



GUN-QUEEN OF THE SPANISH GRANT

By JOSEPH CHADWICK

The dark, hot-blooded temptress of Monteros Rancho deftly filled a dead man's boots with Gringo Devil . . . then flashed the blood-chilled challenge to the land thieves of San Alejandro: "*Treachery will be paid off at sundown. Come grab your receipts.*"

IT WAS a long trip and a tiresome one, yet not a journey half so unpleasant as the chore Ed Reardon must perform once he reached his destination.

The southbound stage rolled along, dropping down from the Moradas at a steady five miles an hour. The six little Spanish mules never faltered in their running stride. "Another hour," said the gray-bearded driver, "and we'll hit the San Alejandro."

Ed Reardon, riding beside him, squinted at the lowering sun, unbuttoned his coat, took the watch from his vest pocket. It was six o'clock by the watch—the dead man's watch.

It was a fine timepiece, a trustworthy movement in an engraved gold case. The stage driver glanced at it admiringly. "That's a mighty handsome——" His voice broke, his old eyes widened. He looked at Ed Reardon's face, startled. "What—What did you say your name is, mister?"

Reardon pocketed the watch. "I didn't say. But if you've got to know, it's Ed Reardon."

"Reardon, eh?" The old man was still watching his passenger. The mules swerved sharply to avoid collision with a Mexican carreta, and the abrupt swing threatened to topple the coach. "Whoa-aa!" the driver yelled.

"Now, dammit," said Ed Reardon, recovering his balance, "stop gawking at me and watch that road!"

"Yes, sir," the driver muttered. He kept watching the road.

But there was no hiding his excitement. Ed Reardon could almost hear him thinking, *Reardon, eh? Reardon...?*

It was seven o'clock on the dot when the stage rolled into San Alejandro. The town was half old and adobe and Mexican, half new and plank and American. The stage company office was in the American part, on Union Street, and directly opposite was a two-storied, false-fronted building bearing a sign: *Territorial House*. "That's the hotel?" Reardon asked.

The driver said, "Yes, sir," with the respect Reardon had put into him back on the road. He tossed the ribbons down to a Mexican hostler. He climbed down one side, Reardon the other. The driver opened the coach door for the other passengers, then opened the luggage boot. He brought out Reardon's valise first "There you are, Mr. Reardon."

Reardon took his bag, started across the street. There were saloons and dance halls aplenty, stores and eating places, and a building bearing the sign: *Venturilla Land & Cattle Co., John Morrell, Mgr.* Reardon smiled. He understood a little Spanish, and venturilla meant good luck.

A fat man behind the desk in the hotel lobby was reading a newspaper. He turned the register around for Reardon without looking up. Reardon signed his name, wrote "Denver" after it. The fat man, still not looking at him, shoved a key across the counter and mumbled, "Room Seven."

*Reardon's smoking six-gun had
crooned its last death-tune.*



"Still time for supper?" Reardon asked.

"Yeah. We serve until eight."

"How far is it to the Monteros Rancho?"

The fat man said, "Monteros Rancho...?" He looked at Reardon now, all interest. "About ten miles. Take the southwest road."

He turned the register about as Reardon headed for the stairs and read what the new guest had written, Reardon's handwriting was a scrawl, and it took the fat man some time to decipher it. "Reardon?" he muttered.

Reardon had just lighted the lamp in his room when a buxom Mexican woman came with a pail of hot water. She filled the pitcher on the washstand, and Reardon said, "I am very obliged to you." The chambermaid giggled and said, "*Muchisimas gracias*" for the quarter he gave her. Her dark eyes gave him an admiring glance as she went out. He did cut a fine figure.

REARDON was what some men called a Black Irisher. He was handsome in a dark, rugged fashion. He was six-feet-one, topped the scales at a hundred and ninety. He was wearing a well-tailored suit of dark gray broadcloth, a white shirt, a black string tie. His Stetson was a lighter gray than his suit, flat-crowned, the band and the medium brim's binding of a contrasting black. He wore Justin boots. His entire outfit had a newish look, and if clothes made the man, Ed Reardon was a lot of man. He washed up, combed his hair, brushed road dust from his hat and suit, wiped his boots. He donned his hat and coat, surveyed himself in the washstand mirror, and wished that he were anywhere but in San Alejandro. He wished that the dead man, whose money had rigged him out like this, were standing there in his place.

He went down to supper.

The dining-room had a single long table, and, the hour being late, only three men were at supper. One looked like a rancher, the other two were townsmen. The same Mexican woman who had brought the water to Room 7 looked in from the kitchen and in a minute came to serve Reardon. There was no choice; supper was simply steak, boiled potatoes, dried-apple pie and coffee. The other diners finished and departed while Reardon was eating, and another man entered and took a place at the table. He said, "Good evening, Rosita," to the waitress, looked at Reardon and greeted him, "Good evening, sir."

Reardon nodded.

The newcomer was a distinguished looking

man of about forty-five; he had good features, was gray at the temples, and his complexion was somewhat florid. He was well dressed, a townsman. "You're a stranger in town, I believe," he said, and smiled. "May I welcome you to San Alejandro? My name, sir, is John Morrell."

"Reardon. Ed Reardon."

"I'm manager of the Venturilla Land and Cattle Company,"

"Saw your name on that sign."

"Are you in cattle or mining, Mr. Reardon?"

"Neither."

Morrell looked surprised. "Neither?" he said.

Reardon said, "That's right," and continued with his supper.

Finished his meal, Reardon drifted into the lobby. He took one of the armchairs by the window overlooking the street, then found that he had nothing to smoke. There were some cigars in his valise, so he rose and went upstairs. He'd left the lamp turned low. The flame was high now. He'd left his valise closed, on the floor. It was on the bed, now, open, its contents an untidy jumble. Somebody had given the bag a thorough searching. Reardon stepped over and took a revolver from the bag, made sure that its load hadn't been removed, and thrust it into his waistband. He went out, descended to the lobby, and approached the fat man at the desk.

"You always go through a guest's luggage in this hotel?"

"Somebody go through yours, Mr. Reardon?"

"You."

"No," said the fat man.

"Maybe you know who did?"

The clerk shook his head. "I've been here or back in the office ever since you checked in," he said. "Trouble is, every key fits every door." He managed to look concerned. "Anything stolen, Mr. Reardon?"

Reardon scowled at him, grunted, "No," and turned away.

He remembered then that he'd forgotten his cigars.

He went into the adjoining barroom to buy one.

It was a small room with a short bar and a few tables. One bartender took care of the few customers, oldish men who apparently liked the quiet atmosphere. It was too quiet for Reardon. He bought a cigar and cigarette makings, and passed through to the street. He lighted the cigar, then strolled along the street. He realized with

something akin to guilt that he was staying in San Alejandro tonight merely because he hated to arrive at the Monteros ranch. It was reluctant to face Juan Forbes's family—and tell them how Juan had died. He'd written Juan's sister that Juan was dead, but that wasn't enough. Juan Forbes had asked, with his dying breath, that Reardon visit his family. Juan hadn't understood how hard it would be, telling a bereaved family that a loved one had been murdered—shot down without cause by a degenerate killer who merely wanted to add another notch to his gun.

"Jess Hagar!"

Reardon said it half aloud, angrily.

He'd like to catch Jess Hagar in the sights of his gun!

He turned finally into a saloon called The Frisco Bar, a sizable place, crowded. A man at the near end of the bar watched Reardon in the back-bar mirror with such an intensity that Reardon's gaze was drawn to his reflected eyes. They were small bloodshot eyes in an ugly face, and fear crept into them. The man's hulking body tensed. Suddenly he grabbed up his whiskey glass, bellowed an oath, and flung the glass at Reardon's image. The crash of glass was explosive.

Reardon was unbuttoning his coat as the man swung around, grabbing out his gun. Fear didn't always help a man's aim, and this man's wild shot splintered through the swing door behind Reardon. Before Jess Hagar could shoot again, Ed Reardon got his gun out and shot him through the heart.

A WOMAN screamed, a man cursed. Boots scuffed noisily as the crowd stamped toward the rear in fright. But it was already over. It had all happened in the space of a heart-beat, and now Jess Hagar, notorious badman, lay dead in the sawdust of the Frisco Bar. His gun, nine times notched, lay beside his lifeless hand. The crowd was quiet, suddenly motionless. Ed Reardon, gun still in hand, glanced sharply about, but no man seemed in a mood to take up where Hagar had left off.

Reardon looked back at the dead man, feeling no regret and no real satisfaction. A gaunt, gray-mustached man with a town marshal's badge on his shirt came away from the crowd, and said, in a Texan's drawl, "I saw it all. He went for you, stranger, and fired the first shot before you got your gun out." His eyes were old and wise, accustomed to evaluating such happenings. "As far as I'm concerned, you're in the clear."

Reardon put his gun away.

The marshal of San Alejandro went on, "Newlin's my name. Why'd Hagar go for you like that, friend? Grudge, maybe?"

"Maybe he mistook me for somebody else," Reardon said, not liking the lie but knowing that explanations were never easy. Jess Hagar had recognized him as Juan Forbes's friend, and had believed that he'd come for revenge. He hadn't, so the lie wasn't too far from the truth. "My name's Reardon, Marshal. I'll be at the Territorial if you've got to go into this further."

