent, respectful ghosts.

Then old Morrel gave them the customary cue that broke the spell. "Give me a drink."

Several proffered their flasks, and as he took one they waited as respectfully as before. Then the chief wiped his mouth and seemed to straighten up slightly. "There's the carcass of a horse around here somewhere. Cain't seem to locate it—but it fell from up yonder into this gulch.

"The Papago ridin' it fell likewise. So Harry was guilty. I admit that. Ain't no more palaverin'. Harry's got my bad blood. But that ain't got nothin' to do with you gents. Larabee will attend to the boy. I give him up."

"We're plumb sorry, chief. Sorry as hell."

"Now you better ride on," the old man said quietly.

This awakened them all to the duty at hand.

"You got to ride with us, chief," some one said.

"Yes, we ain't goin' to leave you moonin' down here alone. You come along."

"You lead us! Same as always."

"We'll git our man with you leadin' us."

"Here's another drink, chief," said one of them, proffering a second flask. "Drink it, and we'll git to our work—you leadin'."

He drained the flask, stood a moment uncertainly looking about at the bowlders and mesquite clumps and sand dunes. Finally he shook his head.

They watched him as he covered his silvery mane with the huge five-gallon sombrero and stalked over toward his horse. He stumbled, or rather staggered slightly, in crossing a sand dune, and one of the men helped him, taking his arm and leading him to the waiting mount.

They paused until he was in the saddle, and then abruptly they all turned and jumped for their horses.

One of the riders spurred his mount immediately to its fastest gallop. The others

followed, a big group trailing along now in single, now in double file. At the rear two riders rode along at an easy canter with Phineas Morrel in between them.

They did not speak. They were all on the trail—a man hunt—and that one thought was in their minds. The chief did not urge his horse. He rode as he had ridden those few miles from the sheep ranch, giving the horse its head, and riding like an inert weight, with hands resting in utter dejection upon the pommel. They had never seen him ride that way before, as though balancing himself by the pommel.

But the sturdy mount, the best horse in that country for desert trailing, broke into a fast canter; and when they hit the steep mule deer trails, going up the mesa side it pressed ahead of the two riders that were accompanying the chief.

Then as all the horses of the posse slowed to the upward climb, it passed one and then another. It was comparatively fresh, a stallion of unlimited strength; whereas the mounts of the rest of the posse were tuckered out from the long race of the afternoon.

"Where is he now?" one of the riders in the rear asked.

"Up about in the middle of the file!"

Then, later: "Chief seems to be gettin' ahead."

The riders had strung out their horses, struggling along in an extended file.

"Where's he at now?"

"Just passed the front rider."

"H-m! That critter of his sure kin eat up mountain trail."

"Is that him 'way in the lead?" another asked.

"Looks thataway, judgin' from the moonlight on the back of his head."

"He's ridin' with head bowed—so's his sombrero is tipped."

"Seems like he's doin' some hard figurin'."

"He's thinkin' of Gentle Ladley—and he'll be the one to git him—alone. Same as always."

"It's his horse that's thinkin' of Gentle Ladley," another objected wisely. "The chief's thinkin' of his son."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



Barry Loses a Trick

By GORDON STILES

IN the living room of the Wilmots' apartment a nice little neighborly group was gathered; besides Hank and Nancy Wilmot, there were Jim Dorsey and his wife, Eileen, Bert and Mary Lester, Barry and Sue Thomas, and Mr. and Mrs. Milton Crane.

The last couple are mentioned in a more formal manner because they did not belong to the nice little neighborly group mentioned above. They came from Flushing while all of the others were part and parcel of New York's recent expansion which took unto itself the name of Bywood.

There had been some bridge earlier in the evening and sticky looking cocktail glasses roosting here and there bore witness to the Wilmots' inclination to entertain in the manner which has won more and more approval since Congress said we couldn't. The cards, however, lay in jaded disorder save one pack, which Barry Thomas held in his hand. This, he presently handed to Mrs. Crane, saying: "Shuffle them, please."

Mr. Crane, hugging his wife's elbow, whispered to her: "Riffle them, Cassie."

Cassie did so, and Barry smiled at the gesture. He was accustomed to have folks riffle cards "on him." And it made no shade of difference.

Cassie passed the deck back to Barry, and her eyes, like those of her husband's, never left the face of the performer. A bit to Cassie's left and slightly in front of her, Sue Thomas sat, also watching her husband.

Nancy was whispering to her husband that there was probably enough gin left for another shakerful of cocktails. The Dorseys and Lesters lounged in their chairs and looked patient.

They all knew what was coming when Barry took the floor and Barry inevitably did just that when strangers were present. Of course, Sue knew all about it, too—far more than any of the others.

But Sue was Barry's wife and her conception of her duties as such would not permit her to crab Barry's game. She hadn't, either, during six years of life with one of the cleverest amateur conjurers in New York.