He turned abruptly to the door. John Morrell stood there, holding the batwings open, dividing a speculative look between Reardon and the man Reardon had killed. "So Hagar got what was due him," Morrell said, and he looked as though he'd just had the surprise of his life.

Reardon said, "It's good you weren't standing there two minutes ago."

Morrell looked at the splintered hole in the one half-door.

He looked back at Reardon, a speculative gleam in his eyes. "You're a good man with a gun, Reardon. But you'd better watch your step from now on. Jess has a brother—and friends."

Reardon said, "Thanks for the warning," and went out.

Back at the Territorial, Reardon saw the Mexican woman tidying up the dining-room as he crossed the lobby. He went in there, and said, "Rosita, somebody was in my room while I was at supper. Whoever it was went through my bag." He took a silver dollar from his pocket, held it up for the plump woman to see. "Do you have any ideas who it was?"

Rosita had smiled at him. Now the smile faded. She glanced uneasily through the door to the lobby, then, seeing the fat clerk was gone from the desk, said, "Two men talked to Shane while you were eating, Senor. I saw them while I cleared dishes from the table."

"You knew them?"

"Si. Senor Morrell and the man who works for him, Senor Passemore," the woman said. "Senor Morrell came in here for supper, but Senor Passemore went upstairs. It made me wonder, for Senor Passemore does not have a room here."

Reardon nodded. He said, "It makes me wonder, too," and pressed the dollar into Rosita's hand.

He went upstairs, locked his door and braced the room's one chair under the doorknob. He drew

the window blind. He removed his coat and hat, unbuttoned his vest, loosened his collar and tie, then, letting the lamp burn, he stretched out on the bed. He folded his arms under his head, stared unseeingly at the board ceiling.

Hagar? he thought.

The gunman's presence in San Alejandro may have been nothing more than coincidence. Jess Hagar had killed Juan Forbes in Colorado, and he'd had to flee from the law. Flight alone could have brought him to San Alejandro. But somehow Reardon doubted that the killer had come here on aimless flight. San Alejandro was but a few miles from Juan's home, Monteros Rancho.

Heavy footsteps sounded along the hall, stopped at the door of Room Seven. A demanding knock came. Reardon eased off the bed, drew his gun. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"Pat Newlin," said a drawling voice. "I want a word with you."

Reardon crossed to the door with the gun in his hand. He wasn't trusting any man, not even one who toted a law badge. He removed the chair from by the door, turned the key in the lock, and said, "Take it easy coming in, Marshal. I'm a little jumpy tonight."

He opened the door, stepped back, every inch of him alert.

Newlin entered slowly, his right hand tugging at his shaggy mustache. His leathery old face showed only good humor. He closed the door, and said "You'll live a long time if you keep on being this careful, Reardon. That's what I came to talk about, your staying alive."

"All right. Go ahead, talk."

"John Morrell was right in warning you that Hagar left a brother and some friends," Newlin said. "The brother, Matt rode into town with a couple of tough hands just a couple minutes ago. Matt took it hard—his brother's death. He's likkering up now at the Frisco Bar and talking about what he'll do to the man who killed Jess."

"Well, thanks for warning me."

"Want some advice, too?"

"I'll listen to it, Marshal."

Newlin nodded. "Get out of town, Reardon," he said simply.

Reardon frowned. His face turned stubborn.

Newlin said, "Don't get your dander up. I'm being friendly. I'm only the town marshal, and my job is just to keep the peace in San Alejandro. Like the law most everywhere, I'm expected to see that keeping the peace means nothing more than seeing

the bigwigs, the property owners, don't get hurt. Anything else goes, and the devil can look out for strangers. But you killed a bad hombre that needed killing, and besides, you seem like a decent sort. So I'm being friendly."

"All right," Reardon said "I'll take your advice."

"Where'll you head for?"

"Monteros Rancho."

Newlin nodded. "I heard that you were headed for there," he said. "I'll lend you a horse. It'll be out back of the hotel in half an hour. I'll pick it up at the Monteros ranch later. How's that with you?"

"Suits me," Reardon said. "I appreciate your being friendly, Marshal. But how come you heard that I'm on my way to Monteros Rancho?"

"There's a lot of talk about you, since you out-gunned Hagar," the lawman stated. "You came in on Hank Jessup's stage. Hank is a big talker. Besides, he's an old-timer in these parts. Came here with the Missouri Volunteers in '46, and he knows all there is to know about the Territory. He was at the wedding when Dixon Forbes married into the Monteros family back in '49 or thereabouts. Hank knew Dixon well, and he recognized that watch you're carrying. Hank couldn't wait to tell it. Soon as he'd checked in at the office he came to the Frisco Bar and spread the news that Dixon Forbes's son had come home."

"He what?" Reardon demanded.

"Sure. Your watch gave you away to old Hank," Newlin said. "Don Luis Monteros gave that watch to Dixon Forbes on the day Dixon married Don Luis's daughter. I guess you got it from your dad, eh? It was smart of you to come back under another name, bucko, but you shouldn't have let anybody see that watch. It was a dead give-away."

"Hold on a minute, dammit!" Reardon growled. "You mean to say that you—and everybody else—figures I'm Juan Forbes?"

Newlin grinned. "Sure," he drawled. "We're not fooled." He sobered at once. "That's why I'm helping you out. I don't want Matt Hagar and his tough companeros to gun you down before you've had a chance to help your family in their trouble." He turned to the door. "I'll get that horse for you, amigo."

He was gone before Ed Reardon could deny that he was Juan Forbes.

II

REARDON looked at his watch, marking the time so that he would know when the half hour Pat Newlin needed was up. He went to his valise and took out his gun-rig and buckled it about his waist. Before slipping his gun into the holster, he replaced the fired shell with a live cartridge. He frowned uneasily.

Reardon knew now that John Morrell's interest in him—and in the contents of his valise—was not idle curiosity. Morrell had been trying to find evidence that he was Juan Forbes. Why? Reardon shook his head. He couldn't answer his own questions until he found out what sort of trouble was plaguing Monteros Rancho, and the likeliest place to learn about that was at Monteros Rancho. But Reardon didn't like it. It was one thing to keep a promise to a dying friend, another to step blindly into a game of murder.

The half hour gone, Reardon left his room. He went back along the hall, found a rear stairs, beyond a door at the end of it. He descended, came to a littered storeroom, crossed it to another door, entered the hotel's kitchen. The kitchen was empty at the moment, and Reardon went through to the hotel's back door.

Newlin was waiting outside, holding a big gray gelding.

The marshal said, "Tie your bag onto the saddle, amigo. Ride out as fast as you can. Matt Hagar is on the prowl."

Reardon, catching the urgency in Newlin's voice, tied his valise to the saddle cantle and mounted the gray. "Monteros Rancho is southwest?"

"Yeah. Head through the Mexican quarter," Newlin directed. "Take the west road until it forks, then take the southwest branch. It'll lead you to the South Moradas. There's a narrow pass, Devil's Gate. Once you're through the Gate, you're on Monteros range. Watch out that some of those Monteros *vacqueros* don't take a shot at you. Better get going, friend. Luck to you."

Newlin turned away, heading for the alleyway alongside the hotel.

Reardon turned in the opposite direction, toward the Mexican quarter. He kept to the darkness at the rear of San Alejandro's buildings and houses, and he breathed easier when he had open country ahead.

It was a dark night. There were a few stars,

but the moon was smudged out by clouds. What little Reardon could see of the country was flat grassland for the better part of the distance to the South Moradas, then the terrain grew rocky. The road led directly to a narrow cut in the hills, a pass so narrow a good-sized wagon would have difficulty squeezing through and perhaps a quarter mile long.

Beyond were more rocky uplifts, then lowhills of sagebrush and scrub timber. Reardon left the road and climbed one of these knobby hills and peered into the darkness. He had a feeling of vast space beyond, a broadening valley, but he could see no lights that would mark the buildings of Monteros Rancho headquarters. He decided to hole up for the night and wait until daylight before running any more risks.

Reardon hadn't meant to sleep. But the night was long, and finally he dozed off. When he woke, the sun was in his eyes.

HE washed up at a trickle of water flowing from a cluster of rocks across the ravine, then took his horse over to drink. He saddled the animal, and was about to mount when he heard the sound of riders.

They appeared from the direction of the road, three of them, following Reardon's tracks. They rode with rifles across their saddles, and they were not vaqueros. The burly man in the middle looked enough like the dead Jess Hagar to be the brother, Matt. He caught sight of Reardon, and let out a yell. He jerked his horse to a stop, whipped his rifle up, squeezed out a shot.

Reardon grabbed the rifle off the gray's saddle and, crouched low, darted for the scant cover of the rocks and brush by the spring. Gunshots crashed, and slugs whined close. Hoofs drummed. Angry voices yelled. Reardon reached his cover, made himself small behind a boulder. He fired a shot that missed but halted the oncoming trio. The riders spread out.

One disappeared from Reardon's sight over by the rocky wall on the spring's side of the ravine. A second swung over into the brush at the opposite side. Matt Hagar dismounted and advanced alongside his horse, using the animal to cover him. All three came on warily, grimly determined. A clammy sweat came out on Reardon. They had him boxed. He might get one, even two of them, but not all three.

Hagar started the shooting again, this time with a six-gun. Slugs ripped at the bushes, thudded

against the rocks and ricocheted wildly. The rider across the ravine began shooting with his saddle gun. Reardon had a glimpse of him, a tough looking youth. Reardon waited until the flurry of shots let up, then fired twice at Matt Hagar and once at the young rider. He was shooting badly. Every shot missed. Hagar now dropped flat in a shallow gully, better cover than the horse, and was patiently waiting. The youth kept working his way along the base of the slope beyond Hagar. The third man remained out of sight, but Reardon knew that he too was coming on along the rock wall.

Hagar yelled, "Kid, get to shooting! Keep him busy!" The youth fired two fast shots, and again Reardon heard the shriek of lead. "Jake, crowd in on him!" Hagar shouted. "We've got him trapped!"

Reardon flattened himself behind the boulder, peered down his rifle barrel which jutted along the side of the rock. He could afford to waste no more shots. He had little time left. He had to get the Kid first, then Matt Hagar, before the hidden Jake was able to bring his gun to bear.

He hadn't much hope.

But they wouldn't get him without a fight.

Reardon had the Kid in his sights now. He squeezed out his shot just as Jake got into shooting position.

Reardon's 30-30 cracked, and the Kid's scream echoed the report. Reardon saw the Kid drop his gun and double over his saddle horn, then he pulled all the way back behind the rock as Hagar's shots probed for him and Jake's rifle tried to target him. They fired half a dozen shots, then held their fire. Hagar called, "What do you think, Jake" And Jake answered, "I don't know." Across the ravine, riding back the way he had come, the Kid groaned, "I'm shot, I'm shot!"

Reardon waited, straining to hear Jake approaching, ready to get Hagar as he'd gotten the Kid. He shifted his position slightly, getting to the side of the boulder again, Hagar's hat was off. Only his bristly black hair, grown low on his brow, and his eyes showed above the rim of the gully. A small target considering the distance. Reardon beaded that narrow brow, his finger curling tighter about the Winchester's trigger.

Then he heard a boot scuff rock just beyond the spring.

Jake was there, not fifty feet away.

Fear was not only a coward's weakness. It could come to any man, and Reardon felt it knife through him now. He held his fire, and the shot that ended the taut quiet came, not from Jake's gun

or Hagar's but from farther away. Jake let out a startled yelp. Matt Hagar bellowed an oath.

"You hit, Matt?"

"Damn' near! That slug knocked dirt in my eyes!"

"Who fired that shot?"

"Somebody up in that timber," Hagar said, and swore bitterly. "A Monteros rider, maybe."

Jake said that they'd better get out there, and the words were hardly out of his mouth when the gun in the trees on the west slope of the ravine spoke again. Jake swore, and his boots scurried as he began to run. Reardon, grasping at hope, yelled at Matt Hagar.

"Throw your gun out, Hagar! You hear?"

Matt Hagar looked after his retreating partners, glanced in the opposite direction, toward the timber, then tossed his gun out. Reardon left his cover, walked toward the gully, and saw that Jake was now mounted and riding with the wounded Kid. He said, "Come out of there, Hagar."

Hagar came from the gully, a bull-like man. His big hands were balled into fists. His ugly face was flushed a dull red. He showed none of the panicky fear Reardon had seen in his brother at the Frisco Bar.

"All right; you've got me," Hagar growled. "What are you going to do about it—kill me in cold blood?"

"I killed Jess in self-defense," Reardon told him. "Plenty of witnesses will back me up on that. If you've got any sense, you'll let this thing end here."

"Only one thing'll end it here," Hagar retorted. "Your putting a bullet in me."

"Ride out, Matt, before I do just that."

"I'll get you, hombre, if it takes a year."

"Ride out," said Reardon.

THE other two had already disappeared, and now Reardon watched Matt Hagar ride out. When Hagar was gone from sight, Reardon turned and gazed at the west slope. A rider came from the timber. The pinto pony carried a woman.

The closer she came, the more attractive she became.

She appeared tall. Her hair was a dark shade of blonde. Her eyes were a clear gray. Her features were finely molded. She wore a divided skirt that permitted her to ride astride, and a mannish gray shirt. Her hat hung at her shoulders by its chin strap. There was a rifle on the pinto's saddle, a

fancy Mexican saddle.

Reardon stepped forward to meet her. "You did that shooting?"

"Yes."

"I owe you my life."

"I could see that."

Reardon was taken aback by her unfriendliness, and he began to squirm mentally under her steady scrutiny. "I had some trouble in San Alejandro last night," he said. "The marshal loaned me a horse and helped me get away. I holed up here and fell asleep. Then—"

The girl said, "I know. I was watching you from sun-up."

Reardon squirmed some more in his mind. It made him uncomfortable to know that a girl like this, a startlingly attractive girl, had been watching him while he slept. He said, "I was on my way to Monteros Rancho. My name is Ed Reardon and I—"

The girl had an annoying way of cutting him off. "So that's who you are. A Monteros vaquero was in town last night. He rode in late, all excited, with a story that Juan Forbes was in San Alejandro. He said that Juan had killed a man named Jesse Hagar and fled toward Monteros Rancho. I started searching at daybreak."

"A crazy idea that I'm Juan Forbes got around town."

"I should have known that it wasn't true."

"You're Juan's sister, Elena?"

The girl nodded. She didn't look very happy. "I received your letter about Juan's death," she said tonelessly. "But I hoped for a little while last night..." Her voice trailed away, was silent for a long moment. Then she said, "You were Juan's friend?"

"Yes. I'd known him for two years," Reardon said. "We were pretty close, but Juan never told me about his family until he was dying. Then he regretted not having come home for so long. He asked me to come see his folks, and give you, Elena, his watch."

Reardon took the watch from his pocket, gave it to the girl.

Reardon said, "Juan had received a letter from you some weeks before he died—so he told me at the end. You'd begged him to come home. He planned to come, but he kept putting it off."

"And now he's dead," Elena said thickly.

"It was because of the watch that some men in San Alejandro took me for Juan," Reardon told her. "I told them my name, but they didn't believe

me. Even Pat Newlin thinks I'm Juan Forbes." He frowned, puzzled. "Doesn't anybody around here know what Juan looked like?"

"Juan hadn't been here since he was twelve years old," Elena replied. "His father—my father—took Juan away with him after my mother's death. After a quarrel with my grandfather, Don Luis."

"But these people must have known that Juan is dead."

"I told no one of your letter."

"Oh?"

"It's easily explained," Elena said. "My grandfather is very old and sickly. He had no sons of his own, and that isn't good—for a don of the old blood. He had one daughter, and she married a gringo. Dixon Forbes." She spoke the name as though it belonged not to her father but to an unimportant stranger. "Dixon Forbes was not all a man should be. But Don Luis always hoped that his grandson, Juan, would one day return. He wanted Juan home to fill his place as master of the hacienda when he passed on. I—I couldn't bear to tell him that Juan had died."

"You mean," Reardon said, frowning, "that Don Luis is still hoping that Juan will come home?"

"Yes. And I'm to blame."

"If I'd known, I'd have seen to it that Juan did come."

"I don't hold it against Juan," Elena said tonelessly. "When my—my father left with Juan, he broke all ties with Monteros Rancho. We never heard from either of them again. Six months ago Don Luis employed a lawyer to search for them. The lawyer learned that Dixon Forbes was dead. He learned of Juan's whereabouts only with difficulty. Juan had no real reason to come home—or even to remember us." She looked at the watch again. "How did he die, Mr. Reardon?"

"He was murdered, Elena."

"Murdered?" The girl shuddered.

"By the man I killed in San Alejandro last night—Jess Hagar."

Elena looked up, stark fear in her eyes. "They sent him to kill Juan!" she cried.

"They?" said Reardon. "Who?"

"The squatter crowd. The Venturilla outfit!"

"John Morrell's outfit?"

"Yes. Venturilla has started a range war with Monteros Rancho," Elena said shakenly. "That is another reason why Don Luis wanted Juan to come home. He hoped that Juan would be the sort of

man who would fight back. That must be why Jess Hagar was sent to kill Juan. Venturilla didn't want Monteros Rancho led by a young man who would put up a fight. They know that they will win out, with only an old man and a girl standing in their way." She stared at Ed Reardon, her eyes wide and excited. "Mr. Reardon, you were Juan's friend. Everyone believes that you are Juan...."

"Yes?"

"Would you if I made it worth your while, be Juan?"

III

FILL a dead man's boots? Ed Reardon was jolted by the idea. He didn't like it. The girl leaned forward in the saddle, the excited look still on her face. "Will you?" she asked. And added, "With my brother dead, I am Don Luis's sole heir. Help me save Monteros Rancho, and I'll pay you whatever you ask—after Don Luis is gone. It will not be long to wait." Again her voice turned husky. "My grandfather won't live much longer. You can trust me. The word of the Monteros is good."

"How do you know that you can trust me?"

"Juan trusted you."

"My price," said Reardon, looking her over, "might be more than you'd want to pay."

Elena flushed. "I'll pay," she said, and looked squarely at him.

Reardon felt a strange excitement of his own. He'd been a mere cowhand except for a few months of unsuccessful prospecting with Juan. He'd had dreams of one day owning a spread of his own, but all men had such dreams—and they were hazy ones with little chance of becoming reality. Now here was this girl offering him—what? Practically a blank check! And she went with Monteros Rancho. He would be risking his life, without a doubt, but if he lived, he had much more to gain than he'd ever dreamed of possessing. He'd make his price high enough!

"You'll do it?" Elena asked, watching his face.

And she was holding out Juan's watch to him.

Reardon nodded. "I'll do it," he said, taking the watch.

They rode south across Monteros range. Grazing cattle in scattered bunches bore the Monteros brand—M. Bands of sheep grazed on low hills to the west. Vaqueros rode in the distance. The miles fell away, and still Reardon

saw nothing of the ranch headquarters. He began to view Monteros Rancho with awe.

It was very old, the girl told Reardon. It had been founded by her great grandfather in 1790, under a land grant from the Spanish Crown. Don Luis had been born there, inheriting the ranch when he was but twenty. He'd held it through the revolution when the Mexicans freed themselves of Spanish rule, and he'd kept it intact when Los Americanos seized New Mexico in 'Forty-six. Don Luis, Elena said proudly, had been a great man in his prime, and even the Apaches had respected him and his hard-riding, straight-shooting vaqueros. The rancho was still its original size except for a portion of its south range which had been given to Dixon Forbes—along with the watch—as a wedding present.

"The DIX, my father called his ranch," Elena said. "It was stocked and equipped for him, but he cared more for town life. He was a sporting man. He drank and gambled hard. When he left after my mother's death, he sold DIX to Arturo Monteros. Arturo is Don Luis's nephew. He comes from the Sonora branch of the family. He is a man like my father. Dixon Forbes had no right to sell DIX to anyone, for Don Luis meant that it was always to be a part of Monteros Rancho. But he accepted Arturo as the new owner, and now, after all these years, that has led to trouble."

"How?" asked Reardon, as the girl paused.

"Arturo Monteros has made some sort of deal with John Morrell and his Venturilla Land and Cattle Company," Elena replied. "DIX is now owned by Venturilla, and both Arturo Monteros and John Morrell own Venturilla. Part of DIX has been sold to nester-ranchers. With them came the squatters."

"Squatters?"

"Yes. They crossed from the DIX onto Monteros range. Our vaqueros ordered them out, but they were defiant. They threatened to fight. Those squatters were sent in by Venturilla, of course, and they're actually gunmen—hired by Venturilla. The scheme is simple enough, to seize Monteros range acre by acre."

"Why didn't Don Luis have his vaqueros fight?"

"He planned to," Elena said. "But first he tried a peaceful method. He sent for Arturo Monteros and gave him a warning. Arturo is a weakling but no fool. Besides, he'd been primed by John Morrell. He defied Don Luis. He produced a paper—a quit-claim for the DIX—that he said

Dixon Forbes had given him at the time he bought the ranch. The signature seemed to be my father's—but it could be a forgery. If it's genuine my father . . ." again Elena stumbled over the word—"sold more range than he had any claim to. The quit-claim not only described the boundaries of DIX, it also showed a map. The boundaries of DIX, according to the quit-claim, take in all of Monteros Rancho's south range!"

Reardon whistled in astonishment.

This was a real range steal.

He asked, "Did your grandfather accept the quit-claim?"

Elena shook her head. "He threatened to take the dispute to court. Arturo Monteros then warned Don Luis that litigation might lose him all of the rancho. You see the land grant paper for Monteros Rancho has been lost."

Reardon swore under his breath.

"Arturo knew that," Elena went on. "He pointed out that if there was a law suit, Don Luis would be called upon in court to prove his ownership to the hacienda. Without the paper from the Spanish Crown, Don Luis can't prove his title to a single acre of the land he holds. He'd be considered a squatter on his own ranch!"

The girl brightened a little.

"There's ranch headquarters," she said proudly.

THE old haciendas supported many people. Vaqueros married and raised families. So did the shepherders, the farmers, the workmen, and the servants. In time, the population of a hacienda might grow to many hundred. It was so with Monteros Rancho.

Beyond the village, where children romped and women gossiped, were barns and other ranch buildings. Dogs and goats roamed about. Peppers hung drying in the sun. A pretty girl drew water from a well. Beyond were tilled fields where farmhands worked. It was a pleasant scene, a peaceful one. The ranch was different from any Ed Reardon had ever known.

He glanced at Elena, found her watching him intently—hoping, no doubt, that he liked what he saw. He said, "You and Don Luis had to hire somebody to find Juan. How was it that Jess Hagar, the man Venturilla sent to kill him, found him so easily?"

Elena was disappointed because he said nothing of the ranch. She replied, "I—I don't know."

"The lawyer who located Juan for you. Who is he?"

"Senor de Baca, of San Alejandro."

"Maybe he told the Venturilla crowd of Juan's whereabouts?"

Elena considered. "Perhaps," she said slowly. "But Don Luis has always trusted Senor de Baca. He told the lawyer to speak of Juan to no one." She smiled. "Don't you like it?"

"The ranch?"

"Yes! I'm beginning to like everything about it."

A rider came from the corrals, a gaunt figure of a man in a big sombrero and a gaily-colored serape. He had an Indian-dark face, beady black eyes, a beak of a nose, a traplike mouth. His skin was creased by a thousand seams and myriad lines. A straggly gray mustache drooped past the corners of his mouth. He seemed a century old, but he held himself stiffly erect. He rode a fine sorrel horse. There was a six-shooter at his thigh and a rifle in his saddle scabbard.

"It's Hernandez," Elena said. "El Capitan—our ranch boss."

The old man reined in, doffed his hat and bowed to the girl. More respect and admiration were in his silent greeting, Reardon realized, than an Anglo-American could have expressed with a thousand words. The rocky face seemed to soften. The glittering eyes lost their fierce look. "You found him," Hernandez said, and looked at Ed Reardon. "I see nothing of Dixon Forbes in you, Juan."

"Oh, but I do, Capitan!" Elena explained.

Hernandez smiled, and suddenly he didn't look old.

"I think," he said, in Spanish now, to Elena, "he is all that you hoped. My eyes tell me that, and they have looked upon many men—good and bad."

He put on his sombrero and turned away, lifted his horse to a lope.

Reardon stared after him. "We didn't fool that one," he said.

"But he accepted you!"

"Maybe," Reardon told Elena. "But I wouldn't gamble on it."

Within the adobe wall was a wide patio where a gardener worked among carefully tended flower beds. An ancient cottonwood tree shaded a stone-walled well. Across this pleasant spot was the porticoed veranda of the *casa*. An old man sat in a comfortable chair in one of the arches, where the warm sun touched him. He was not old in

Hernandez's way; there was feebleness here, not rawhide toughness. Don Luis's eyes were closed. He was covered with a blanket despite the warmth of the day. A woman-servant hovered farther back on the veranda, watching over him.

"He sleeps so much of the time now," Elena told Reardon. Then she spoke to her grandfather in Spanish, waking him.

Until now, as Elena said, "He's come! Juan's home, at last!" Reardon had not fully understood that the girl meant to deceive her grandfather. The others, yes, but not Don Luis. The truth was, Reardon was a little shocked. Then he realized that the deception hardly mattered.

Don Luis had difficulty in concentrating. For a long moment, it seemed that he did not even recognize the girl who was now kneeling beside him—and looking at him with eyes full of affection and sadness. The old grandee clung to life by a slender thread. His face, which once must have been a strong and handsome face, was a haggard mask. The formation of the bones could be traced beneath the waxy skin. His dark eyes were dull, bewildered. "Juan...?" he murmured. It occurred to Ed Reardon that Don Luis was but a rapidly fading symbol of the past, nothing more.

At last understanding came, and the old man said, in his own tongue, "One waits, and one is rewarded. Come close, Juan, so that I can see you. My eyes grow dim."

Reardon moved closer.

He was sure that Don Luis would know him for an imposter.

The dull eyes studied him, the empty voice said. "A handsome one, like Dixon Forbes. But you do not resemble him. Nor are you a Monteros in appearance. But I can see the strength of you." He looked at the girl. "What say you, Elena? What do you think of your brother?"

"He will help us, Don Luis."

"Si? Then I will rest...."

Don Luis lay his head back against the chair and closed his eyes. There was a faint smile upon his colorless lips. Elena sighed. She rose and tucked the blanket closer about her grandfather, then turned to Reardon with a smile.

"I'll show you to your room, and then we'll have breakfast," she said.

REARDON followed her into the house, to a bedroom which she said would be his. He put down his valise, then faced her with a frown.

"Look; was it necessary to make him believe

that I'm Juan?"

"There's good in it, not harm. He is happy now."

"Somehow, I don't like it."

"I love him," Elena said. "I'd do nothing to hurt him. I think he's willed himself to live until you—until Juan—came home. And now . . . Well, he'll not be with us much longer."

"You're sure getting me in deep."

"You're not afraid."

"How do you know?"

Elena smiled. "I saw how you fought this morning when the odds were against you," she said.

Reardon hardly heard her words. He was wondering what it would be like to hold such a girl in his arms.

They went through the sprawling house to an enormous kitchen where the cooking was done at a huge fireplace and the baking in a great stone oven. A middle-aged woman served them breakfast, and while they were eating, the boy who had taken their horses earlier appeared at the outside door. He held his sombrero on his chest, smiled, and said, "Senorita—"

"What is it Mateo?"

"El Capitan sent me. He wants to talk to Don Juan. He's waiting at the corrals."

"Thank you, Mateo," Elena said, and looked at Reardon. "Hernandez will want to discuss things with you," she told him. Her voice lowered to a whisper. "Act as though you're the master of the hacienda. He'll expect you to give the orders Don Luis can no longer give."

Reardon nodded, uncertainly.

Hernandez was hunkered down in the shade of a barn, a cigarito drooping from his thin lips. He lifted a hand in greeting. Reardon hunkered down beside him, took out makings. When his cigarette was lighted, he said, "What's to be done, Hernandez?"

"It's not for me to say, Senor."

"It is when you're asked."

"I'm only a ranch boss."

"You're an old hand. You've had experience in these things."

Hernandez's expression didn't alter, but Reardon sensed that he was pleased by being asked for his opinion. He said, "The squatters are west of Venturilla Creek. They should be driven out, amigo. The ones to the east, we do not bother about. They are on DIX range."

"How many squatters are there?"

Hernandez held up both hands, fingers wide-spread.

"How many vaqueros do we have?"

"More than enough."

"Good. We'll jump those squatters at sundown."

"Si," Hernandez murmured, and his eyes began to glitter.

He tossed his cigarette away, rose, strode to his horse, mounted and rode out across the range. Reardon watched him until he disappeared, sharply aware that the man hadn't once called him "Juan."

The boy, Mateo, appeared and Reardon asked him for a mount. Mateo saddled Monteros horse for him, a rangy roan, and Reardon struck out across the range. It was two hours later when he returned to headquarters, and then a horse and buggy stood by the patio gate. Mateo appeared to take his horse, and Reardon asked the boy about the rig.

"Senor Arturo Monteros came in it," Mateo said.

Reardon frowned. He wondered if Arturo Monteros was here because the Venturilla crowd had discovered that they'd made a mistake in taking Ed Reardon for Juan Forbes. He went toward the patio gate reluctantly.

Elena was on the veranda with Monteros. The two faced each other in anger. Monteros was a bulky man of about fifty-five, sallow of complexion, and he didn't resemble his uncle, Don Luis, in the slightest.

Elena saw Reardon approaching, and relief showed on her face. She said huskily, "Juan, Arturo wants you to go away. He says that Matt Hagar has put a bounty on your life, that Hagar has offered five hundred dollars to the man who kills you!"

Monteros nodded jerkily. "It's true. Juan. I warn you, as a Monteros." He was nervous. He mopped sweat from his face with a handkerchief. It was a pudgy face. The man was well dressed, and he had the appearance of a prosperous merchant. "Half the men within a hundred miles of here will look for a chance to ambush you, Juan. You must go away."

"And ride straight into an ambush when I leave Monteros range," Reardon said. "No dice. Hagar didn't look to me like a man who has five hundred dollars to throw away. But John Morrell probably could afford it—to get rid of me."

"I assure you, Juan...."

Reardon bared his teeth in a mirthless grin.

"You say the right words, friend, but they ring as counterfeit as a lead peso. Morrell is the man behind that bounty offer, and Morrell sent you here to try and scare me off. You wasted your time. Drive back and tell your partner that you couldn't scare me off."

"Juan, believe me," said Monteros. "I regret my dealings with Morrell. I hoped to benefit, but I've been victimized. I'm treated like a peon!"

"Then quit him, man." Monteros looked desperate. "What? And lose everything?" he asked. He shook his head. "No, I can't. But I have warned you. I've not betrayed my own flesh and blood. More, I can't do."

He turned and made his way through the patio, still mopping his face.

Elena grasped Reardon's arm. "Ed, I'm frightened!"

He looked at her with another mirthless grin. "Why? You knew that you were practically signing my death warrant by asking me to pose as Juan Forbes," He saw that he hurt her. "Sorry," he said. "But they can't get me here, those bounty hunters Arturo talked about. In fact, I'd say that the Venturilla crowd is worried. For some reason they're not sure of their ground. Juan Forbes is what worries them, and I'd like to know why. Do you suppose Arturo and Morrell are afraid that Juan—and they're really convinced that I'm Juan—can produce the lost land grant paper?"

"I—I don't know."

"Somehow we've got to find out."

"Ed, if Arturo and Morrell sent Jess Hagar to kill Juan and he came back and told them that he had killed Juan, why are they convinced that you're Juan?"

"They figure Hagar lied to them," Reardon said. "Maybe they think that Hagar did shoot Juan, but just wounded him, and that Juan, after he recovered, came to hunt down Hagar. When I walked in on Hagar, he recognized me for Juan's friend. I killed him before he could tell his crowd just who I am." He paused, then added, "Hernandez and I are going to clear out those squatters tonight."

"I—I almost wish you wouldn't," Elena said.

Her hand was still on his arm. She stood very close. Reardon had only to reach out.... He was rough about it. He held her to him and kissed her upon the mouth. Elena gasped, went rigid. She got her hands against his chest—and pushed with all her might. She broke free, shrank back, a hand held to her mouth as to a sore spot.

Reardon was suddenly angry, with her and with himself.

He said flatly, "Well, now you know why I stayed here."

She turned and fled into the house, and Reardon was angrier still. He'd let her know what his price was for risking his life, a part of his price, and in return he knew that she would welsh when the time came to pay up.

IV

LA COSTILLA, Hernandez called it. The Rib. It was a low ridge in the grass flats and ran east and west across Monteros range, dividing it into two parts. The south range lay below the two dozen riders at sundown, and Reardon looked down upon the squatter-held land.

Venturilla Creek was a narrow, winding ribbon off to the east. A line of crude shacks, each a half mile apart, had been built parallel to the stream. The first shack stood near the spot where the Venturilla flowed from the ridge. Reardon counted six of them. A rise hid the others, but Hernandez said that there were four more. Half a mile west of the squatter shacks was a barbwire drift fence, and Reardon asked about it. "The squatters put it up, Senor," the old vaquero said. "No doubt they will move it farther west if we permit it."

Reardon nodded.

By no stretch of the imagination could those shacks, built so close together, be considered ranchhouses. Nor could the strip of land between the creek and the fence be taken for adequate range. There were cattle grazing there, in small scattered bunches—"about a thousand head," Hernandez told Reardon. The truth was easily read. The squatters were merely gunmen posted there to hold stolen Monteros range, and, as Hernandez said, if they were allowed to remain, orders would soon come for them to seize a much larger portion of the south range.

Reardon looked at Hernandez, at the score and more of vaqueros waiting behind them. He said, "We'll go in there and drive what cattle we come to ahead of us. We'll throw the stock across the creek, and we'll burn the shacks one by one. Let's get at it."

They rode down from La Costilla, and came into the strip behind the drift fence. A man appeared in the doorway of the nearest shack and,

after a moment's hesitation, drew his gun and fired a shot into the air. The squatter at the next shack picked up and echoed the signal, and one after another, the shots racketed along the line of shacks. As soon as each squatter fired his signal shot, he took to his horse and rode to join up with his neighbors.

The vaqueros spread out, gathering cattle, and soon were driving perhaps four hundred head before them. Reardon rode with Hernandez to one side of the point of the driven herd, and now four squatter-gunmen were grouped before the second of the string of shacks. They were directly in the path of the cattle. Two more were riding up to join those four, and no doubt the rest of the group were on their way.

Reardon was surprised by their boldness. He would have expected them to flee from a fight with such odds. But now he saw why they were so bold. A bunch of riders—ten of them—suddenly appeared from a clump of cottonwoods on the east side of the Venturilla. They came splashing across the stream, some with rifles across their saddles and the others with sixguns ready in their hands. It would be a fight, all right. These men had their orders. They were now to earn their pay.

Reardon said, "Tell your boys to stampede those cattle, amigo."

Hernandez turned back to give the order. The vaqueros relished the idea. They began to yell and shoot off their guns. Spooked, the cattle began to run. All in an instant the critters were crazed by fear, and became a wildly stampeding mass. The vaqueros rode after them, keeping up the din. A juggernaut of longhorned beasts bore down upon the Venturilla riders.

There was no way to fight a stampede, and Reardon saw confusion sweep the ranks of the waiting gunmen. They hadn't expected this ruse, and Reardon marvelled at their stupidity. It would have been the one thing he would have anticipated. He looped his tied reins over the saddle horn, lifted Marshal Newlin's rifle from its boot. He was ready when the first shots racketed.

He missed his first shot, but with his second toppled a Venturilla rider. He made another drop his smoking gun and reel in the saddle. The vaqueros were now shooting at the squatter crowd, and the roar of gunshots was louder than the thunder of the stampeding herd. The foremost cattle now neared the enemy riders. Horses spooked, shrieked in terror. Men shouted, cursed. Then the Venturilla crowd was in flight, fleeing

across the creek ahead of the cattle. The first part of the herd streamed past the shack, but the bulk of it jammed in against the flimsy building. It toppled over and disappeared beneath the mass of cattle.

Some of the Venturilla riders retreated on across DIX range, but a few swung off to one side of the cattle and started a wild shooting. Reardon dismounted for more accurate shooting. Hernandez and his riders followed Reardon's example, and for a few minutes shots racketed savagely. Finally the Venturilla gunmen sickened of it and rode off. A heavy quiet came to the south range.

Reardon told Hernandez, "Have your vaqueros put the shacks to the torch, amigo. Then they can clear out the rest of the cattle and tear down the fence. They can move those dead men over onto DIX range, too. Any of our men hurt?"

"Two wounded, Señor. But it is nothing. Scratches."

"Good," said Reardon. "It was a cheap job, after all. Have the vaqueros keep guard along the west side of the creek, and shoot anybody that tries to cross. Half a dozen men should be enough."

Hernandez's eyes were agleam.

He grinned, and said, "It reminds one of the old days," and rode over to his men to give them their orders. When he returned, he asked, "What is next, Señor?" He saw that Reardon was thoughtful.

"We can't win this fight by force alone, Hernandez," Reardon said. "We'll have to outsmart the Venturilla crowd as well. There's a man I'm curious about. Don Luis's lawyer, de Baca, know him?"

"Si. Señor Ramon de Baca," "You and I will pay him a visit, eh?" said Reardon.

They rode north together, and behind them a ruddy glow spread across the darkening sky. The first of the shacks had been fired.

THE shortest route to Devil's Gate and the road to San Alejandro lay past Monteros Rancho headquarters, and there young Mateo intercepted Reardon and Hernandez. "Hola, El Capitan!" the boy called. "Dona Elena wants to see you and Don Juan!"

They swung toward the casa, Reardon somewhat reluctantly, and Elena came to the gateway to meet them. "She wants to see you, hombre," Hernandez told Reardon. It was true, though how the old "man had known Reardon could not guess. He dismounted and crossed to the girl. She wore a billowy skirted dress of some dark material—green, Reardon thought—and had a

lace *mantilla* about her head and drawn about her throat. Reardon wished for light to see her by, dressed like this—as a woman should dress. But now he sensed her mood. It was not friendly. "I want you to go away," she said bluntly.

"Why, Elena?"

"Let's say that I do not want you killed."

"Let's say it's because I showed you how I feel about you—what I want out of this trouble," he said, as bluntly as she. "It's too late for you to back out, Elena. You made a bargain. I'm holding you to it."

The girl looked at him for a long moment in silence, then lifted her voice, "Hernandez, you will take this man away. Take him west to Solano and put him on the stage, with his passage paid to Denver." Her voice broke, then was shaky with emotion. "He is not Juan Forbes. He is an imposter."

Hernandez rode closer. "That I know, Señorita," he said calmly, and Reardon stared at him. "I knew that he was not your brother. It was something I felt." He shook his head. "But he stays."

"I gave you an order, Hernandez!"

"A man grows weak when he take orders from a woman, Dona Elena," the old vaquero replied. "Tonight one must be strong. This nameless hombre and I have work to do." He turned away, adding "Come, amigo."

They rode through the darkness at a lope, in silence, and it was not until they neared the pass in the hills that Hernandez spoke.

"Don't fret about the muchacha, amigo" he said. "I've had three wives in my time. Each of them wished to get rid of me at times. You were Juan's friend?"

"Yes."

"And he is dead?"

"He was killed by Jess Hagar, one of the Venturilla crowd."

Hernandez swore under his breath. "But you made Jess Hagar pay for that. And we'll make the rest of those ladrones pay for it. You have a name, hombre?"

THEY avoided the American part of San Alejandro. They entered the Mexican part by way of a dark side street. The hour was late. Ramon de Baca's house was but a few steps from the plaza, a larger one than most of the adobes. Entrance was gained through a gate in a patio wall. Reardon and Hernandez left their horses by the

gateway, and crossed the patio to the house door. A trace of lamplight showed through curtained windows. A servant opened the door when Hernandez knocked. He was a hunchback and a deaf mute, and he shook his head and pointed to the gate when, reading Hernandez's lips, he learned that the callers wished to see his master. They refused to be turned away.

Hernandez pushed the servant aside and entered. Reardon followed, closed the door, and saw the ugly look in the hunchback's eyes. They'd entered a wide hallway. Hernandez crossed to a door to the left, flung it open, and Reardon followed him into a large room rather extravagantly furnished as an office or a study. A man sat at a desk writing a letter. He glanced up, said angrily, "What's the meaning—"

He recognized the old vaquero. His annoyed look faded. "Ah. Hernandez! What can I do for you? Is there trouble at the Rancho?"

"My friend wants to talk with you, Senor."

De Baca glanced at Reardon. He put down his pen, rose. He was a stout man of medium height, about forty, ordinary looking. He seemed a little nervous now. "I'm afraid, sir, we haven't met before."

"A lot of folks around town think I'm Juan Forbes."

"You—!"

Reardon grinned mirthlessly. "You know better, eh, de Baca? You located Juan after a long search—for Don Luis. You saw Juan. Maybe you even talked to him, without letting him know that you were interested in him. You returned here, reported Juan's whereabouts to Don Luis." Reardon paused, and his face was rocky now. "And you also reported his whereabouts to somebody else."

"No! I swear—"

"Was it to John Morrell, de Baca? Or to Arturo Monteros?"

"I give you my word...."

"If you're no better lawyer than you are a liar," Reardon said flatly, "I sure wouldn't want you to handle my affairs. We didn't come here to listen to a bunch of lies. You told somebody in the Venturilla crowd of Juan's whereabouts, and that outfit sent Jess Hagar to murder Juan. Maybe you can't see it, de Baca, but some of Juan Forbes's blood is on your hands!"

The lawyer was having trouble with his breathing. He said, "It wasn't a betrayal. I give you my word. Arturo Monteros and I are friends. And

after all, he is a Monteros. He came to me and said that Don Luis was sending him to see Juan, and that he wanted to make sure of Juan's whereabouts. I didn't know that Arturo was lying. I told him how to find Juan in good faith. If Juan is dead, I am not to blame. I—"

"Why'd they want Juan dead?"

"I can only guess, Senor. From what has happened since, I've seen that there is a plot against Monteros Rancho. Don Luis is very old. Dona Elena is only a girl. Arturo Monteros and his friends do not fear them. But they did not want Juan Forbes coming here to interfere. A young man will always fight."

"Maybe they figured Juan had something to fight with."

"I don't understand, Senor," said de Baca, and he looked puzzled.

"It looks as though the Venturilla crowd is gambling on a forged quit-claim and the missing land grant paper," Reardon stated. "I'm just guessing, but maybe Arturo Monteros—and his partner, Morrell—figured that Juan could prove the quit-claim a forgery and also produce the old title to Monteros Rancho."

"I—I do not know."

"I told you, de Baca, that Hernandez and I didn't come here to listen to a bunch of lies," Reardon said. He glanced at the old vaquero. "All right, amigo."

Hernandez smiled wickedly. He drew and cocked his gun.

De Baca cried out hoarsely, reeled back and, upset his chair.

Reardon almost laughed. De Baca was not only a stupid lawyer, but also a coward. "Hernandez will kill for Monteros Rancho," he said. "You'd better talk, friend. Juan could have proved the quit-claim was a forgery, couldn't he?"

De Baca nodded jerkily.

"And the land grant paper isn't lost?"

"No.... No, Senor."

"Where is it?" Reardon demanded "Dammit; you know!"

"I think maybe you are right, Edouardo," Hernandez said. "This one has been Don Luis's lawyer for many years, as his father was before him. Juan couldn't have had the paper, but de Baca and his father may have come by it." He gestured at de Baca with his sixgun. "I grow impatient, hombre."

De Baca leaned heavily against his desk. "I will tell you," he muttered. "As I said, Arturo and I

are friends. One night we were drinking. Arturo talks too much when he drinks too much. He told me of John Morrell's plan to seize Monteros Rancho. The next day, Arturo realized that he's said more than he should. He sent Matt Hagar to threaten me. I—I was in fear of my life from then on, even though I swore to Hagar that I wouldn't repeat what Arturo told me."

"The land grant paper!" Reardon snapped.

"It is in my possession," de Baca said miserably. "I let Arturo know that I had it, and that only so long as I remained unharmed would it stay 'lost.' I told him that it was being held by someone who could return it to Don Luis if anything happened to me."

"You're smarter than I thought, de Baca."

"It was my insurance," the lawyer said. "Without it, I would have been murdered. I don't blame my friend, Arturo, but John Morrell. He wouldn't have let me live. I felt it. I saw it in Matt Hagar's eyes. They would have killed me the first chance they—"

Reardon broke in, "We want that paper, de Baca."

"No! It's my life!"

"Now you're not being smart," Reardon told him. "Hernandez only has to kill you, and the person who has the paper will return it to Don Luis."

De Baca looked near collapse. "All right. I will get it for you," he said thickly. "My friend doesn't live far from here."

V

IT WAS a small house on another street. An attractive woman answered de Baca's knock. She opened the door guardedly. The lawyer said, "It's Ramon, Terese. I have some friends with me from Monteros Rancho."

They were admitted, and the room, when the lamp was lighted, was surprisingly well furnished. Evidently this was de Baca's other home, and doubtlessly a well-kept secret. The lawyer said, "I gave you a paper some months ago, Terese. You will get it, please."

The woman sensed de Baca's uneasiness, but she went obediently to another room. She returned with a large envelope, which she handed to the lawyer. De Baca ripped it open with shaky hands, looked inside, then handed it to Reardon. After glancing at the contents—an ancient parchment—

Reardon passed it over to Hernandez.

"What do you think, amigo?"

"It's the land grant," the old vaquero said, after examining the parchment. "We'll take it to Monteros Rancho now?"

"You get started with it," Reardon said. "I'll visit a little while with our friends here, just so Senor de Baca doesn't take a notion to run and tell Arturo Monteros what's happened."

Hernandez frowned. "This town's not safe for you, amigo."

Reardon said, "It's an order. Get going."

Hernandez shrugged and went out. De Baca looked sick with worry. Reardon took out makings. He never got his cigarette made. A sudden commotion racketed outside. There were angry shouts and a pounding of running feet. Hernandez's voice lifted in lusty Mexican oaths. Reardon leapt for the door. He got it open and saw a swarm of Mexicans rushing Hernandez who was mounted. The mob was led by de Baca's deaf mute servant, and he had a knife in his hand. Reardon drew his gun, jumped for his horse. He got mounted and rode straight into the howling mob. He shouted to Hernandez to ride out, then began clubbing down at the bobbing heads about him. The mute lunged at him, aiming the knife at his stomach. Reardon struck out, and his gun barrel crashed against the hunchback's head. The mute collapsed to the ground, but then a club landed a savage blow on Reardon's back. The blow almost knocked him from the saddle.

His horse was running now, spooked, and headed back the way it had been led from de Baca's house. The frenzied mob came howling after Reardon. When he reached the corner he looked back. Hernandez was in the clear now, riding off in the opposite direction. Reardon turned into de Baca's street, and lifted the gray to a hard lope. He was well ahead of the mob by the time he reached the plaza. He crossed to a dark side street, raced on, and behind him a worse bedlam broke out as the whole Mexican quarter was aroused.

There was still a hubbub over in the Mexican quarter when Reardon rode warily up to the American part of San Alejandro. He left his horse in the shadows of a barn, went on afoot, entered a dark alleyway between two plank buildings. He halted short of the street, for excited voices shouted there. One yelled, "What's up, anyway?" And another answered, "All hell's broke loose! They're hunting the hombre who killed Jess Hagar last night! He's over in the Mex quarter!"

Footsteps pounded. Men running toward the Mexican quarter.

Reardon took a furtive look at the street. The office building of the Venturilla Land & Cattle Company was dark. Reardon knew that he should have expected that Morrell wouldn't be at his office in the middle of the night. He had no idea where the man lived. He thought of Marshal Pat Newlin. The old lawman might tell him where he could find John Morrell. Reardon retraced his way through the alley, and searched for the rear of the marshal's office. He located it by coming upon a squat adobe building with barred windows, the lock-up, and entered the office by the back door.

There was a short hallway, with a door to the right that opened into Newlin's living quarters. That room and the office, beyond the hall, were deserted. A lamp burned low in the office, and the street door stood open. It looked as though the marshal had just stepped out, no doubt to investigate the trouble in the Mexican quarter, so Reardon waited in the dimness of the hall. He was rolling a smoke when Newlin came in. The old-timer was instantly alert, peering into the hall.

"It's Reardon, Marshal."

"Yeah?" said Newlin, coming back. "What's up, anyway? There's a riot over in the plaza, with everybody gunning for you."

"I had some business with de Baca, the lawyer."

"And de Baca's servant got his head busted open."

Reardon grinned briefly. Then said, "Where can I find John Morrell?"

Newlin's interest sharpened. "Out at the DIX," he said. "A rider came tearing in from there early tonight with word of trouble with the Monteros crowd. Morrell left for DIX Ranch right away with a big bunch of tough hands."

Reardon swore softly, disappointed.

"What about Arturo Monteros? Did he go with Morrell?"

"No. I saw Monteros over in the plaza just a few minutes ago," Newlin replied. "Look, Reardon; this town's unhealthy for you. Matt Hagar spread word that he'd pay five hundred dollars to the man who killed you. Everybody knows about that bounty offer, and plenty of hombres would like to collect. You hang around San Alejandro and you're apt to take a bullet in the back or a knife in the ribs."

Reardon only half listened to that. He was wondering if Morrell meant to move onto

Monteros range and force a showdown fight. He supposed that he should head for Monteros Rancho and prepare the vaqueros for trouble—real trouble. But Reardon, having recovered the land grant paper and learned that Arturo Monteros's quit-claim was a forgery, felt that there was an easier way to stop Morrell and his Venturilla crowd than with a bloody fight. A confession might do it, he thought.

If not Morrell's confession, then Monteros's.

He said, "Marshal, find Monteros for me. Will you?"

Newlin must have been impressed by Reardon's earnest manner. For he said, "All right. I don't know what you're up to but I'll bring Monteros here for you."

PAT NEWLIN wasn't long. He brought Arturo Monteros with him, and he must not have told the man who wanted to see him for Monteros started violently at sight of Reardon. He would have fled had not Newlin blocked his way, and said, "Take it easy, friend. Nobody's going to harm you." The marshal maneuvered him back into the hall.

"Juan—" Monteros began, pleadingly.

Reardon cut him short. "Let's get it straight," he said curtly. "Juan Forbes is dead. He was murdered by Jess Hagar—by the Venturilla crowd. I was Juan's friend, and I'm siding Monteros Rancho in their fight against Venturilla."

Monteros's mouth fell agape.

Newlin grunted with surprise.

Reardon went on, "I've had a talk with Ramon de Baca. He claims to be in fear of his life, but maybe he's just shrewd enough to be trying to cut in on Venturilla's scheme. That doesn't matter, now. De Baca admits that your quit-claim is a forgery, Monteros. And he also turned over the 'lost' land grant paper to me. Hernandez is on his way back to the ranch with it. Venturilla is whipped, Monteros."

Monteros's face glistened with sweat. "De Baca lies," he said thinly. "I received the quit-claim from Dixon Forbes many years ago. As for the land grant paper... I am not concerned about it."

"You're concerned, all right. You and Morrell planned to take over the whole of Monteros Rancho."

"No! It's not true!"

"You had Juan murdered because you were afraid that he would say that the quit-claim is a

forgery. Juan would have remembered that his father sold you only the DIX, not the entire south range.”

“I am innocent!”

“You’re guilty as hell,” said Reardon, and drew his gun. “You’re going to admit it. You’re going to confess, with Newlin a witness, or you’ll get a bullet in your guts!”

Monteros shrank back, collided with Newlin.

The marshal’s presence steadied him somewhat. He was stupid and a coward. He said defiantly, “It would be murder. You’d hang. Senor Newlin would be a witness against you.

Reardon swore under his breath, because of the failure of his bluff, then he remembered how terrified of Hernandez Ramon de Baca had been. He said, “You’re right, I can’t risk killing you. But there’s somebody who’ll do it. I’m taking you to Hernandez.”

Monteros shuddered. “No! Hernandez is part Apache! You can’t—”

Newlin broke in, “I’d talk if I were you, Monteros. This hombre means what he says. And Hernandez.... Well, I Wouldn’t want him working out on me.” He knew that Reardon was bluffing, and he gave him a wink. “Save yourself, Monteros. Why protect Morrell? He’s the man Reardon’s after. He sent Hagar to kill Juan Forbes, didn’t he?”

Monteros nodded jerkily.

“And it was his scheme to steal Monteros Rancho?” Newlin prompted.

Monteros said dully, “Yes. I would not have thought of such a thing. I needed money, and Morrell offered to buy into the DIX as my partner. He took the original quit-claim I received from Dixon Forbes and forged Dixon’s signature to another. He sent Jess Hagar to kill Juan. What could I do? I was in fear of my life.” He shuddered again. “Now Morrell will have me killed for talking like this!”

“Reardon will protect you,” Newlin said. “You go to Monteros Rancho with him. You’ll be safe there.”

“Hernandez...?” Monteros said.

“He’ll not harm you now that you’ve come clean,” Newlin told him. He looked at Reardon. “I’ve got no business mixing in this. But it’s rotten clear through, and I’m going to side with you. I’ve a hunch that Morrell is out at DIX and getting ready for a showdown. We’d better head for Monteros Rancho. I’ll get a horse for myself and one for Monteros. Where’s your mount, Reardon?”

Reardon hadn’t expected so much of Newlin. He told Newlin that his horse was over at the barn outside town, and that he and Monteros would wait there.

Fifteen minutes later the three of them rode away from San Alejandro. Pat Newlin seemed eager for some action. Arturo Monteros was sullen, his spirit crushed. Ed Reardon rode through the night with mixed feelings. He’d outsmarted John Morrell, but he was still somewhat worried. Morrell didn’t know he’d been outsmarted, and there was no telling what sort of coup the man was planning. Reardon was also thinking of the girl, of Elena Forbes. He wanted her. She was the price he would demand if he succeeded in saving Monteros Rancho. But suddenly he wasn’t sure if he wanted his reward, if it were unwillingly paid.

VI

IT WAS after three o’clock when they reached the ranch headquarters. Lighted windows in the casa and at the village told Reardon that something was wrong. As he and his companions swung up to the corrals, Mateo appeared through the darkness carrying an ancient rifle. The boy was excited.

“El Capitan told me to watch for you, Don Juan,” Mateo burst out. “There’s trouble on the south range. Hernandez rode out with all the vaqueros!”

Reardon dismounted and began off-saddling the gray, and told Pat Newlin, “We’d better have fresh mounts.” He told Mateo, “I have a man’s job for you. You take Senor Monteros to the casa and stand guard over him until Marshal Newlin and I get back.”

The boy said, “Si!” and swung his old rifle to cover Monteros.

Reardon and Newlin saddled fresh horses from the corrals, and they were mounting when Elena approached. Despite the darkness, Reardon could see the frightened look in her eyes. He said, “Hernandez gave you the paper?”

“Yes. But——”

“Don’t worry now. Everything’s going to be all right.”

“Ed——”

Reardon turned his horse away without waiting to hear what the girl had to say. He couldn’t trust himself with her; given the chance, he’d play the fool and tell her that he was in love with her. He heard Newlin coming along behind

him, and he lifted his horse to a hard lope. It was a dozen miles to La Costilla.

They caught the racket of gunfire as they neared the ridge, a burst of shots following by a lengthy silence and then another burst. It didn't sound like a pitched battle between two sizable bunches of riders, and Reardon hoped that he was still in time to avoid a bloody fight. He and Newlin slowed for the slope, and their blowing mounts labored upward. Gaining the crest of La Costilla, Reardon and his companion saw shadowy figures patrolling the strip from which the squatter-gunmen had been cleared. They rode in bunches of fours or fives, and at intervals some of the vaqueros swung close to Venturilla Creek and fired across it. Descending the south slope, Reardon and Newlin found Hernandez watching his riders. He was no longer erect in the saddle. His head was bowed, his shoulders sagged.

"They are too many for us," he said, as Reardon reined in beside him. Defeat was in his voice. "I just returned from prowling the DIX, like a coyote. Morrell has brought gunmen from San Alejandro. Matt Hagar has rounded up the DIX crew and the nester-ranchers. Then there are the squatters we drove out. They are gathering a big bunch of cattle to drive ahead of them, the same trick we worked on the squatters. All we can do is show those ladrones how vaqueros can die."

Reardon heard shouts in the distance. Some of the Venturilla crowd were bringing the cattle up. The attack would come any minute. Reardon trusted Hernandez's judgement. There would be no stopping the attack if the odds were as great as the old vaquero said. Reardon said, "There's a chance, amigo. We'll let them come on—and take as much of Monteros range as they want."

"Ah?"

"I've got Arturo Monteros a prisoner," Reardon explained. "He's confessed that the DIX quit-claim is a forgery. Don Luis can get the courts to deal with squatters now that he's got his land grant title back. Morrell is beaten and doesn't know it yet."

Hernandez was silent, uncertain.

Reardon went on, "Have the vaqueros put up a show of fighting. Tell them to do enough shooting to make these range-grabbers think they're in a fight, but tell them not to risk their lives. While the shooting's going on I'll slip across to DIX and try to find Morrell. I figure he'll stay out of bullet range. Maybe I can catch him alone."

Hernandez brightened somewhat. "Si. It will

be as you say."

As he rode off, Reardon turned to Pat Newlin and said, "Keep your eye on him, Marshal."

He turned east when Newlin started after Hernandez, took cover in some brush, and waited for the attack to be launched.

It was not long in coming. The Venturilla crowd wanted to attack while there was still darkness. A great herd of cattle was stampeded across the shallow stream. A large band of riders—about fifty, Reardon estimated—rode with the wildly running cattle.

Once the wild charge of cattle and riders was past his hiding-place, Reardon rode east. He forded the creek, rode warily across DIX range. His rifle was across his saddle and he peered about for any riders lurking in the darkness. He saw no one here, and for a time feared that Morrell might have ridden with his crowd or returned to San Alejandro. Then he topped a rise and saw a light.

He rode toward the light at a walk. It grew brighter, larger, took the shape of a window. Shortly, Reardon made out a group of buildings and knew that he'd located DIX headquarters.

A saddled horse stood ground-hitched before the adobe building with the lighted window. Reardon was riding up from the side, making no attempt to approach silently, and, as he swung around to the front, his arrival brought a man to the door.

A tall and bulky man. The lamplight from within silhouetted John Morrell.

MORRELL called out, "It must have been easy Matt, since you're back to report so soon." His voice was cheerful; he was pleased with his victory—which he didn't seem to doubt. Then, as no answer came, he snapped, "Hagar! Talk up, man!"

"I'm not Matt Hagar, Morrell."

"Wh—What?" Morrell peered into the darkness. "Who are you then?"

"My name's Reardon, Morrell. Ed Reardon."

Morrell gave a violent start "You mean—?"

Reardon reined in. "The man you mistook for Juan Forbes. The one you sent Matt Hagar after last night, the one you offered a bounty for." He saw the man in the doorway grow rigid. Morrell's face was obscure, but he could imagine the look of shock upon it "I've got the lost Monteros deed, Morrell. I've got evidence that the DIX quit-claim is a forgery. I've got Arturo Monteros a prisoner—and his confession. The vaqueros have drawn your

gunfighters into a trap. There's only one thing more I want, Morrell."

A mumbled oath was all Morrell could utter.

"I didn't come here to avenge Forbes's murder," Reardon went on. "But Jess Hagar paid for his part in that murder and now I want you to pay for your part in it. Damn you, killer; go for your gun!"

Morrell croaked, "I—I'm not armed!"

"There's your horse," Reardon said, almost shouting now. "There's a rifle on its saddle. Get it! Go for it or I'll kill you in cold-blood!"

Morrell took a stumbling step forward toward the horse.

Then there was a pounding of hoofs behind Reardon.

He shot a look over his shoulder. Three riders loomed through the darkness, traveling at a hard lope. A gun roared. Morrell's gun. Morrell had been armed; he'd whipped a six-gun from beneath his coat as Reardon was distracted. The slug, meant for Reardon, caught his horse in the head. The animal shrieked wildly, and went down. Reardon flung himself clear, but hit the ground on his left side. For an instant the dying horse thrashed before him, and he had a blurred glimpse of Morrell, now hugging the ranchhouse wall, aiming a second shot

Reardon rolled away, still clinging to his rifle, and Morrell's slug kicked dirt into his face. He was flat on his stomach now, and he fired a quick shot at Morrell. Then, jumping up, he darted for one of the other buildings, the DIX bunkhouse, and gained the protective corner of it as Morrell's third shot came. By then one of the riders—Matt Hagar, Reardon knew by the voice—yelled, "Keep him busy, Morrell! We'll take him from behind!"

Reardon had a glimpse of the three as they swerved to circle the bunkhouse. The two men with Hagar were the hardcased Jake and the wild-looking Kid. The Kid's left arm was in a sling, but he had his tied reins looped over the saddle horn and held a six-gun in his right hand. They vanished from Reardon's view at once, beyond the bunkhouse. He knew that they had him trapped.

He'd blundered, but anger rather than despair gripped him. His anger, growing into an ugly rage, was directed at Morrell who now opened fire on him again, and he knew that he was going to get the man before he went down bullet-ridden. He fired three fast shots in Morrell's direction, then flung aside the rifle and drew his six-gun. He leapt away from the bunk-house, into the open, ran at

Morrell. He held his fire, and Morrell, his nerve breaking, darted around the side of the ranch-house.

Reardon's gun roared, once and again, and a scream ripped from Morrell as he went sprawling to the ground. The man was dead when Reardon reached him. Hagar and the other two came racing from behind the bunkhouse. Reardon pressed against his wall, swung his gun up. They broke clear of the bunkhouse, hit the ranch yard, their guns blazing. Reardon tried to bead the burly Matt Hagar who was in the lead.

It was Jake who was knocked off his horse.

The next second the Kid was shot from his saddle.

Reardon realized then that other guns had opened up to down those two. Matt Hagar realized it, too, and swung his gun to meet the attack on the flank. Reardon's gun roared again, and this time he hit Hagar. Other slugs, from guns still hidden from Reardon, tore into Matt Hagar as he reeled in the saddle. As Hagar's body fell, Hernandez and Newlin rode closer and called to Reardon.

THEY'D gunned down Jake and the Kid. They'd seen Matt Hagar and his two toughs turn back to the DIX, Hernandez explained, and they'd figured that Reardon might need some help. They believed that one or more of the three had seen a rider cross over to DIX and that the trio had returned because they guessed that Morrell was in danger. Hernandez asked if Reardon had settled with Morrell, and said, "It is good," when Reardon nodded toward the body sprawled alongside the house.

His horse dead, Reardon caught up and mounted the horse Morrell would no longer need. He told Pat Newlin that he would return to San Alejandro with him and there take the next stage north. He gave Hernandez Juan Forbes's watch, and said, "Give it to Elena. Juan wanted it returned to his family."

It was daylight when Reardon and Newlin reached San Alejandro. The marshal immediately spread word that there was no longer a bounty on Ed Reardon's hide, and gave the town the story of the fight at the DIX. There was, Reardon discovered, no stage out of San Alejandro until the next day. He again took a room at the Territorial House.

He slept most of the day, then, late in the afternoon, while he was dressing, there was a knock at the door. He took it for granted that it was

Pat Newlin, and called, "Come in."

It was Elena.

Reardon stared, could say nothing.

Elena too was so flustered she could not speak at first. Then she smiled and said, "Hernandez gave me a talking-to, Ed. A real spanking of a talking-to. He understands me better than I understand myself. And he'll never forgive me if I don't bring you back with me. Ed, come back—please."

"You don't need me now."

"The squatters are still on the south range."

"I doubt it. They're probably coyoting it for a healthier climate."

"Well, Monteros Rancho will always need a

man like you," Elena tried again. "Don Luis is in a coma. The end is very close for him. When he is gone, there'll be no man to be head of Monteros Rancho."

"It's not Monteros Rancho that I care about."

"I'm part of it, Ed. I go with it."

Reardon shook his head. "When I took you in my arms..."

Elena flushed. "I was taken by surprise, Ed," she said thickly. "I was a little frightened. You see, it was my first time. No man had ever kissed me before. And you weren't very gentle about it."

She came toward him, not frightened now but bold.